The Australian
Women's Register

Entry type: Person
Entry ID: AWE4854

Exley, Thea Melvie

(1923 - 2007)

Born	19230902, Melbourne Victoria Australia
Died	20070129, Canberra Australian Capital Territory Australia
Occupation	Archivist, Art historian

Summary

Thea Exley was the first woman to head a regional office of the Commonwealth Archives Office (now the National Archives of Australia), its first national Senior Archivist Reference and Access and the first Director Preservation at the Australian Archives (another predecessor of the National Archives). She was an inaugural member of the Australian Society of Archivists and served as a Councillor from 1977 to 1979. After her retirement she completed a PhD in art history.

Details

Thea was born in Melbourne on 2 September 1923 the only child of Adelaide (nee Walker) and Harold James Exley who became Deputy Commonwealth Statistician, Tasmania.

She briefly attended Canberra Girls' Grammar School (then St Gabriel's School) before moving with her family to Hobart in 1933. She attended The Friends' School and subsequently graduated from the University of Tasmania with a Bachelor of Arts degree. During the Second World War she undertook library training at the Commonwealth National Library and on returning to Hobart worked at the Public Library there. After the war she travelled overseas and worked for a time at the library of Australia House, London.

On her return she was invited by the Commonwealth National Librarian Harold White to join the staff of the Archives Division of the National Library. This led to her joining the Archives Division's Melbourne office as an Archives Officer Grade I on 26 February 1953. In 1961 she became the first woman to head a state office of the Commonwealth Archives Office (the successor to the Archives Division). At a time when there were very few women in senior positions in the Commonwealth public service this was a significant achievement.

During her time in Melbourne she was involved in an unsuccessful attempt to form a professional association for archivists. She was subsequently on the committee of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia (LAA), at that time the only Australian association which brought archivists together. She was interested in establishing proper training for archivists and served as an examiner for the LAA's paper in records management from 1963 to 1966.

In 1970 she moved to Canberra as the first Senior Archivist, Reference and Access. Cabinet decisions under the Gorton government (1970) and the McMahon government (1972) created a new, exciting and quite complex access regime for Commonwealth records. Proactive examination of material created before 1945 was commenced at this time. Twenty access examiners were employed and Thea was responsible for guiding their very lively discussions and for ensuring that the resulting decisions were collected into a substantial body of policy, precedent and procedure which became the foundation of the later *Australian Archives Access Services Manual*. Thea regarded her work striving for an accountable and fair access regime as her most important professional contribution.

Thea participated in the development of the Australian Society of Archivists and became an inaugural member in 1975. From 1977to 1979 she was a Council Member and chaired the Society's first Public Issues Committee which made submissions to a number of Commonwealth and State enquiries on copyright, privacy and freedom of information.

From 1977 to 1981 Thea was Chief Archivist with considerable responsibility for the operational work of the office while other senior staff members were taken up with the development of the Archives Act. In 1982 and 1983 she was Regional Director, ACT when the first purpose built repository in the Canberra suburb of Mitchell became operational.

In 1984 Thea became the Australian Archives' first Director Conservation. Her leadership in commissioning the first survey of the condition of the whole collection and the subsequent development of a policy and procedural framework to manage the physical state of the records was significant in providing a management focus on this important area of archives work.

Thea retired on 1 September 1988 after a 35 year career which made a substantial contribution to the National Archives. She received an Australia Day award for her work in 1989. A meeting room at the National Archives was named in her honour in 2003.

After her retirement Thea studied Art History and in 2000 was awarded the degree of Doctor of Philosophy by the Australian National University for her thesis titled 'Patronage by proxy: art competitions in Australia during the twentieth century'. She was interested in the influence of art competitions within the community.

Thea died on 29 January 2007 after nearly two years of illness. The attendance of three former heads of National Archives and the widow of a fourth at her funeral demonstrated the respect for her professional achievements. Family, friends and former work colleagues reminisced about her cross country skiing, her bushwalking, her hospitality and her love of cats. Professional colleagues particularly remembered her warm welcome to new entrants and her passion for the challenge of archives work.

She left a bequest to the National Gallery of Australia which funded an archivist's position and another to Bush Heritage Australia.

Published resources

Newsletter
Obituary: Dr Thea Melvie Exley, Caldwell, Jill, 2007,
http://www.archivists.org.au/icms_docs/111012_Issue_19_April_2007.pdf

Magazine article
Dr Thea Melvie Exley (1923-2007), National Archives of Australia, 2007

Report
National Gallery of Australia. Annual Report 2008-09, 2009,
http://nga.gov.au/AboutUs/Reports/NGA_AR_08-09.pdf

Annual conservation Report 2008-09, 2009,
http://pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/46845/20110518-0000/www.bushheritage.org.au/downloads/about_us/annual_conservation_repor

Journal Article
Obituary Dr Thea Melvie Exley 1923-2007, Caldwell, Jill, 2007

Site Exhibition
From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra, Australian Women's Archives Project, 2013,
http://www.womenaustralia.info/exhib/ldkg

Resource
Trove, National Library of Australia, 2009

Archival resources

Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Australian National University
Australian Society of Archivists deposit 1

Canberra Girls Grammar School Archives
Diary entry 3

National Gallery of Australia, Research Library Archive
Papers of Thea Exley / Thea Exley

Author Details
Jill Caldwell

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Digital resources



Title: Photographing the Queen Victoria Proclamation
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023



Title: Thea Exley on the far left
Type: Image
Date: 3 May, 2023