

The Politics of Preserving The Past: The Early Years of The Historical Society of Queensland

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*A Special Paper to Commemorate the Society's
75th Anniversary*

The Historical Society of Queensland was established in the latter part of 1913, some twelve years after the formation of the Australian (since 1918 Royal) Historical Society, Australia's oldest surviving historical society and four years after the launching of the Historical Society of Victoria.¹ During the early part of 1913 a provisional committee was established — with Dr F.W.S. Cumbrae-Stewart, foundation Registrar of the University of Queensland, and A.C.V. Melbourne, a recently appointed temporary lecturer in history and economics of the same institution, as provisional secretaries — which subsequently drew up a document entitled *Proposal for the establishment of a Society to be Called the Historical Society of Queensland* which included a draft constitution. It laid down the philosophy which was to guide the society for years to come. After pointing out that the records of the hundred years commencing with Captain Cook were wholly documentary, it added:

Happily many of the men and women who have done the work of the last fifty years are still living, and it is possible to supplement documentary records by the testimony of actual witnesses. But in a few years they will no longer be there... Many instances of the destruction of valuable private materials can be cited, and it is unfortunately a fact that many public records have not escaped a similar fate.³

The *Proposal* and the draft constitution were approved by the provisional committee on 21 July 1913, by which time 84 "ladies and gentlemen had signified their intention of becoming original members of the Society".⁴ The society was formally launched exactly one month later, at a meeting chaired by its patron, Governor Sir William MacGregor, with a membership of exactly one hundred, including thirteen members of parliament. The meeting elected a former Premier, Sir Arthur Morgan, a wealthy newspaper proprietor and president of the Legislative Council, as president, and the young Melbourne as secretary. Cumbrae-Stewart was elected vice-president, together with J.F.G. Foxton, former state and federal

minister, and A.J. Thynne, another former minister, foundation member of the Senate of the University of Queensland and its future Vice-Chancellor and eventually Chancellor. The council included the following Brisbane identities: Rev. C.E. Burgess; J.M. Davidson, manager of the South Brisbane branch of the Bank of New South Wales; J.J. Knight, editor-in-chief of the *Brisbane Courier* and the *Observer* and a keen student of Queensland history whose works included *In the Early Days* (1895) and *Brisbane: A Historical Sketch of the Capital of Queensland* 1897); Captain John Mackay, retired sailor, explorer and harbour-master; J.J. Michie, the Aberdeen and Cambridge educated foundation professor of classics at the University of Queensland; T.J. Ryan, the recently elected leader of the local Labour Party who went on to become Premier in 1915; W.J. Scott, the Under-Secretary of the Lands Department; and the barrister (and subsequently judge) J.L. Woolcock, “elder statesman of the University Extension Movement⁵ and a prominent member of the first university Senate.

The principal object of the society, as laid down in the constitution, was the study of the history of “that part of the British Empire now included in the Territories of Queensland and New Guinea” and of the near-by Pacific islands, and the collection and preservation of all types of material for such study, including “genealogical and biographical particulars”.⁶ In this respect the society’s aims were broadly similar to those of the Historical Society of Victoria, but differed somewhat from those of the Australian Historical Society which not only aimed to collect all types of material “having reference to Australian history” but also to compile “authentic and accurate records relating to Australian events chronologically arranged”.⁷ But the Queensland society had additional aims compared with the other two societies, namely the forming of local sub-centres to promote local history; the publication of Queensland Records; and, most importantly, the “inspection, indexing and calendaring of public records and registers”.⁶ Nor did it, unlike the other societies, intend to form a library; according to the *Proposal*, “all documents should be available to as many persons as possible, and a place should be found in the public library for such documents as may come into the possession of the Society”.³

The Historical Society of Queensland differed in yet another respect, namely its close initial association with the local university. One-third of the first executive were in one way or another connected with the local university. The society was, in fact, the university’s brainchild, and had from the start the support of the Governor, Sir William MacGregor, himself a fervent believer in the university and all it stood for.⁸ H.J.J. Sparks whose reminiscences are a veritable mine of information claimed — without giving chapter and verse — that the society was founded by Cumbrae-Stewart, but an equally

good, if not better, case can be made out for A.C.V. Melbourne, the young and enthusiastic lecturer in history and economics, appointed in 1913 as a temporary replacement for E.O.G. Shann, who had resigned to take up a chair of history and economics in Western Australia. Melbourne had studied history in Adelaide under G.C. Henderson, Australia's first scientific historian who had brought back from Oxford "an evangelical enthusiasm for disciplinary innovations",⁹ such as the insistence on the meticulous use of original sources and on the primary facts, and whose own research on *Sir George Grey: Pioneer of Empire in southern Lands* (1907) had convinced him of the need for the collection and preservation of local historical records.

Melbourne, was joint secretary to the provisional committee, which drew up the *Proposal for the Establishment of a Society to be Called the Historical Society of Queensland*. It clearly expresses the importance of original sources and the primacy of facts, and its basic precepts are almost identical with those expressed by Melbourne in an article entitled "Australian History," published under the pseudonym "Historicus" in the *Queenslander* three weeks before the inaugural meeting of the historical society. Its style shows clearly that it was written by the same man who had also drafted the *Proposal*.¹⁰

The society's initial membership, one hundred, compares more than favourably with the foundation membership of the Australian Historical Society (nineteen), or even the Historical Society of Victoria (159, including 62 honorary, that is non-paying members). Yet by 1928 the society had only half-a-dozen financial members left, while its Melbourne and Sydney counterparts had gone from strength to strength, the latter reaching a membership of just under 900 by the late 1920s. According to G.C. Austin the society suffered a setback early in the war when its affairs were "disorganised"¹¹ by the enlistment of Cumbræ-Stewart and Melbourne, but the dislocation could not have been too serious, since Melbourne was promptly replaced as secretary by H.A. Alcock, an Oxford trained English-born schoolmaster who had been appointed as lecturer-in-charge of history and economics at the start of 1914. Melbourne himself rejoined the society after his invalidation from the army in 1916, while Cumbræ-Stewart remained in Brisbane throughout the war, as assistant district censor and interpreter, and in early 1917, following the death of Sir Arthur Morgan, was in fact elected the society's president — an office he was to hold for the next thirteen years.

More damaging than the effect of the war was the death of close to thirty members before the war's end, including Sir Arthur Morgan, the vice-president J.F.G. Foxton, and Captain J. Mackay, a member of the council — while only fifteen new members had

joined. Financial difficulties were another contributing factor. Unlike the Sydney and Melbourne societies which were subsidized by their state governments, the Queensland society received no financial assistance from the government, despite the lobbying of its new patron, MacGregor's successor Sir Hamilton Gould-Adams who had on a number of occasions advocated the subsidizing of research into Queensland history. But the crucial factor was the general loss of interest in the affairs of the society, manifesting itself in a string of formal resignations (twelve in 1916-17 alone). The reasons for this can only be surmised. It may well be that many members were not happy about the close association of the society with the university and its domination by university staff. There existed, briefly, what the 1916 annual report described as "our affiliated society at the University".¹² An intriguing passage in Stuart MacIntyre's Survey of Australian historiography in *Australians: a Guide to Sources* goes some way towards explaining the society's decline. We do not know the reaction of the members of the society, wrote MacIntyre, when, at their inaugural meeting, they

heard the young lecturer at the newly established Queensland University read a paper on "Methods of historical research."

They surely would have nodded with approval when A.C.V. Melbourne claimed that a nation's care for its past was a measure of its civilization ... but when the speaker went on to suggest that the state of Australian historical research was negligible, and that it would remain thus until the university trained scholars in its proper procedures, members may have stirred a little uneasily. This was to make their own work, the collection of sources such as diaries and letters, and the compilation of the basic record, merely preparatory to the work of a trained specialist. Melbourne's description of the procedures of historical analysis... were quite remote from their experience and interests.¹³

Early Australian historical societies were essentially antiquarian in orientation and guarded the past in a "proprietary fashion", little more than exclusive clubs dedicated to the celebration of the "pioneer legend"¹⁴ and providing an opportunity for ladies and gentlemen of social distinction to identify each other. The Historical Society of Queensland was not dissimilar in this respect; "the names of many well-known families", to quote G.C. Austin, were well represented in the role of original members. The history which stirred their interest was the history of the deeds of their pioneering forebears — "as they wandered into Queensland from the South and the East to build their homes and wrest a fortune from the country which they had adopted as their own".¹⁵ The potential for conflict was further enhanced by the general antagonism towards the university which was never far from the surface during the early years of this century.¹⁶ Queensland was still a frontier society, based on

industries which did not, by and large, require a high level of education. Little wonder that many Queenslanders saw the university as a superfluous adornment.

DECLINE

Which brings us to the person of Cumbrae-Stewart, president of the society from 1917 until 1930. Despite being an “almost compulsive scribbler”, he published no substantial work either before or after he took up the foundation chair of law in 1926.¹⁷ His style of running the society appears to have alienated most of the members and was at least partly responsible for its virtual disintegration by the mid 1920s. “Severe, with an erect military bearing and a fiercely waxed moustache”, he was “always formal and pontifical in public”. While he may have been an asset to a new and raw university where his “punctilious ceremoniousness”¹⁸ made up for the lack of tradition, he was the wrong person to preside over the meetings of elderly descendants of Queensland pioneers, most of whom found his authoritarianism and “pompous mannerisms and excessive dignity” irritating.¹⁸ He was not one of them and did not command their respect. The resignation of no less than twelve members during the first year of his presidency may have been no mere coincidence. Meetings were held infrequently: four in 1918, two each in 1919 and 1920, none in 1921, one in 1922, two in 1923 — the second on 3 December when the society met “for the purpose of celebrating the second day which the discoverer [John Oxley] spent on the Brisbane River”. One was held in September 1924, the hundredth anniversary of the discovery of the site of Brisbane, when the president and his wife entertained the “members of the Society, old residents and others”, in the rooms of the Brisbane Women’s Club, and the president addressed the society, “basing his remarks upon Mr Oxley’s field books and identifying the spots where he landed, especially the place at North Quay...”.¹⁹

The meeting was the last for nearly five years. In late 1925 Cumbrae-Stewart was appointed, to the newly created chair of law, in keeping with the university tradition that the “man on the spot was invariably adjudged the most suitable person for the job”.²⁰ At the same time — on 25 September 1925 — he also became one of the two permanent trustees of the Oxley Centenary Fund, set up to administer the unspent balance (about 2500 pounds) of the proceeds raised by the Brisbane Centenary Celebrations Committee, in commemoration of John Oxley’s discovery of Brisbane River in December 1823.²¹ By early 1927 Cumbrae-Stewart seems to have lost interest in the historical society. H.J.J. Sparks recorded how, having discovered several “really good books of Queensland verse” in Brisbane’s second-hand bookshops, he began to wonder about the

need for a repository for such items in Brisbane. I asked Miss McIver, the assistant [university] librarian, about the position with regard to the Historical Society, and was informed that the Society had lapsed and its library deposited in the University. Asking to see the library, I was shown a pile of books and papers heaped up on the floor in the middle of an empty room.²¹

The Society, however, had not “lapsed” completely. In March 1928 Cumbræ-Stewart, who had edited the society’s *Journal* since 1914, brought out a slim issue which he wrote all by himself, just as he had written the entire previous issue, published in 1925. In September he unburdened himself to Dr E. Sanford Jackson, founder of the Royal Australian College of Surgeons in Queensland, one-time president of the Queensland Club and an amateur historian with wide-ranging interests. The Historical Society of Queensland, Cumbræ-Stewart wrote:

has fallen on evil days. We have been unable to get a Secretary... the subscriptions don’t come in and only half a dozen members are financial... Neither Melbourne nor Alcock are interested in Queensland history and I find that my work as Professor of Law takes all my time. I discussed the question of converting the Society into a branch of the RAHS with Cramp [secretary of the Royal Australian Historical Society] but nothing came of it... We could call a meeting at some central place and see whether there are enough people to warrant our going on. I am much indebted to you for your offer of help, the first I have had and I have been greatly discouraged. I tried to keep interest going by writing articles for the *Courier* until Taylor [Sanderson Taylor, the editor of the *Brisbane Courier*] stopped them last year. I am prepared to hand over all my private files of cuttings etc and to support anyone who will take over the Society and move it along. But my support cannot be very active though there will be all the good will in the world.²²

RECUSSCITATION

Cumbræ-Stewart’s letter is almost certainly the earliest surviving item of society correspondence and makes three significant points. Firstly, Cumbræ-Stewart offered to step down as president, yet later he changed his mind and refused to let go. Secondly, the society — or rather Cumbræ-Stewart, since he was the society — had lost the support of the influential *Brisbane Courier*. And thirdly and most importantly, the professor had been offered, and in a fashion accepted, assistance with the running of the society. We do not know what kind of help Dr Jackson had proffered, but subsequent events suggest that he was acting as a spokesman for a group which included a foundation member of the society, the accountant Thomas Welsby, a former member of parliament, book collector and prolific local historian; the retired Supreme Court judge C. Jamison; and the

weather forecaster Inigo Jones, all of whom were to play an important role in the society's affairs.

The meeting which Cumbrae-Stewart hoped to convene, eventually took place in February 1929. It amended the society's constitution (in what respect we do not know) and heard an explanation from the president "why the society had been in recess so long".²³ Other meetings followed, and in October 1929 Cumbrae-Stewart himself spoke on the "Law Courts of Moreton Bay and Early Queensland" — the last paper he was to read before the society. A number of new members joined, among them retired Judge Jameson; the printer W. Lees, author of the six-volume *The Gold Fields of Queensland (1899)* and *Coaching in Australia: A History of the Coaching Firm of Cobb and Co. (1917)*; the accountant F.O. Nixon; A.E. Round, who was to serve as the society's secretary from 1930 until 1935, and Inigo Jones, the colourful and controversial meteorologist with an interest in long-range weather forecasting (on the basis of sun spots) who in 1928 became Director of the Bureau of Seasonal Forecasting of the Council of Agriculture. A fellow of the Royal Astronomical and Meteorological societies, he was an accomplished artist and musician, and halfway through 1930 displaced Cumbrae-Stewart from the presidency of the historical society, and remained at the helm until April 1935.

The circumstances of Cumbrae-Stewart's removal from the presidency are not entirely clear — no one recorded the minutes of the meeting — but there is evidence that it was part of a plan conceived by Dr Jackson and his supporters back in 1928, to seize the control of the society and of the Oxley Memorial Fund which had been lying unused since its establishment. When the centenary of the settlement of Brisbane River was drawing near, a number of leading citizens formed the Brisbane Centenary Celebrations Committee, presided over by the Mayor H.J. Barry. Unlike many similar celebrations, the Brisbane Centenary finished in the black; indeed the committee must have expected a surplus because the official programme announced:

The proceeds derived from all Centenary Events organized and controlled by the Brisbane Centenary Celebrations Committee, will be devoted to a common fund for the following objectives: — Scholarships and Bursaries in Science, Engineering, Arts and Crafts, Assistance in the creation of a Chair of Australian History at the University of Queensland, and other Permanent Centenary Memorials.²¹

The committee did not include a single representative of the historical society, yet in September 1925, at its last meeting, it not only decided to erect a permanent memorial to John Oxley, "in the form of a block of granite with a bronze tablet suitably inscribed", and to devote the balance of the fund for the foundation of an Oxley

Memorial Library of Queensland literature “in connection with the proposed Municipal library of the City of Brisbane”,²⁴ but also elected Cumbræ-Stewart — who was not a member of the 1924 committee — as a joint trustee of the fund with the Lord Mayor. Nor was that all. The actual trust deed, declared in August 1926, differed in a number of ways from the committee’s earlier resolution. For instance, it stipulated that the inscription on the Oxley Memorial should be “indicted” by the Historical Society of Queensland, and gave the trustees “absolute management and control” of the proposed Oxley Memorial Library. As well, the trust deed contained a schedule which set out a number of specific objects such as “Collection of Records, Maps, Historical Reminiscences, Photographs of Celebrities and of Pioneers, Photographs and other Authentic Pictures of Historical Interest or Importance, Historical Exhibits”; formation of an association “with a view to gathering together old Brisbane and Queensland pioneers”; the exhibition of “Historical Antiquities, Records, and Objects of Permanent Interest as Nucleus of a Queensland Historical Museum and Library” and, under the heading “Educational”, the following statement: “Exhibitions or Bursaries tenable in:— Scholarship; Science; Engineering, Arts and Crafts; Agriculture; Commerce; University Extension; e.g. a Chair of Australian History...”.²⁵

PLANS FOR THE OXLEY MEMORIAL LIBRARY

Some eight years later, a few weeks after the formal opening of the Oxley Memorial Library in April 1934, Inigo Jones was to describe the deed as a “very peculiar instrument”.²⁶ But it was not the deed itself but the schedule which was somewhat peculiar. The proposal to “gather together” the surviving Queensland pioneers and the scheme to collect historical records and documents duplicates the objectives of the historical society, while the reference to a future “Queensland Historical Museum and Library” was confusing, since there was no indication whether it was to be part of the Oxley Library or a separate, independent body. Indeed, the whole idea of a private body (which, in essence, was the status of the Oxley Memorial Library during the first twelve years of its existence) contrasted with all other states where preservation of local historical material, such as it was, between the wars, had been the province of the local state library. But in Queensland “culture was a dirty word”,²⁷ and spending public money on matters cultural presumably doubly so. The Public Library of Queensland — immemorialized by R. Munn and E. Pitt, in 1935, in the oft-quoted phrase that “anyone wishing to carry away a favourable impression... should never make a mistake of entering it”²⁸ — was perennially starved for funds. Established in 1896 as the Brisbane Public Library and administered by a Board of Trustees, it was renamed Public Library of Queensland

became a sub-department of the Chief Secretary's Department in 1906, thereby losing whatever independence it may have had under the earlier arrangement.

In March 1924 a culture-loving Brisbanite, writing under the pseudonym "Fabian", complained in the *Brisbane Courier* about the "large gaps left by the laissez faire and want of initiative of our State Government", particularly in the Australian section which consisted of exactly two shelves. For modern literary works, wrote "Fabian", the reader might as well "have applied at the Dead Letter Office — such standard authors as Lawson, A.B. Paterson, Will, Ogilvie, Denis and O'Dowd were not represented "by as much as a single volume". As for historical material, the situation was not much better; most Queensland provincial papers were kept for a few months and then given to the State Stores Board "for packing purposes".²⁹

It was this deficiency which the Oxley Library was meant to remedy. In 1922 the Brisbane City Council appointed a sub-committee to look into the establishment of a municipal library. "The information collected indicated that there was a genuine need so the Council adopted the policy of making an annual appropriation of 1,000 pounds to form the nucleus of a capital fund which might be used to establish a municipal library at some future date." The creation in 1925 of the Greater Brisbane City Council seems to have killed the idea, possibly "due to the immense debt inherited from the older local government bodies".³⁰ Nothing more was heard of a municipal library after that date, while the Oxley trustees had failed to meet even once during the first four years of the trust's existence. In April 1927 Dr F.W. Robinson — a member of the university's English department, with the help of the University Dramatic Society which donated ten pounds for the purchase of books — initiated what became known as the Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature, in the form of a reading room to be approached through his study.³¹ The same year — exactly when I have not been able to establish — the *Brisbane Courier* published a strongly worded letter about the "need for an Australian library in Brisbane", written by Sparks shortly after he discovered that the historical society had "lapsed". This is how Sparks described the circumstances in which he came to write the missive:

... I had a letter from Sir John Quick, telling me of his works, and asking me to call on Firmin McKinnon [associate editor of the *Brisbane Courier*]. Mr McKinnon told me of the existence of the Oxley Memorial Trust, and introduced me to the editor, Mr Sanderson Taylor, who commissioned me to write an article on the need for an Australian library in Brisbane and calling for some action by the Trustees. Not knowing that Dr. Stewart was one of the Trustees, I drafted an article, putting matters rather bluntly,

and took it to Mr McKinnon for approval before polishing it. The next day I found the article, in all its rawness, in the *Courier* as a letter to the Editor, signed with my name in full.²

What direct effect, if any, this had on later events we can only guess, but on 21 March 1928 the Brisbane Town Clerk received a letter from the City Solicitor indicating that M.J. Barry (who gave up local politics after 1925) was “desirous of retiring from the trust of the [Oxley] fund and that he proposes that the Council should become Trustee. He states that Dr Cumbrae-Stewart is prepared to retire also, so that the Fund may go into the Council’s trust account.”³² The finance committee of the Brisbane City Council agreed to accept the trust, but the stratagem to remove Cumbrae-Stewart did not succeed. “Your impression that I am desirous of retiring from the Trusts”, replied the professor

or that I have suggested that the Council should become Trustee is incorrect. I certainly shall not retire voluntarily until the Oxley Memorial is unveiled and some definite understanding reached regarding the Memorial Library.³³

That was in April 1928. His position as trustee was unassailable: he was appointed for life. Without his co-operation, or at least his tacit approval, the Oxley Centenary Fund was paralyzed. When the trustees finally convened in September 1929, the meeting was chaired by the Brisbane Mayor W.A. Jolly, and attended by the City Treasurer, N.F. Heatherington, and by the City Architect. The meeting accepted Barry’s resignation as trustee and replaced him by Jolly, as “Mayor of Brisbane for the time being”. It also discussed the housing of the Oxley Library in the New Town Hall [City Hall] but left the matter in abeyance as the Lord Mayor was unable to make “any promise in this connection”.³⁴

And so we come to 1930. It all started in January when the Lord Mayor called a joint meeting of the Oxley trustees and the historical society to discuss “joint accommodation” at the Town Hall. Although the minutes of the meeting are extremely sketchy, there is little doubt that Jolly did his utmost to get the two bodies to co-operate but the meeting decided otherwise; the historical society was to have the “sole use of the room at the Town Hall”.³⁵ On 9 June, however, by a resolution of the Brisbane City Council, the Oxley Memorial Library was allocated “more commodious”³⁶ accommodation in the new building. That problem solved, Jolly convened another meeting, on 2 July, which included two new faces — J.J. Stable, Professor of Modern Languages and Literature at the University of Queensland and a foundation member of the historical society, and Firmin McKinnon of the *Brisbane Courier*. Also present was the City Treasurer, N.F. Heatherington; Cumbrae-Stewart, “owing to illness”,³⁷ was unable to attend.

What ailed the aging professor we do not know, but the meeting

was almost certainly convened in the knowledge that he would not be able to attend. It appointed Heatherington as secretary and treasurer of the Oxley Memorial Fund, and resolved to create a permanent committee of advice — consisting of Professor Stable, Professor Alcock (who became the University's first Professor of History and Economics in 1922), Dr Jackson, McKinnon, the University Librarian Miss E.K. McIver, the retired Supreme Court judge A.W. McNaughton and the trustees, as *ex officio* members — to “advise and assist” the trustees in all matters connected with the management of the Oxley Memorial Library. And lastly, it decided, as a matter of urgency, that an approach should be made to the historical society to discuss the “control and use” of the Oxley Library.³⁸

Cumbræ-Stewart's illness had other, for him even more serious consequences. On 27 July, at a meeting from which he was also absent, the historical society passed a motion directing the secretary to thank the professor “for the care of Historic relics etc. and enquire of him when it would be convenient to remove the society's belongings from the University”.³⁹ More importantly, it decided that the next annual meeting — be held as soon as possible. “They deliberately issued notices...”, wrote Sparks many years after the event, “at such short notice as to exclude the University members... To prevent any suggestion of Dr. Stewart's being suggested as President, plans were laid to have Inigo Jones... ready to take over the reins immediately”.¹⁸ Writing in 1935, the then president of the historical society, Sir Raphael Cilento, recorded that shortly after his displacement Cumbræ-Stewart “severed his connection” with the society, “taking with him” the accumulated funds of the Oxley Memorial Trust and “announcing that there was no further connection between this fund and the Historical Society”.⁴⁰ However Cumbræ-Stewart was vice-president in 1930-1, and 1931-32, but was not involved in its affairs to any large extent.

THE MOVE TO NEWSTEAD

The final break (once again undocumented) came in the first half of 1932 — possibly in February, following a meeting of the historical society council which called for urgent discussion between the society and the Oxley trustees “concerning amalgamation”.⁴¹ In May 1932 the Brisbane City Council gave the society partial use of Newstead House, giving it, for the first time, a permanent home, thereby strengthening its hand in its tug-of-war with the Oxley Library whose accommodation in the Town Hall was only temporary. In October the historical society sent a deputation to the new Lord Mayor, J.W. Greene (who had replaced Jolly in 1931) to discuss “matters in connection with the Historical Society and the Oxley Memorial library”.⁴² Nothing came of it, but in the meantime the society had

acquired a new and powerful ally, in the person of the recently appointed Governor Sir Leslie Wilson, who in the years to come was to exceed “the bounds of duty”⁴³ in furthering its cause. By the end of the year the society was ready for a frontal attack. On 10 December the *Brisbane Courier* published a letter from Welsby, which asked why the Oxley library

was ever mooted, and what is to be gained by its formation. If the library is really for “the study and general knowledge of Queensland authors and writers” — and poets — why all that can be desired in this direction can be already found in scores of public and private collections. When formed who is to run it, and in what manner... Might I suggest that the Oxley Memorial Library Trustees should call a meeting, and get something done by either having the object for which the vote of the money was passed rescinded or go for another eight years hibernation [*sic*]. To hold so large a sum of money for so many years is beyond my comprehension.⁴⁴

Three days later Dr Jackson weighed in with his contribution. He called the Oxley Library a “premature infant whose very existence is shaky or uncertain”, and criticized the past “dual position of the president of the historical society and Trustee of the Oxley Library” as “sure to lead to confusion”. Like Mr Welsby, said the good doctor,

I have no quarrel with the Oxley Library. Indeed, I am one of the committee chosen by the Trustees to carry out some duties in connection therewith. But those duties are very indefinite. A meeting of that committee was called some three or four years ago and met, without important result. I have often wondered when another would be called, and feel now that it should be done at once.⁴⁵

The meeting was eventually called in May 1933, followed by another in June — a joint meeting of representatives of the Oxley Library advisory committee, the Historical Society of Queensland, the Royal Art Society and the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association — which ended in general unpleasantness and bitter recrimination. But in December 1932 all this was still to come. The day after the *Brisbane Courier* had published Dr Jackson’s letter, the Governor wrote to Premier Forgan Smith, about an urgent matter of “really great importance to the future of the State” — the creation of a Central Record Office. It was his “understanding”, wrote the Governor, that many departments had valuable records stowed away in cellars and that it was the “practice, from time to time, to destroy files no longer in use...”⁴⁶ Although the creation of an Archives had been suggested as early as 1913 when Melbourne had advocated a record office which would hold both government archives as well as “manuscripts and other papers”, and in 1917 the historical society itself had called for a “proper system of dealing with the archives of Queensland” to stop them from being “filched from us and removed to Sydney”, the question had never been raised by someone so high

in the official hierarchy.⁴⁷ What makes the Governor's initiative doubly interesting is both its judicious timing and his concluding remark that since the creation of such an office would necessarily involve further expenditure which the government was "endeavouring to avoid under present circumstances", he did not expect anything to come of it in the near future — a somewhat puzzling comment which will become clearer in a moment. "I am sure you will not mind my writing this", concluded His Excellency, "and please do not think of answering, as I can speak to you tomorrow when I see you."⁴⁶

What the two talked about can only be surmised, but presumably they discussed the possibility of turning of the historical society into an unofficial repository of state archives — a theme to which His Excellency was to return more than once in the future. In January 1933, the society celebrated Foundation Day with well publicized pageantry and lecturesses at Newstead House, which led the *Brisbane Courier* to announce that the historical society had "a very definite duty to perform" and that its "archives ought to contain all the material necessary to the historian of Queensland".⁴⁸ In March the *Courier* announced that since the move to Newstead House the society's affairs "have prospered more substantially" than at any time since it had been forced to go "into recess" because it had no home for its collections,⁴⁹ and that the society was hoping to obtain financial assistance so it could send a representative to the country districts to collect historical documents. All the while, strange things were happening behind closed doors, at Newstead House and elsewhere. In April 1933 Sparks, already an honorary librarian of the Queensland branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia, became (temporary) librarian of the historical society as well. During the short time he was at Newstead, he recalled in 1952,

I was made aware that a move was afoot to seize the Oxley Trust Fund. The claim was advanced that Dr. Stewart was appointed Trustee by virtue of his position as President of the Historical Society, and that the trusteeship should now vest in Inigo Jones... I asked Mr. Jones how he proposed to administer the fund if he got hold of it, and he told me that he would use it to fireproof Newstead House, which was a highly inflammable wooden structure. I promptly set out to block Mr. Jones from getting the fund, and to stir the trustees into action.

It seems that the quarrel had progressed very far before I became aware of it, and had become incredibly embittered by personalities... Dr Stewart claimed that Mr. Jones was antagonistic to the University as a whole, because he was refused an honorary degree for his sun spot long range weather forecasting system, and that Dr. Jackson was also directed against the University... Being on very friendly terms with both Dr. Stewart and Mr. Jones I tried to smooth matters out by persuading Mr. Jones that a library at

Newstead House would be an embarrassment to the Society, because it had no hope of servicing it.

I knew that by now Mr. Jones was going about among influential people in Brisbane, enlisting their support. He even told me that the Governor, Sir Leslie Wilson, supported him. This, however, I did not believe. I approached Professor Alcock about whole quarrel, and told him that I thought I could get Inigo to drop the matter, if he could persuade Professor Stewart to make some constructive move. Professor Alcock said they were both "difficult men", but he would do what he could. I also went to Mr. F.A. Cooper, then Minister for Public Instruction, and thereafter kept both Alcock and Cooper advised of the whole position day by day...²

On 12 May the Oxley Library Committee finally met, after hibernating for almost three years, with the same membership as in 1930 except for the inclusion of W.H. Brown, the librarian-in-charge of the Public Library. The meeting elected the former Supreme Court judge A.W. McNaughton as permanent chairman, and promptly invited the historical society, the Royal Art Society and the Queensland Authors' and Artists' Association to meet on 16 June to discuss what the *Brisbane Courier* chose to describe as a federation of Brisbane's literary interests.⁵¹ On 2 June the historical society met to formulate strategy, and, according to the minutes, instructed the delegates to stress "the necessity of merging the Oxley Library into the Historical Society's Library. The Birthright or Prestige of the Society, must not by any means to be interfered with."⁵² When all the parties met, on 16 June, the chairman of the Oxley Library Committee, McNaughton, as well as Greene and Heatherington were absent, the last two "owing to the pressure of business".⁵³ With Cumbrae-Stewart in the chair and the historical society delegates primed, the meeting was doomed. Predictably, Inigo Jones moved that the Oxley Library should be amalgamated with the historical society — at Newstead House — and was supported by the Royal Art Society and Queensland Authors' and Artists' Association. Cumbrae-Stewart declined to accept the motion, on the ground "that he did not think it advisable to proceed with the business of the meeting"⁵⁴ during the absence of the three members of the Oxley Library Committee, and subsequently disallowed Welsby's motion that his own ruling with regard to Inigo Jones' motion be disagreed with. At the close of the meeting, reported the *Daily Mail*, the representatives of the historical society stated that although they had been invited to discuss means of co-operating "they had not been allowed to do anything".⁵³

And so an opportunity was lost. When the Oxley Library was eventually opened, on 5 April 1934, it came as an anti-climax. Sparks replaced Heatherington as secretary to the Oxley Library Committee in August 1933, starting an association which was to last over five

years; in September shelving was erected in the top-floor areas of the Public Library assigned to the Oxley Library, and in the early part of 1934 two of the “better type private libraries of Australiana”, those of J. Maxwell (former Mayor of Brisbane) and J.B. Morgan (son of Sir Arthur Morgan) were bought by the Oxley Library Committee.

SEPARATE IDENTITIES

After 1934 the paths of the historical society and the Oxley Memorial Library diverged despite statements by the Governor at the opening of the Oxley Library and Inigo Jones at a meeting of the historical society three weeks later, favouring an amalgamation. The historical society became incorporated in 1936 under the *Religious, Educational and Charitable Institutions Act* of 1861. In early 1940, following the passing of the *Newstead House Trust Act* of 1939, it was given the use of the whole of Newstead House, with the state government and the Brisbane City Council sharing the cost of reconstruction. During 1942-45 Newstead was occupied by the United States Army (with the society’s possessions “crammed into three small rooms”)⁵⁴, but the society remained active, more than doubling its membership, to over 250 during the war. With the election, in 1945, of Professor Alcock as president, the society renewed its close association with the university. It became the Royal Historical Society of Queensland in 1958.

About the time the Oxley Library opened, representatives of the Royal Art Society and the Queensland Authors’ and Artists’ Association began to take part in the Oxley Library Committee’s meetings, while the university demonstrated its support by reserving space for the library (as well as a future Public Archives Office) in its plans for a new library building.⁵⁵ The historical society still had the support of His Excellency — and a new, highly capable president, in the person of Sir Raphael Cilento, specialist in tropical medicine, and since 1934 the state’s Director-General of Health. Cilento had a different, less emotional style than Inigo Jones, and better connections in the corridors of power. On 2 August 1935, just one day after Miss Majorie Warham had been seconded as the first Oxley Librarian, Sir Raphael wrote to his minister, the future Premier E.M. Hanlon. He had spoken to His Excellency the Governor the previous evening, who

requests [emphasis added] that the Minister should receive a deputation on the subject next week, and subsequently support, through the usual channels, the proposals... [that it was] most undesirable that there should be a number of small societies working against one another and wrecking the possibility of doing anything useful in this connection, and the only institution that can bring them together is the Government. His Excellency therefore suggests that there should be a small subdepartment of records or

Section of Records, which should devote its attention to this activity; and that a short Act, if necessary, should be drawn up to make it possible to control the activities of all organisations devoted to this purpose and to co-ordinate them.⁵⁶

Sir Raphael added that Professor Cumbrae-Stewart had formed a Council which had recently been joined by G.W. Watson of the Chief Secretary's Department, and a Bibliographic Society,⁵⁷ "with the main object of keeping control of the funds and re-establishing the dominating position he lost when he lost the presidency of the Society". He had discussed the matter with the Public Service Commissioner, J.D. Story, who thought it would not be difficult to appoint someone as clerk in charge of a Section of Records and establishing the Historical Society as the voluntary organisation for carrying out the collection of material etc., adding also the Oxley Memorial fund and its activities to prevent stupid personalities from gravely interfering with an activity for the public benefit.⁵⁸

At the next meeting of the historical society, Sir Raphael was authorized to "meet Mr. Cooper, the Minister for Education to enlist his support... for the collection and protection of historical archives and documents and their storage at Newstead", and at the same time to approach the members of the Committee of the Oxley Library with the "object of determining the basis of co-operation".⁵⁸ It had no immediate result. As for the fate of Cilento's submission to Hanlon, the copious (if not always legible) marginalia on the letter itself indicate that the question of a sub-department of records had been put to the Premier in 1937 by cabinet itself.

In the meantime, there occurred a development which took much of the heat out of the quarrel, namely the "disappearance", as Sparks had called it, of the Oxley Trust Fund. In February 1936 a retired grazier, P.M. Forrest, offered to sell his library to the Oxley Memorial Library, for the sum of 2,447 pounds which, accidentally or by design, "would eat up practically the whole of the remaining money"⁵⁹ [in the fund]. The Oxley Library Committee, and in particular Cumbrae-Stewart, urged prompt purchase, but the then Lord Mayor, Alderman Jones, did not like the prospect of disbursing the whole of the fund in one fell swoop, until he realized that the whole community approved the purchase, "but he declared that he intensely disliked having his hand forced in this manner."⁶⁰

There still remained what can only be described as the vice-regal obsession with making Newstead House Queensland's "established centre of history-recording activity". Speaking during the Discovery Day celebrations at Newstead House, on 29 April 1935, His Excellency — called for the creation of a Department of archives or a Government Registry where the historical records of Queensland could be preserved, adding that at Newstead House the historical

society “had a great opportunity”, now that the Lord Mayor “has held out hopes of the property being handed over to the Society as a permanent trust”.⁶¹ A week later the minister for Public Instruction, A.F. Cooper, expressed great hope for the Oxley Library’s future as a “national institution”.⁶² And so the saga continued. In November 1936 a deputation from the historical society sought Cooper’s support for the establishment of a permanent historical museum at Newstead House, pointing out that Queensland alone of the states possessed no official institution to preserve important historical material which is daily diminishing, and sought to “re-establish contact between the Historical Society and the Oxley Memorial Library.

Specifically, the deputation asked the minister to take steps to “reconcile, to the advantage of each, these [two] bodies”, to pay for the maintenance of Newstead House, to second a government officer to work there as “caretaker and librarian”, and to subsidize the publication of the society’s journal. The minister “listened with interest” and promised to reply “in due course”.⁶³

The final chapter of this drawn-out epic was played out in the months preceding the outbreak of the war in Europe. In November 1938 Sir Raphael Cilento (since 1936 one of the vice-presidents of the historical society) led yet another delegation to the Premier, to discuss that a permanent historical museum and library at Newstead House. Some two months later the same delegation saw the Treasurer, F.A. Cooper, who, it seems, for once spoke his mind. Reporting back to the society in January 1939, Sir Raphael wrote that it was generally agreed that the “idea to be aimed at” was the establishment of a Department of Archives, consisting of a government department only accessible to accredited persons for particular purposes; another department with documents readily accessible to the public; and sectional libraries for the Historical Society and the Oxley Memorial Library.⁶⁴

The minister, concluded Sir Raphael,

requested that we should make individual approaches to the Societies we represented as early as possible, and that we should notify him of the general view taken by the societies. Outside the proposals outlined above, I think it may be taken that the Government is not prepared to act, and that action along the lines suggested will only be attained if the Historical Society and the Oxley Memorial Trust show themselves willing to collaborate in that regard.⁶⁵

Thus Queensland had to wait another nineteen years for its “Department of Archives”. Part IV of the 1943 Libraries Act, it is true, contained provisions for the care and preservation of public records, under the overall control of the Library Board, but was not proclaimed until 1958, just in time for the Queensland Centenary.

The ultimate irony is that while the Brisbane literati bickered, one retiring individual achieved more than all the local cultural nabobs put together. I refer to Richard Pennington, the university's first James Forsyth Librarian, appointed in 1939. In August 1940 Pennington, just back from a conference of the Australian Institute of Librarians with the preservation of archives for its theme, mentioned the subject to Professor Alcock who in turn wrote to the Under-Secretary of the Chief Secretary's Department, G.W. Watson,⁶⁴ enquiring about the measures taken by the state government to ensure that no records of value were pulped as waste paper (Cardboard Pty. Ltd. had recently offered a price of one pound per ton of all records from government departments.)⁶⁷ It was the beginning of protracted correspondence between the two men which finally bore fruit — somewhat unexpectedly — on 17 October, when the Under Secretary circularized all state government departments and sub-departments with a "Memorandum of the Preservation of Archives", setting down guidelines to be followed when "surplus departmental accumulations are being passed for pulping". The guidelines were a verbatim reproduction of a memorandum written by Pennington and forwarded by Alcock to Watson only nine days earlier. As for the effectiveness of the "Pennington Guidelines", we can only hope that they did some good, and hope that Pennington was unduly pessimistic when he exclaimed, in a moment of despair before the government had decided to act: "I don't suppose it's really worthwhile troubling Mr. Watson again; for in 100 years time we shall be fortunately deaf to the execrations of the Queensland historians, if there are any".⁶⁸

ENDNOTES

1. C.G. Austin, "The Historical Society of Queensland", *Journal of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland*, 6(1), September 1959. There are no minutes of meetings of the historical society before 1928 and those of the next five years are extremely sketchy. Austin's history is based exclusively on information in the Society's *Journal*. No correspondence could be found before 1928 and very little before 1933, nor could reports be traced for 1924-32, most likely because none were ever produced.
2. H.J.J. Sparks, "The Oxley Library", typescript, 1952, p.2 (original MSS in John Oxley Library, OM 81-21).
3. *Proposal for the Establishment of a Society To Be Called The Historical Society of Queensland*, Brisbane, 1913.
4. "Formation of the Society", *Journal of the Historical Society of Queensland*, 1(1), January 1914, p.5.
5. M. Thomis, *A Place of Light and Learning: the University of Queensland's First Seventy-five Years*, St. Lucia, 1985, p.101.
6. "Formation of the Society". p.7.
7. Australian Historical Society, *Rules and Regulations*, Sydney, 1901, p.3.

8. R.B. Joyce, *Sir William MacGregor*, Melbourne, 1971, p.368.
9. S. MacIntyre, "The Writing of Australian History", in *Australians: A Guide to Sources*, Sydney, 1987, p.20.
10. *Queenslander*, 2 August 1913.
11. Austin, p.220.
12. Report for the Year 1916-17", *Journal* 3(1), August 1917, p.105.
13. MacIntyre, p.19.
14. *ibid.* p.18; J.B. Hirst, "The Pioneer Legend", *Historical Studies*, 18(71), October 1978.
15. "Formation of the Society", p. 2.
16. Thomis, *A Place of Light and Learning*, Chapter 1.
17. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, p.171.
18. *Sparks*, p.1.
19. 'Proceedings of the Historical Society of Queensland", *Journal* 2(3), October 1925, pp.121-2.
20. Thomis, p.116. Cumbrae-Stewart was appointed at the "local" rate of 800 pounds p.a., after the Senate had failed to fill the chair from the outside at a higher salary.
21. Brisbane Centenary Celebrations, 6th to 16th August, 1924, *Official Programme*, Brisbane, 1924 (no pagination).
22. The letter has been pasted into the first volume of the society's minutes. It is headed only "Dear Doctor" but there is no doubt that it was addressed to Dr Jackson.
23. RHSQ Minutes, 21 February 1929.
24. *Brisbane Courier (BC)*, 28 September 1925.
25. A copy of the Oxley Centenary Trust Deed is held in the Librarian's office, John Oxley Library.
26. RHSQ Minutes, 24 April 1934.
27. Thomis, p.6.
28. R. Munn and E. Pitt, *Australian Libraries: A Survey of Conditions and Suggestions for Their Improvement*, Melbourne, 1935, p.61.
29. "The Public Library", *BC*, 8 March 1924.
30. *Brisbane 1859-1959: A History of Local Government*, by G. Greenwood and J. Lavery, Brisbane, 1959, p. 4529, 493.
31. Thomis, p.139 and F.W. Robinson, "The Fryer Memorial Library of Australian Literature" *University of Queensland Gazette* (24) November 1952 p.8.
32. Oxley Memorial Library Records, OM 65-18, John Oxley Library.
33. Cumbrae-Stewart to Town Clerk, 3 April 1928, *Ibid.*
34. Minutes of Conference held in the office of Alderman W.A. Jolly, on Tuesday 3rd September 1929, OML Records, OM 65-18.
35. OML Advisory Committee Minutes (hereinafter ACM) 20 January 1930, OM 79-18.
36. *Ibid*; Oxley Library "Constitution and Rules", Typescript, n.d. [1933?].
37. J.L. Pring, "The Oxley Memorial Library of Queensland", p.24, *Quill* 3(2), May 1962.
38. OML Advisory Committee Minutes, 2 July 1930.
39. RHSQ Minutes, 27 July 1930.

40. Cilento to Home Secretary, 2 August 1935, Premier's Department 2527/54.
41. RHSQ Minutes, 17 February 1932.
42. *Ibid.*, 5 October 1932.
43. Austin, p.223.
44. *Brisbane Courier*, 10 December 1932.
45. *Brisbane Courier*, 13 December 1932.
46. Wilson to Premier, 14 December 1932, Premier's Department 2527/54.
47. *Queenslander*, 2 August 1913; *Journal* 1(3)August 1917, 107.
48. "Historical Society", *Brisbane Courier*, 31 January 1933.
49. *Brisbane Courier*, 4 March 1933.
50. Sparks, pp.2-4.
51. *Brisbane Courier*, 13 May 1933.
52. RHSQ Minutes, 2 June 1933.
53. *Daily Mail*, 17 June 1933.
54. RHSQ Minutes, 24 April 1934; *Courier-Mail*, 24 April 1934; Austin, p.224.
55. Thomis, p. 139.
56. Cilento to Home Secretary, 2 August 1935, Premier's Department 2527/54.
57. The Bibliographic Society was established not by Cumbrae-Stewart but by Sparks, its president. Other officers in 1936 included Alcock, Stable, Cumbrae-Stewart and Watson (vice-presidents), and C.B. Christesen. Cooper, then Minister for Public Instruction, was patron. I have not been able to locate its constitution but one of its aims was the "co-ordination of all learned and cultural societies in Brisbane", *Courier-Mail*, 17 February 1937.
58. RHSQ Minutes, 14 August 1935.
59. Sparks, p.5.
60. *Telegraph*, 30 April 1936.
61. *Courier-Mail*, 1 May 1936.
62. *Courier-Mail*, 8 May 1936.
63. Welsby to Cooper, 3 November 1936, RHSQ Welsby Correspondence.
64. Cilento to Davis (Secretary of the historical society), 26 January 1936, Welsby Correspondence. Queensland had to wait another 19 years for its "Department of Archives." Part IV of the 1943 Libraries Act which contained provisions for the care and preservation of public records was not proclaimed until 1958, just in time for the Queensland Centenary.
65. Sparks to Nathan, 10 March 1938 and Nathan to Sparks, 11 May 1938, OML Advisory Committee Minutes, 79-18.
66. Watson was chairman of the Oxley Memorial Library Committee until 1945 when he was replaced by Professor Alcock.
67. Watson to under-Secretary, Department of Justice, 5 September 1940, Premier's Department 2527/54.
68. Pennington to Alcock, 19 August 1940, Premier's Department 2527/54.