

# Conversations from the Past



Mel Pratt, Douglas Wilke and unidentified chauffeur, 1930s  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24721163

Barry York recalls the pioneering work of the Library's first oral history interviewer, Mel Pratt

The name Mel Pratt has an important place in the National Library's story. He was the first interviewer contracted for the Library's Oral History Project when it commenced in 1970.

A career journalist during the 1930s and Second World War, Pratt joined the Commonwealth Department of Information in 1945 and, at the time of his retirement, was acting director of the Australian News and Information Bureau. His retirement in 1970 coincided with the National Library's search for a suitable individual to serve as the Library's official oral history interviewer. Pratt was available and responded favourably to the offer made by Deputy Librarian, Cliff Burmester, in October of that year.

Pratt's brief was to record interviews with eminent Australians in the field of federal and state parliamentary politics, the public service, journalism and other aspects of public life. Manuscript staff undertook copious research into the background of each interviewee, and Pratt used these briefs as a guide to each interview. Writing in the *Journal of the Oral History Association of Australia* many years later, he recalled how he aimed to persuade each interviewee to provide a 'true, accurate and unreserved account of the events for future generations'.

Pratt's work has largely been overshadowed by that of the Oral History Collection's celebrated pioneer, Hazel de Berg, who recorded more than 1200 people, mainly from the arts, between 1957 and 1984. Most of her recordings predated the Library's establishment of an oral history project. Her sterling work was on a *laissez faire* basis, an arrangement fully supported by the National Librarian, Harold White. The Library supplied her with

recording equipment and other practical support and she selected her own interviewees.

Pratt's appointment marked the beginning of a systematic oral history collecting program, based on what has become known as 'the Columbia model'. Columbia University, in New York, established the world's first oral history research centre, the Oral History Research Office, in 1948. Harold White visited the office in 1950.

The 'Columbia model' stressed the need for interviewers to be well prepared, with considerable prior research, and it encouraged interaction between interviewer and interviewee: the former was not just there to operate the tape-recorder but was part of an intellectual process. The defining quality of the Columbia



Hazel de Berg with Dame Mary Gilmore during an interview in 1961  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an10572980-1

approach was its elitism. It saw oral history as a way of supplementing the documentary records of great men. Thus, during the 1970s, the Library's oral history work was seen in terms of its Manuscript Collection.

In September 1970, Manuscript Librarian, Graeme Powell, drew up a list of about 190 people whom he felt should be considered for interview in the years ahead. Several of those on the list were recorded by Pratt over the next nine years. His first interview, with Henry (Jo) Gullett, a member of Federal Parliament from 1946 to 1955, took place on 14 November 1970. A fortnight later, he recorded Sir Peter Heydon, the distinguished diplomat and departmental head whose career had spanned three decades. Part of Pratt's appeal to the Library lay in the fact that he was widely known and liked

in such eminent circles. Most of his interviewees were men of his own generation and, he later claimed, he was on first-name terms with about half of them.

The Library also approached him because it was assumed that his work in journalism had given him strong skills as an interviewer. Pratt reflected on this assumption years later in the above-mentioned journal article, which he called 'Confessions of an Untrained Oral Historian'. He described his 'tools of trade' as the 'wad of copy paper and a knowledge of Pitman's shorthand', rather than the new-fangled recording machine required by the National Library. Oral history, he concluded, is 'an entirely different field' to media interviewing. It aims to create a unique historical record and, of course, there is no place at all for an

'aggressive approach' of the type frequently used by radio and television interviewers.

Having completed two successful interviews at the end of 1970, he and staff from the Manuscript Collection worked energetically during 1971 to complete 25 others. The names reveal the 'establishment' focus of his work, and also its importance: Raphael Cilento, J.A. Alexander, Frank Forde, John (Jack) Kelly, Theodor Bray, Oswald Woodger, Maurice Mawby, Clyde Cameron, Norm McCance, Leonard Huxley, Stewart Jamieson, Keith Archer, William Hudson, Bill Hartley, Arthur Coles, Daryl Lindsay, Geoffrey Sawyer, John Commins, Donald Rodgers, Charles Abbott, Kenneth Bailey, William McKell, James Darling, William Dunk and Arthur Calwell. Many had been knighted.

The interview with Arthur Calwell, Australia's first Minister for Immigration from 1945 to 1949, is a significant primary source. In it, Calwell refers to the influence of his American paternal grandfather on his attitude to immigration. Calwell says that his grandfather's origins made him interested in American history and he learned how the United States grew and prospered through its enthusiastic intake of millions of down-and-out migrants from Europe.

History has its patterns and theories, but it also has its idiosyncrasies. Regardless of Calwell's grandfather, Australia would have had a mass immigration program after the Second World War because capitalist economic development demanded a large and immediate labor force. But would Calwell have been such a strong enthusiast for it without the influence of his grandfather? Oral history can provide tantalising personal insights and pose intriguing questions that beg further research.

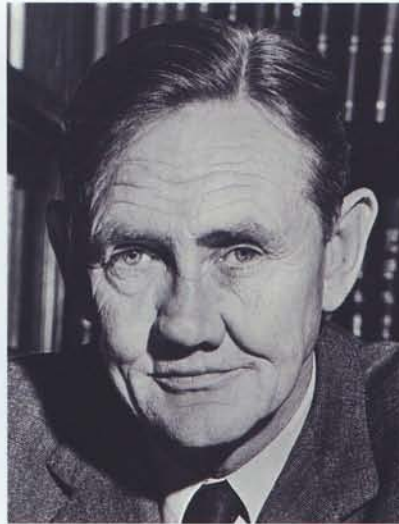
During Pratt's first few years, the Library formulated better ways of managing the project and making it more cost-effective. A full-time Oral History Librarian, Suzanne Lunney (née Walker), was appointed in 1973 and interviewers other than Pratt were contracted to undertake specific interviews. By 1977, there were half-a-dozen other interviewers. Lunney herself recorded more than 60



Arthur Calwell, Minister for Immigration, welcoming the 100 000th British migrant, Isobel Savery, 1949  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24717043



Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of Fred Daly, Labor Member for Grayndler, House of Representatives, Parliament of Australia 1959*  
 b & w photograph; 15.4 x 11.0 cm  
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an24717001



Unknown photographer  
*Portrait of John Gorton c.1968*  
 gelatin silver photograph on fibre based paper; 24.1 x 18.9 cm  
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an12267176



Dame Enid Lyons, the first female Member of the House of Representatives in Commonwealth Parliament, 1940s  
 Pictures Collection, nla.pic-an23259539

interviews. The aim was to relieve the staff in the Manuscript Section of the time-consuming task of preparing Pratt's briefs, by contracting interviewers already specialist in particular fields. Contracting interviewers interstate also helped to reduce travel costs. After 1971, Pratt averaged 10 interviews each year with such important figures as Henry Bolte, Robert Askin, Kep Enderby, John Gorton, Douglas Wilkie, Keith Grainger, Hubert Opperman, Cliff Burmester, Henry Bland, John Overall, Jim Forbes, Thomas Playford, Alan Reid, Fred Daly and Alan Ramsey. In May 1978, he completed his last: with former federal parliamentarian, Nelson Lemmon. It was his 95th interview for the Library.

The Pratt Collection is an Australian historical 'Who's Who', and it has all the additional advantages of the sound archive. We delve into Pratt's work and hear the actual voices of men of power and influence who shaped political history or reported upon significant aspects of Australian life during the 1930s Great Depression, the Second World War and two decades of postwar reconstruction and national development. We can read all about these people in books and articles; we can view their images in old

photographs and portraits; but to hear their voices adds another dimension of understanding altogether.

Some of the accents, for instance, are indicative of the influence of upper-class Englishness among Australian elites that seldom exists today. About a third of Pratt's 95 interviewees were born in the late nineteenth century. And nearly all were born before the First World War. The youngest interviewee, journalist Mungo MacCallum, was born in 1941.

Almost absent from the Pratt Collection are the voices of women. Only four were recorded by him and, of those, only two—Dame Enid Lyons and Dr Margaret Sutherland—were recorded for their own stories. Yselt Bailey was interviewed for her memories of her late husband, Professor Kenneth Bailey, and Mary Evatt was interviewed not just for her own life, but for memories of her husband, Herbert Vere Evatt. Pratt interviewed Dame Enid, the first woman Member of the House of Representatives, and Dr Sutherland, the outstanding Australian composer, in 1972, at a time when the new feminist movement was ensuring that women would gain greater political, economic and bureaucratic power.

The Pratt interviews reflect the fact that women had largely been

excluded from senior institutional positions. Indeed, in the list of 190 potential interviewees drawn up in 1970, only three were women. Over the next two decades, as women entered nearly all the spheres of power and influence, the Library's collecting strategy gradually changed. Today, the Oral History Collection is rich in the diverse voices of eminent women.

Mel Pratt died on 24 July 1986. In conveying the Library's condolences to the Pratt family, Director-General Warren Horton made an assessment of his work that remains valid today, nearly two decades later:

Mel took pride in being the first interviewer to be appointed to the Library's Oral History Project. His skilful manner on tape, his fine knowledge of public affairs and his ability to meet the intellectual demands of interviews with almost 100 notable Australians, produced a series of tapes and transcripts which continue to be highly esteemed by all who have used them.

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