Marie-Louise Ayres provides an overview of the riches to be found in the papers of Patrick White, which were recently acquired by the National Library.

I can’t let you have my ‘papers’ because I don’t keep any. My mss are destroyed as soon as the books are printed. I put very little into notebooks, don’t keep my friends’ letters … and anything unfinished when I die is to be burnt. The final versions of my books are what I want people to see …

Patrick White, reply to Dr George Chandler, Director-General, 9 April 1977, National Library of Australia, MS 8469

Patrick White repeated these stern denials for the rest of his life, and the world believed him. He even denied the existence of these papers to his biographer David Marr, with whom he otherwise cooperated over many years.

But, from the moment Barbara Mobbs emailed the Library on 16 August 2006, calmly writing ‘you might be interested in the material on the attached list. Nobody has seen this …’, it became clear that White had not ‘destroyed’ everything, and that he had left a rich, if far from complete, archive to posterity.

So, was White telling George Chandler an outright ‘fib’ back in 1977? Well, yes and no. A comparison of all White’s known works, published and unpublished, against the contents of this new collection and the tiny number of manuscripts and typescripts known before it became public, confirms that White was largely telling the truth. In 1964, when White and his life-long partner Manoly Lascaris moved from Castle Hill to Centennial Park, Lascaris was put in charge of the bonfires into which he tossed many of the manuscripts and almost all of White’s correspondence.

It seems certain that by 1977 White had burned many priceless documents, including the manuscript and typescript versions of his great novels The Aunt’s Story (1948), The Tree of Man (1955), Voss (1957),
Patrick White (191–1990)

Notebook (detail) 1941
Manuscript Collection MS998

right:
Patrick White (191–1990)
Notebook 1941
Manuscript Collection MS9982

above:
Patrick White (191–1990)
Notebook [detail] 1941
Manuscript Collection MS9982

which was published in 1979. We have no manuscripts of plays written before 1981. But this does not mean White left no pre-publication record of these or other works. In his reply to George Chandler, he was certainly being disingenuous about his notebooks. The 10 notebooks contained in his collection are treasure troves, full of observations, first paragraphs, timelines, character descriptions and research notes. Most of White’s novels first appear in these notebooks, along with many of his plays, short stories and a surprising number of poems (many of which were never published). It is clear that White himself wrote in these, and mined them—sometimes many years—for his creative work.

ing breakfast a ewe gave birth. She lay on her side, gave one or two grunts, and a seizing a leg, whirled a lamb out of her. wung it in a wide semi circle, new and ening, and laid it beside the mother in grass.

Notebook, Papers of Patrick White, MS 9982, Series 2, Folder 3

White’s handwritten full draft of his memoir, prepared 40 years later in his preferred folded foolscap bundles, using his favourite fountain pen and corrected in blue and red biro, is followed by no fewer than four typescript drafts (all present in this collection, in Series 3, Folders 1–4). The final draft recounts the episode thus:

Riders in the Chariot (1961), The Solid Mandala (1966), and The Eye of the Storm (1973). There are no manuscripts for his first two novels, nor for The Twyborne Affair, which was in preparation at the time of White’s letter to George Chandler and...
One morning as the light was increasing, a beast lay down on her side and started moaning. The shepherd whipped from out of her an identifiable lamb ...


It is interesting to think of White thumbing through those notebooks from long ago, getting reacquainted with his younger self. Perhaps he admired the immediacy, the energy of the writing—a boy ‘seizing’ a ewe and ‘whirling’ a lamb out of her—before cropping and taming the text a little for publication: the shepherd ‘whips’ a lamb from this ewe.

Other pre-1977 material survives. Typescript versions of some early plays made their way to the Mitchell Library, the Fryer Library and the National Library in the 1980s and 1990s. This new archive shows that a partial typescript of *The Vivisector* (1970) and a full typescript of *A Fringe of Leaves* (1976) were spared the flames, as were typescripts of three early screenplays from the 1960s, *Willy Wagtail*, *Clay* and *Down at the Dump*. White’s short story from 1977, ‘Fête Galante’, survives in manuscript form. A novel running to more than 160 000 words, *The Binoculars and Helen Nell*, and a novella of some 25 000 words, ‘Dolly Formosa and the Happy Few’, both written in 1965, are here in full as first and completely uncorrected manuscript drafts.

But, despite these exceptions, White was not stretching the truth too far when he said he kept no personal papers. And perhaps George Chandler’s letter itself influenced White’s thoughts on keeping his manuscripts? We will never know for sure, but certainly there is a great change in his habits from around the date of their correspondence. From destroying the majority of his working documents, he moves to keeping most of them. The creative work of his last 13 years is richly represented in manuscripts, typescripts and correspondence. The three short stories published together as *Three Uneasy Pieces* (1987), and three late plays *Signal Driver* (1982), *Netherwood* (1983) and *Shepherd on the Rocks* (1987), are all present in magnificent manuscript form, including stage plans, character lists and changes of names and titles (some of which were perhaps well advised; for example, *Shepherd on the Rocks*, which started life as ‘The Budgewank Experiment’).

Every draft of *Flaws in the Glass* was kept. The single manuscript of *Memoirs of Many in One* (1986), purchased by the National Library and the Mitchell Library in 1991, is fleshed out with typescript versions in this collection, and even some very late corrections to page proofs. Another unfinished novel, ‘The Hanging Garden’ (undated but probably from this later period), was also kept. Unperformed plays in manuscript and typescript forms were retained, perhaps in the hope that they could be reworked at some stage.

Who can disagree with Patrick White when he says that the ‘final versions’ of his books, plays, short stories and poems are what matter most? They are, indeed, his final word on the subjects he treated and should always stand as the pinnacle of his achievements. But this archive adds so much to our knowledge of how White worked. We can see how he wrote, what he struggled with and what he abandoned. We can and should be astonished at the absolute assurance with which he put pen to paper when writing a novel and how little changes from the first paragraphs that were scrawled in notebooks through successive manuscripts and multiple typescripts to the final product. His inspiration, his forward impetus and the sheer flow of these manuscripts are awe-inspiring. This collection shows that there is such a thing as literary genius and that White possessed it.

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Damian McDonald
The Papers of Patrick White – Exhibition record shots, 30 November 2006
Pictures Collection
We can also see that he struggled more with his plays and that prose was his ‘natural’ form. Unlike his novels, the manuscripts for his plays show him changing titles and character names, adding and subtracting characters and, not infrequently in early drafts, slipping from dialogue to prose as he wrestles with what is to come next.

We can see what he abandoned, and ask ourselves questions about why. Why did he abandon his complete first drafts of ‘The Binoculars and Helen Nell’ and ‘Dolly Formosa and the Happy Few’ without so much as a blue or red biro correction? Why did he correct ‘The Hanging Garden’ when it was clearly so far from being complete? Why did he publish so little poetry when his notebooks are full of poems?

Asking these questions matters as do all the questions that ever-inventive researchers will inevitably ask in the future. Archives in themselves never fully answer these questions, but archival documentation—whether in personal papers, photographs or oral history—is the lifeblood of scholarly research and enriches the public record, deepening our understanding of people, events and societies.

In this archive, we can see some of what White treasured and, in the nearly 200 condolence letters sent to Lascaris after White’s death, how much he was treasured. These last letters are perhaps the best answer to the question of why it matters that this archive survives. So many speak in the most direct way possible of the influence that White’s work had on Australia’s artists and readers. Letters from famous writers acknowledge White’s greatness and convey a sense of the status of ‘colossus’ that White holds in Australia’s literary psyche. Those from the dramatic world convey grief beyond words at the loss of this major spirit of Australian theatre. Family, friends and neighbours mourn Patrick the man, as well as White the writer.

Other letters are from those who had never met Patrick White, or perhaps met him only once. Yet they write to Lascaris to express their profound sense of his influence on their lives and thinking and an equally profound sense of loss at his death. In one especially poignant letter, a couple tell Lascaris that they read White’s works in their early twenties and that they felt he had always been part of their ‘family’, so much so that they named their son Patrick Manoly ‘for his writing and his love’. In a ‘second wave’ of these expressions of influence and of gratitude, visitors to the Library’s November 2006–January 2007 exhibition of selected items from the archive have expressed their sense of wonder at its survival, and an extraordinary feeling of personal connection with the writer and the man:

Of all the days to be in Canberra, this one fills my heart with joy and satisfaction.

and:

Patrick, your novel The Tree of Man changed the way I look at people. I thank you for the life you endowed it and every other novel with ...

Despite ample opportunities to destroy his entire personal archive, Patrick White did not do so. Australia must be grateful that he did not, that his loyal literary agent and executor, Barbara Mobbs, disobeyed his instructions to destroy his papers, and that they are now held safely in one of Australia’s great research libraries, where they are available for scholars and the curious alike.

An all day viewing of the Papers of Patrick White (nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms9882), including talks by experts on the man and his work, will be held on 30 March 2007.

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