With Hancock out of the way, Copland stepped into the job of recruiting officer for the Social Sciences school, sharing with Firth the task of recruiting for Pacific Studies. A day or two after the exchange on the park bench, he sat down in the same park with W.D. (Mick) Borrie, a demographer who was already on the University’s books as a Social Science Research Fellow. Hancock had provided for a demographer in his plans for the school, and he had approached Borrie several months earlier. Copland now confirmed the invitation, and Borrie became the University’s first appointment in the Social Sciences, with the title of Research Fellow. In the same park he also sounded out Geoffrey Sawer, Associate Professor at the University of Melbourne, about a position in law.

A fortnight later the Vice-Chancellor met S.F. (Siegfried Frederick) Nadel, who was Firth’s suggestion for the chair of Anthropology in Pacific Studies. Born in Vienna in 1903, Nadel’s early career had been devoted to music, including the publication of a biography of the Italian-German composer, Ferruccio Busoni. From musicology in German he passed quickly through ethnomusicology to anthropology in English. Moving to London in 1932, he immersed himself in the study of the Nupe people of central Nigeria and completed a University of London PhD on the subject a few years later. In the late 1930s he prepared a detailed comparative survey of the hill tribes in the Sudan, which led to a wartime post with the British Army in north Africa. Returning after the war to London, he taught for a while in Firth’s department before moving to Newcastle as Reader in Anthropology at King’s College in the University of Durham. By the time Copland met him in London, Siegfried had given way to Fred and he had become, as Firth put it, ‘very British’. Firth regarded him as outstanding: he had been promised a chair in Newcastle and would probably be a candidate for one in Cambridge. Although he knew little about the Pacific, no doubt he would quickly learn.

Copland continued recruiting in the United States, where he met Hancock’s friend Walter Russell Crocker. Born in 1902 as a fourth-generation South Australian, Crocker had lived what Hancock admiringly termed a ‘life of action’, first with the British Colonial Service in Nigeria, then with the International Labour Office, and during the war with the British Army in Africa, India and Britain. This had not prevented him writing several books, on the Japanese population problem, British colonial administration in Nigeria, and problems of colonial self-government. His interests were ideally suited to the school: he wanted to work on problems relating to
international government in the Pacific area, and on how the United Nations and other international organisations might fit into the Pacific picture. Copland concluded, after visiting him in New York, that despite his reputation for being rather prickly, his interests and vigorous mind were exactly what the University needed.

Another of Firth’s and Hancock’s suggestions for Pacific Studies had already agreed to come to Canberra. James Davidson, a New Zealander in his mid-thirties, was an exception to Hancock’s preference for recruiting to the senior positions proven men of middle age. After a doctorate from Cambridge he had served briefly in the New Zealand public service, then returned to England, where he had worked as a research assistant at Oxford before joining British Naval Intelligence. Since the end of the war he had been a Lecturer in Colonial History and Fellow of St John’s College, Cambridge; and when Hancock approached him early in 1949 he was busy advising the New Zealand government on a new Constitution for Western Samoa.

These three appointments—Nadel, Crocker and Davidson—provided the nucleus of a professoriate in Pacific Studies. Two other senior positions in the school were created in 1949 and filled early in 1950. On Firth’s recommendation W.E.H. Stanner was appointed Reader in Comparative Social Institutions in the Department of Anthropology. A Sydney graduate with a PhD from the University of London, Stanner’s research interests extended from east Africa, through northern and central Australia to New Guinea and the South-west Pacific. He had recently published a book entitled The South Seas in Transition and was currently working on the economics of Australian Aboriginal societies.

The other reader was C.P. FitzGerald, whose translation to Canberra was probably the only appointment in the history of the ANU that was foretold with the help of a horoscope—or, to be precise, the visit to Australia which immediately led to his appointment was accurately foretold. Born in London in 1902, FitzGerald had spent over half his adult life in China. After working in Britain on secret assignments during the war, he returned to China in 1946 as representative of the British Council, first in Nanjing and then in Beijing. In December 1948, on the very day that the siege of Beijing began, a Chinese fortune-teller told him that in the Chinese equivalent of July next year he would set out, without his family, on a long voyage to a country he had never visited before. Shortly afterwards Copland wrote a letter inviting him to undertake an extensive lecture tour of Australia for the ANU. The invitation reached him a few months later, after the blockade had been lifted, and in July he duly set out, without his family, for Australia. After travelling around the country for more than two months, delivering lectures on contemporary China, he returned to Beijing, followed soon after by a letter from Copland offering him a three-year appointment as Visiting Reader in Oriental Studies.

FitzGerald was Copland’s nomination: they had got to know one another well when their families had lived close by in Nanjing. Firth too had met him before the war, and thought well of his writings on Chinese culture and history. Not so Eggleston, who was annoyed by FitzGerald’s public advocacy of international recognition of the new regime in China when the situation in Eggleston’s view was far from settled; and who wanted in any case to offer visiting positions to Chinese and Indian scholars who would bring their
Sir Douglas Copland, Vice-Chancellor 1948–1953. This posthumous portrait shows him much as he was during his time as Vice-Chancellor. Oil by Bryan Westwood, about 1976.
own cultural perspectives to matters of importance to Australia. However, Copland argued that the revolution in China would prevent the University from getting the sort of indigenous Chinese scholar they wanted; and the quality of Fitzgerald’s lectures in Australia convinced the Vice-Chancellor that the University need look no further.

The earliest professorial appointments to the Social Sciences school were Geoffrey Sawyer for law and Trevor Swan for economics. Sawyer, who was approaching 40, had been born in Burma but had lived in Melbourne most of his life, where he had taught at the University, specialising in constitutional law. During the war he had been in charge of propaganda broadcasts to Japan and Japanese occupied territories. Wherever thought well of him, and Eggleston was pleased that he was likely to take an interest in ‘the scientific aspects’ of the law. Sawyer, with a substantial work on Australian constitutional cases to his credit, as well as a popular paperback on Australian government, was regarded as a solid investment. In contrast, Swan was less remarkable for his solidity than for his outstanding intellect: in 1948 he was being eagerly sought by a leading economist in the European Economic Commission, who described him as ‘exceptionally able and brilliant’. Except for a short stint as lecturer at the University of Sydney, most of his work to date had been in government departments. Coombs knew him well and supported him warmly; but Copland, who suspected he thought too highly of himself, remarked that he had not yet undertaken a sustained piece of work and thought he would benefit from a few years at a more junior level. Swan had initially applied for an advertised readership in economics. However, as Hancock had shown, the market was not teeming with economists; so, despite Copland’s doubt, he was offered the chair.

In addition to the two professorial appointments, three readers were appointed to Social Sciences. Where the chairs were filled by invitation, Council members thought it appropriate to advertise for readers, even though they might have someone in mind. Hancock’s suggested readership in the Sources of Australian History was filled by Laurie Fitzhardinge; L.C. Webb, a New Zealander who had been in charge of price stabilisation in New Zealand during the war, was appointed Reader in Political Science; and H.P. Brown, Director of Research in the Commonwealth Bureau of Census and Statistics, joined Swan as Reader in Economic Statistics.

This amounted to ten senior appointments in Pacific Studies and Social Sciences during the first year of recruiting. (Borrie’s post of Research Fellow was a junior academic position.) Eggleston, assuming that there would not be enough Australians available to staff the two schools, had hoped for a balance between Australian and overseas appointments, but as it turned out, five had been born in Australia, two in New Zealand, and one (Sawyer) was as Australian as anyone could wish. Where Hancock had favoured experience and middle age, Copland and Eggleston leaned towards youth and promise. Perhaps the result fell between the two: the average age in 1950 was 41, with Swan at 32 the youngest, and Crocker and Fitzgerald, the eldest, not yet 50.

No precise formula governed these early appointments. As might be expected for a research institution, Copland and his colleagues attached great weight to research experience, capacity and potential. While they were impressed by evidence of teaching
experience, they were prepared to take promising candidates on trust. Fields of interest were important, especially for Pacific Studies, although Nadel was appointed without ever having written about the Pacific. Publications were also significant, and here Nadel, with three books and many articles, was one of several appointees who stood out. Swan, on the other hand, had exactly the right interests, but his capacity to publish was judged almost entirely on potential.

Formal qualifications were less important than reputation. In the days before doctorates became commonplace, there was no minimum qualification in the social sciences and humanities: many senior professors at the time, in Australia as well as Britain, had only Master degrees (which in the case of Oxford University were BAs elevated by the passage of time and the payment of a fee). Eight of the ten professors and readers had taken their first degrees from Australian universities or a college of what was then called the University of New Zealand; four of the eight had overseas postgraduate qualifications, from Oxford, Cambridge or London. There were no American degrees, though Crocker had spent two years studying at Stanford. Of the two who had not graduated in Australia or New Zealand, Nadel was laden with degrees from Vienna and London, while FitzGerald had no degree at all.

This was as remarkable then as it would be now. The Professor of Chinese at London’s School of Oriental and African Studies told Firth, when he asked, that FitzGerald could not hope for a university post in Britain without a degree—but that if he had a degree, he would have had an appointment long ago. Firth was troubled by this advice, but not deterred; and Copland was confident of his man. Fortunately, the regional readerships were regarded as experimental, so his appointment could be labelled ‘Visiting’, meaning short term, without its seeming at all odd. Nevertheless, for a young university eager to make its name in the critical world of Academe, it was a brave decision and testimony to the Vice-Chancellor’s ‘spirit of adventure’.

Above all, Copland and his colleagues on the Interim Council wanted their early appointments, especially of the first professors, to be outstanding; and if this meant they were different from the sorts of people who were appointed to state universities, then so much the better. Conversely, they avoided the conventional: a geographer who currently held a chair in New Zealand was rejected because he was merely ‘a capes and bays man’. Being outstanding implied being creative, able to design innovative research programs, and capable of leading the University in unfamiliar directions. Some of those first appointees seemed to fill these criteria to the letter; others, such as Brown and Fitzhardinge, had special qualities to offer—in their cases statistical and bibliographical skills. All were sympathetic to the ideals which Copland or Firth had put to them, and willing to act out the role of pioneers.

Wright warned that not all their appointments would be successful: the social science schools would undoubtedly attract academics who would ‘collect tailored tweeds and discuss wines ... just like any other university’. But if they were careful they should be able to keep this group to a minimum.

Well before Copland and Firth were ready to recommend appointments to the social science schools, the first professors in the John Curtin School had been entered
on the University's payroll. Recruitment, for Florey, was a straightforward business. What he was looking for was a small group of men who were masters of their own subjects and able to make discoveries themselves, while at the same time gathering around them research workers of high calibre and training students for PhDs. His self-imposed constraint was that recruiting for the ANU should not disadvantage other Australian institutions.

His first recruit was a biochemist from Melbourne, Hugh Ennor, who had come to his notice during the two years Ennor had recently spent in Oxford. In mid-1948, when Florey approached him about the chair of Biochemistry, he was 35 years of age. After completing a first degree from the University of Melbourne in 1937, he had worked at the Baker Institute for Medical Research in Melbourne, where his investigations into the metabolism of fat had won him a DSc. During the war he had conducted research on chemical warfare and served for a time as superintendent of a large group of scientific workers. Then, after the spell in Oxford, he had returned to the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories in Melbourne, where he was senior biochemist. According to Wright, Ennor in each of his roles had shown originality, sound judgement, and a capacity for leadership and organisation of 'a most unusually high level'. Privately he conceded that Ennor's achievements, while considerable, were not epoch making, and that the appointment was 'a bit of a gamble'. But everyone agreed that he was an open and engaging fellow, and such matters weighed heavily with Florey.

Ennor formally joined the University in August 1948 and before the year was out had delivered his inaugural lecture. In the meantime, Council appointed Adrien Albert to the chair of chemistry, the title of which was shortly changed to Medical Chemistry because Albert wanted to avoid 'pure organic chemistry', as well as allow for the formation of other chemistry departments in the future. Born and educated in Sydney, Albert had just turned 41. After serving as chemist to a firm of dyers, he had moved to London, where he completed a PhD in Medicine in 1937. Returning to the University of Sydney, he initiated a novel research program in chemotherapy and gathered around him a strong team of chemists who worked, in association with bacteriologists in Melbourne, on the relationship between chemical constitution and antibacterial activity. Since 1947 he had been back in London as a research fellow in the Wellcome Institute. According to Sydney Rubbo, head of the Bacteriology Department at the University of Melbourne, he was already generally regarded as one of the foremost chemists in the field of chemotherapy, and there was every indication that his reputation would be further enhanced. Florey was confident of his capacity, and Wright regarded him as 'well proven'—though privately he wondered whether his personality would cause problems.

Chemistry was a strong area and, had Albert not been attracted, there would have been other outstanding people to choose from. Florey's own field of experimental pathology presented more of a problem, as in his view there was nobody who was both suitable and available. Similarly, he held out little hope of making an immediate appointment to microbiology, where there were people who were up and coming but no one who was yet ready to be taken away from full-time research. Florey handed the problem of microbiology to his colleagues in Australia, and was pleased when Bill Keogh
of the Commonwealth Serum Laboratories and Macfarlane Burnet put forward the name of Frank Fenner at the Walter and Eliza Hall Institute, one of the young scientists whom Florey dared not poach, especially since he had heard that Burnet had him in mind to succeed him at the Hall Institute. Florey sought assurances from Burnet that Fenner, whom he had not met, had the qualities required in a head of department, and that there would be no future recriminations; and thus reassured, he invited Fenner in guarded terms to accept the chair, telling him that he was still young and that he should be devoting most of his time to research. Burnet, having offered Fenner, now made a half-hearted attempt to dissuade him; but he had already decided that, as the ANU was clearly here to stay, collaboration made more sense than resistance.

Fenner was formally appointed to the chair of Microbiology early in 1949, at the age of 34. Born in Ballarat, Victoria, he had graduated in medicine from the University of Adelaide. In the early years of the war he completed a Diploma in Tropical Medicine at the University of Sydney and an MD by thesis at the University of Adelaide. As a member of the Australian Army Medical Corps, he served in Australia, the Middle East, New Guinea and Borneo, first as a pathologist and then as a malarialogist. Back in Australia, he joined the Hall Institute and conducted research on mousepox, which Burnet described as the most comprehensive study ever made of a virus disease in an experimental animal, with important implications for the study of smallpox in humans. ‘I regard Fenner as the most accomplished investigator I have ever worked with’, Burnet told Copland.

The chair of Physiology took longer to fill. After pondering whether his rule relating to poaching extended across the Tasman, and concluding with the help of the New Zealander Copland that it did not, Florey decided to try to tempt J.C. Eccles, who was then Professor of Physiology at the University of Otago, Dunedin. Born in Melbourne in 1903, Eccles had graduated MB BS from the University of Melbourne before winning a Rhodes Scholarship to Oxford, where he took out an MA and later a DPhil. After several years in the Physiology Department at Oxford, he returned to Australia to direct the Kanematsu Memorial Institute of Pathology at Sydney Hospital. He had taken up his position in Dunedin in 1944. Eccles’ contributions to fundamental knowledge about the nervous system, presented in a long series of papers, had won him an international reputation, Florey describing him as ‘one of the best living neurophysiologists’. That speciality was, in Florey’s view, a slight drawback, as he considered that neurophysiologists tended to work in extremely narrow fields. Nevertheless, he was a brilliant catch.

So, by mid-1950, the John Curtin School had four professors (though the date of Eccles’ appointment had yet to be settled). On Florey’s advice, Council had appointed two established scientists with international reputations and in the two other cases had, in Wright’s words, taken a bet on the youngsters. There were, as yet, no readers. Florey was pleased with his work, and sure that the University would have within a few years four first-class departments, which would constitute a solid basis for the future development of the school.

Oliphant was in no hurry to appoint professors or readers to the Physical Sciences
school. What mattered most to him was having the building erected and the equipment installed so that he could get on with his own major research project. The most important people for this purpose were the technicians who had worked with him in Birmingham, especially Mick Cornick and Jimmy Edwards, who came out to Australia early in 1950 as an advance guard. Oliphant himself, and several others of the Birmingham team, arrived in August 1950.

By this time, Oliphant had made only one senior appointment, Ernest Titterton as Professor of Nuclear Physics. Titterton, now in his mid-thirties, had been Oliphant’s first research student at Birmingham and, during the early years of the war, had worked with Oliphant on the development of radar. From 1943 to 1947 he worked on the Manhattan Project in the United States, where he got to know most of the western world’s leading nuclear physicists and became convinced that nuclear weapons offered the best prospect for world peace. He contributed a major discovery which helped show that it was possible to produce a nuclear bomb; and on 16 July 1945 he was given the historic task of triggering the world’s first nuclear test explosion in New Mexico. Returning to England, he joined the Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, and it was here that Oliphant approached him with the offer of a chair at the ANU. One referee remarked that he would make an able lieutenant, whose gifts lay in applying current knowledge to specific problems rather than breaking new ground.

The Research School of Physical Sciences also grew through the addition of a ready-made Department of Astronomy. Before Oliphant took up duty as Director, the Commonwealth Astronomer, Richard Woolley, had approached the University with a proposal that researchers in the Commonwealth Observatory should have their work recognised for the degree of PhD at the ANU. Oliphant, who had known Woolley from Cambridge, was happy to suggest that he be given the title Professor of Astronomy and that the Mount Stromlo Observatory be recognised as fulfilling the functions of a Department of Astronomy within the research school. Woolley duly became an ‘Honorary Professor’ in 1950, though it was a few years yet before Mount Stromlo was formally transferred from the Commonwealth government to the University.

By mid-1950, two years after recruitment had begun, the University had sixteen senior academic staff on its books (though not necessarily on its payroll). Eleven of these, including Oliphant but not Woolley, were professors, and five were readers. There were, in addition, ten or so ‘junior’ staff, most of whom were designated Research Fellow; although Borrie had been promoted to Senior Research Fellow, and D.J. Brown in Albert’s Department of Medical Chemistry had been given permanency with the title ‘Fellow’. Several technical officers, laboratory managers and research assistants were on the fringes, their status varying according to their official roles and personal capacities.

The pioneering staff were as diverse as might be expected of people with different academic interests and personal backgrounds: and some of their differences, political as well as professional, became obvious as they settled in. One thing they had in common: they were all men. This was so obvious that nobody at the time seemed to notice—or if they did, it was not something commented on, least of all by the men of the Interim Council. Occasionally a woman was considered for an academic
appointment: Firth spoke to a senior female colleague about the chair of Anthropology, but concluded that she probably would not be interested; and Hancock knew a ‘first rate’ woman at Oxford who had worked with him on shipping history and who could pursue fundamental research on Australia’s transport problems: ‘Apart from her merits, I think it is a good thing to get a woman when she makes the grade’. But presumably they usually did not, or if they did no male was aware of it. So the ANU began as a male preserve, which made it little different from other Australian universities at the time, and no different at all from All Souls.

**The lure of Canberra**

Yes, I’ll come’, Davidson told Hancock after the idea of coming to Canberra was put to him. ‘The answer surprises me. I had no intention of coming to it three days ago; but I discovered it yesterday and felt thoroughly delighted with it.’ Sawyer, when Copland asked him the question, had to pinch himself to be sure the offer was true. Nadel, who was then visiting Illinois, reacted more soberly. He took a long walk along the shores of Lake Michigan before deciding to accept new challenges in Australia.

Why did they come? And what did they expect to find when they reached Canberra? On the face of it, the Australian National University around 1950 had little to offer. While salary levels remained higher than in other Australian universities, they were starting to lag behind those in Britain, so that the original objective of providing generous conditions of service to help reverse the brain drain was no longer relevant. The proposed conditions for research were intended to be of the highest world standard, and for many senior scholars the chance to pursue research full time was appealing. But to counter that, it was well known that Canberra as yet had little or nothing in the way of buildings, laboratories and library resources that made efficient

Florey relaxes during a
day trip to the
Brindabella Range, west
of Canberra, in 1950. Like
many other expatriates,
he responded to the lure
of the Australian
landscape. The
photograph was probably
taken with his camera.
research possible. As Oliphant prepared to embark on the voyage to Australia, Florey warned him, in words that Oliphant would repeat many times in future years, that all he would find in Canberra was 'a hole in the ground and a lot of promises'.

Happily for the Interim Council, an ample budget and the absence of too many strict rules and regulations allowed it to offer unusually generous salaries and perquisites. Eccles asked for and received £500 above the stated professorial salary of £2000, setting a precedent for differential salaries to take account of exceptional qualifications. Many of the new appointees had special requirements and the University tried hard to oblige rather than risk losing them. Oliphant, reminding Copland of the sacrifices he and his wife were making in coming to Canberra, insisted on accommodation comparable with his 40-square, six-bedroom dwelling in Birmingham; and as the cost of building in Canberra placed such a house well beyond his means, he asked the University to build it and rent it back to him. This was a tall order; but the Interim Council, after initial hesitation, recognised that the University's flag was 'nailed to the Oliphant mast'. Mills approached the government for the extra money and Oliphant—after long building delays and some public criticism of the transaction—eventually moved into what was, by Canberra standards, a mansion.

The attractions of Canberra differed from one person to the next. Davidson was drawn by the prospect of working 'on the edge of the Pacific for the next five years or so'. Eccles, who might have commanded a chair in Britain or the United States, concluded that the ANU would give him 'exceptionally favourable opportunities' for pursuing his research interests and a release from his current burden of teaching at Otago. Fenner had reservations about moving to a position that would carry a significant administrative load, but knew that if he stayed at the Hall Institute he would remain in the shadow of Burnet. He chose independence over the security of the known. In contrast, FitzGerald came in part because he had nowhere else to go: confronted with the tumult of revolution in China, at odds with his current employers in the British Council, and barred from academic employment in Britain through the want of a degree, he was attracted by certainty and security, at least for the next three years.

For all the early appointees, the prospect of moving to Canberra was an adventure: but their enthusiasm for the adventure varied. Albert, set up comfortably at the Wellcome Institute, tried to postpone his departure as long as possible. In no time at all he had his own stationery printed, which was headed:

The Australian National University
Canberra
Department of Medical Chemistry
Euston 4477.
183, Euston Road, London, N.W.1.
Copland thought this rather cheeky, but what could he do about it? When Copland and Wright arranged for Albert to be accommodated at the Munitions Supply Laboratories at Maribyrnong, ten kilometres from the centre of Melbourne, he protested that the laboratories were too isolated and primitive, and threatened to resign if he were forced to go there. He was wrong about the standard of the laboratories; but Florey supported him, so the Department of Medical Chemistry remained in Euston Road until the permanent laboratories were ready in Canberra.

Crocke, on the other hand, heard ‘the call of the kookaburra’. Inspired perhaps by his South Australian ancestry, he expressed eloquently the enthusiasm of a pioneer. On the one hand, he wanted to escape from New York, which he loathed, as soon as possible; on the other, he was drawn by the physical environment: ‘The sun, the healthy air, the space, the association with human beings most of whom are healthy and buoyant, and the beauty—and the varied beauty—of the Australian landscape ... It is better than the South of France, it is better than Arizona, it is better than Morocco.’ He did not like ‘the cult of excessive social security, of bets & beer, and all that’. But what really distinguished the Australian, he wrote, was hope. ‘And living in such a favoured land he damned well ought to have hope.’ Admittedly, he was trying by these words to persuade Hancock (too late, as it happened) to come to terms with the Interim Council. But he too was keen to come to Canberra, so much so that he was willing to accept a much lower salary than he had earned in New York.

Crocke would soon be disappointed. Influenced by Hancock’s vision of the University, he saw himself helping to recreate Oxford in the antipodes. He was the first professor to come—and the first to go.

** Overseas scholars **

Well before the first academic staff had started packing their trunks for Canberra, the University had begun sending its first scholars abroad. The idea of overseas research studentships had been suggested early in 1947 by a federal Labor backbencher, Kim Beazley, a former schoolteacher and university tutor, and later a long-term member of the University Council. A few months later Wright put forward a similar proposal which had the specific purpose of providing the ANU with a pool of potential employees.

Eager to provide signs of activity, the Interim Council approved the scheme without consulting the Academic Advisory Committee or laying down precise rules and regulations. From the outset it was never exactly clear what it was intended to achieve.
There was general agreement that the scholarships should be used to train students in research techniques; but was every student expected to take out a degree? If so, the scholarships' two-year tenure was scarcely sufficient to complete a PhD. What happened in practice was that students tended to have their scholarships extended or to be granted an additional stipend; but some did not feel impelled to enrol for a PhD at all.

Nor was there universal agreement about whether the scholarships should be used specifically to train ANU staff. Florey, who was most anxious to avoid charges of poaching, was the only member of the Academic Advisory Committee who favoured the scheme as a source of researchers for Canberra. The others were at best lukewarm, tending to argue that the money would be better spent in providing opportunities for people who had already gained substantial research experience. Certainly, nobody tried to force research scholars to come to Canberra at the end of their terms. Whether they should return to Australia was another matter. Although there was an understanding that they should, the University could hardly insist that scholars come home if Australia had no jobs to make use of the expertise they had spent two or three years acquiring.

The scholarships paid generously and were in high demand. For the first round in 1948 there were 186 applications, two-thirds of which came from Australia and the rest from Britain. Twenty-seven scholarships were awarded in that year, all but six to students applying from within Australia. Twelve were for Medical Research, seven for Social Sciences, five for Physical Sciences and three for Pacific Studies.

Recipients of ANU Overseas Scholarships were, theoretically, allowed to pursue their research in any appropriate institution. In practice, the dollar shortage meant that nearly everyone went to the United Kingdom, which in any case was probably where most people wanted to go. Of the 56 recipients from 1948 to 1950, 31 went to Oxford or Cambridge and 14 to London. Eight more were sprinkled around other parts of the United Kingdom, one travelled widely without enrolling for a degree, and only two enrolled at Harvard.

The character of the scheme differed significantly from one school to the next. Florey did his best to ensure that the scholars attached to the John Curtin School worked in areas relevant to its research interests, and tried to develop some sort of family spirit among them, inviting them as a group to the occasional dinner at Lincoln College and keeping an avuncular eye on their progress. He also encouraged them to return to Australia once their degrees were completed, except in his own field of experimental pathology, where Australia was not yet ready to receive them.

The social scientists, on the other hand, were given an almost free choice of what they wanted to study and where they wanted to go. This resulted in a wide diversity of research topics. R.A. Gollan, a Sydney graduate in History who won a scholarship in 1948, sought advice from Hancock and ended up with Harold Laski at the London School of Economics, studying the influence of British political thought on Australian politics in the nineteenth century. C.M. Williams, an Assistant Lecturer in History at Melbourne, chose Oxford to work on the English civil war. N.G. Butlin wanted to go to the United States to study the latest analytical techniques of economic history. With
Copland’s help he obtained additional dollars through a Rockefeller Fellowship and enrolled at Harvard, only to find that working for a Harvard PhD would take him away from the research he so much wanted to do. Thumbing his nose at the PhD, he devoted himself to studying the relationship between public and private investment in nineteenth-century Australia and learning all he could from Harvard’s Centre for Entrepreneurial History. The University let him go his way and had its investment repaid many times over. Occasionally, however, it was necessary to pull a scholar into line. In Pacific Studies, George Nadel (unrelated to Siegfried) set out to write a Harvard PhD on Australian intellectual history, but showed signs of not producing. He was sent a rocket and told to return immediately to Australia, where his book on Australia’s Colonial Culture eventually appeared.

Although these were the first ANU scholars, they could hardly be described as the first ANU students, as their degrees were awarded by overseas institutions. In 1951, as the research schools prepared to take in their own students, the scholarship scheme was changed to provide for students enrolling in Canberra and to ensure that their research work was related to the work of the schools. An overseas scheme was maintained until 1953, but on a more modest scale.

It was hard to judge at the time whether or not the Overseas Scholarships Scheme, in old and new guises, was a success. Just over a quarter of the total number of scholars remained overseas at the expiration of their scholarships, and fewer than a quarter returned to take up positions at the ANU. These proportions improved, from the University’s point of view, with the passage of time, as former scholars of some years’ standing accepted posts in Canberra. The return on the investment received a larger boost from the remaining half of the scholars, who found places in other Australian universities. ANU scholars spread around Australia testified to the University’s national credentials and strengthened the argument that the ANU would help rather than hinder the Australian university environment.

The full achievement could only be measured in decades to come. Out of a total of nearly ninety scholars, comprising participants in the Overseas Scholarships Scheme to 1950, and ‘general scholars’ and special cases to 1953, some forty had achieved by 1990 the status of professor or its equivalent in Australia or overseas. The overseas professors included Henry Harris, who succeeded Florey at the Dunn School; Peter Worsley, Sociology at Manchester; A.E. Beck, Geophysics at Western Ontario; Ken Burridge, Anthropology and Sociology at British Columbia. Richard Storrs and Adrian Mayer each held research fellowships at the ANU before taking up the chairs, respectively, of Japanese History at Oxford and Asian Anthropology at the School of Oriental and African Studies in London.

Among the scientists who came to occupy chairs in Australia there were J.H. Bennett, Genetics at Adelaide; Stuart Butler, Theoretical Physics at Sydney; A.J.F. Boyle, Physics at Western Australia; J.T. Clifford, Botany at Queensland. The social scientists included the historians F.K. Crowley and J.D. Legge at New South Wales and Monash; A.F. Davies, Political Science at Melbourne; G.A. Wilkes, English and Australian Literature at Sydney; and three professors of Law at Sydney, W.L. Morison, D.G. Benjafield and R.W. Parsons.
Nine of the scholars became professors at the ANU: historians R.A. Gollan, K.S. Inglis and C.M. Williams; N.G. Butlin, Economic History; B.D. Cameron, Economics; D.J. Mulvaney, Prehistory; J.H. Carver, Physics; F.W.E. Gibson, Biochemistry; and I.G. Ross, Chemistry. Some of these we will meet later in their ANU careers.

Other scholars made distinguished contributions in universities, government, the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO) and industry. But this list is long enough to show that, as an Australian contribution to the world of learning, the scheme was an unequivocal success.

A shed in a paddock

The business of building a university moved slowly. Early in 1950, as the first academic staff arrived to take up residence, there were no permanent structures to greet them. The Sydney Morning Herald’s comment that ‘the National University is still a shed in a paddock’ was close to the mark.

The paddock was an area of about 200 acres (80 hectares), which embraced the site Walter Burley Griffin had set aside for educational purposes in his 1912 plan. During the 1930s and early 1940s, diligent lobbying by the University College, along with the Canberra University Association, had protected the site and adjacent areas against encroachments, and had even managed to increase the designated area by half as much again. Not that the College gained any immediate benefit from its efforts: as soon as the ANU was established, it was taken for granted that the land would be vested in the University’s name. The Interim Council, as one of its earliest tasks, began negotiations to lease the site from the Commonwealth government and the formal transfer was...
effected in 1953. Meanwhile, planning for the erection of buildings went ahead on the assumption that the formalities would be completed, all in good time.

There were already structures on the paddock when the University came into being. Most had been erected in the few years after 1912, during which Griffin’s prize-winning design had largely been ignored. They included four brick buildings: Canberra House, once the home of the Administrator of the Federal Capital Territory and now occupied by the British High Commissioner; two other residences; and a Department of Health laboratory. There were also various timber constructions: sixteen cottages, Acton Guest House (a hostel for single public servants), and the several buildings which had once comprised Canberra Community Hospital. All these structures were currently serving other uses, chiefly office and storage space for the government or residences for Commonwealth employees. Gradually the government would move out and the University would move in. But in the meantime, the University had to solve its accommodation problems in other ways. The Interim Council was shunted around from one venue to another: the Senate committee room in Parliament House, meeting rooms in the Department of Post-War Reconstruction or the Treasury, or the library in the Institute of Anatomy. Subcommittees met wherever they could, even in a quiet corner of the Hotel Canberra if nothing better offered.

The shed was a Royal Australian Air Force mess hut which was moved in sections from the country town of Cootamundra to the site at Acton, where it was reassembled and refurbished to accommodate a board room, offices and a kitchen. It was the first building the University could call its own. The Registrar, R.G. Osborne, looked forward to hanging a few pictures and adding some modest improvements ‘to mitigate some of the asperities of Canberra’ and impress visitors. The Interim Council met there for the first time at the end of 1949.

The first academic staff began to arrive early in 1950: Borrie from Sydney, then Crocker from New York by way of Britain and Europe. Within a few months Crocker had concluded that the asperities of Canberra were almost too much to bear. When he arrived there was no office for him, not even a desk or chair. After several weeks, he and Borrie were given rooms alongside the public servants who were about to vacate the old hospital building, but still no shelves, so that he could not unpack his books.
Domestic accommodation was worse. Initially he was lodged in the Hotel Canberra, where he had to move rooms three times in ten days to make way for politicians, who were given priority. He escaped to the South Australian bush. On his return he was given a poky room, without a desk, in Lawley House, a relatively superior hostel for unmarried and mostly young public servants, where meals were a: fixed times and there were community sing-songs on Thursdays.

Little wonder that he wrote to Hancock about the woes of life in Canberra: the wholesome but dreary atmosphere created by civil service clerks, the primitive and expensive shops, the absence of restaurants, the need to book weeks ahead for a dental appointment. ‘In short, the last 3½ months have been lonely, dull and irritating.’ And yet he would make the same mistake again, as he really liked Australians and the landscape was wonderful!

More academics took up duty over the next twelve months, mostly social scientists, including Swan, Davidson and Nadel—but also Oliphant, full of energy and enthusiasm for getting Physical Sciences under way. They too were given rooms in the old hospital building which was soon adorned with signs to show that this was in fact The Australian National University and not some government department. The medical scientists remained where they were until temporary laboratories were erected in 1952. By the end of the year, Fenner, Ennor and Eccles had moved in with much of their equipment and some of their staff.

The paddock—or a large part of it—had now become a construction site. Early in 1953, when Albert was visiting Canberra, the four medical professors arranged for photographs of changes on the site to be sent to Florey, who regarded photographs as the only proof that things were actually happening. Together they and the Laboratory
Manager, Bunker, arranged to pose alongside some ‘very decrepit sheds’ near the laboratories, brushing off flies and patting a starved-looking mongrel which had adopted them. But to Ennor’s disappointment, the day before the photographer’s arrival the contractor pulled down the sheds, depriving them of an opportunity to record for posterity their pioneering spirit.

**Academics and architecture**

New arrivals in Canberra—scholars as well as staff—were often welcomed at the railway station or airport by Ross Hohnen, who had succeeded Osborne as Registrar in 1949. They were then taken on a tour of the site, with Hohnen pointing out where future buildings were planned to be—the John Curtin School here, Physical Sciences there, and so on. Some were bemused: it took a fair stretch of the imagination to accept Hohnen’s vision of a university in the paddock.

Nevertheless, it had been assumed from the outset that fine architecture and appropriate landscaping would be a feature of the University, as it was of most great universities. Even before the ANU Act was passed, Coombs was thinking about a grand design: he proposed an architectural competition, which would have been normal in such circumstances. But the Academic Advisers pressed for an architect to be appointed immediately; and Oliphant in particular made it clear that he regarded the provision of the simple buildings he required as a test of the Interim Council’s capacity to get things done.
Lewis’s site plan dated April 1948, after the Easter conferences. Details differ significantly from his sketch of the previous November, which is reproduced as the front endpaper. Deferring to the Academic Advisers, he has made the library, at the centre rear of the plan, significantly larger than the administrative building, which dominated the earlier sketch.

Existing buildings in 1948 include the Institute of Anatomy and Canberra High School, which later became the University’s School of Art.

The Academic Advisers required that University House should be in ‘a gracious and dignified style’. Lewis obliged with a design that won both their approval and the Sulman Medal for architecture.
Council decided to appoint a single architect to get on with the job, and on Wright’s suggestion turned to Brian Lewis, Professor of Architecture at the University of Melbourne. Lewis had trained in Melbourne and practised there as an architect before moving to England, where he studied at the University of Liverpool, a hub of architectural innovation. In the late 1930s he worked in the architectural department of the Great Western Railway, designing stations, hotels and other railway buildings, and after war service returned to the railway in 1944 as its Chief Architect. Success in England led to his appointment in 1946 to the new Melbourne chair, where he immediately introduced the University’s first full-time course in architecture and set about creating a school where one scarcely existed before. Lewis was an extrovert, quick-witted and short-tempered, a bit pompous, but with a touch of the larrikin. Like the members of the Academic Advisory Committee, he did not put up with any nonsense. Wright judged him a good fellow.

Lewis was appointed Consulting Architect late in 1947 and asked to produce an overall site plan, together with ideas for buildings for physical sciences and medical sciences; a combined building for the two social science schools, a residential hostel and the library; and residential housing, including flats. The combined building was Wright’s idea: he saw it as a ‘cross between All Souls and a rooming house’. Although the idea did not last long, it is a significant reminder of where he and his colleagues often looked for inspiration.

In sketching the site plan, Lewis drew inspiration from the landscape and from Griffin’s 1912 design for the city. The dominant feature of the site was a well-defined ridge, running from the University’s northwestern boundary near Sullivan’s Creek, then steeply descending to its southwestern boundary on the shore of the proposed lake. Viewed from where the west basin of the central lake would one day be, this ridge led the eye towards Black Mountain, along the water axis which was integral to Griffin’s original plan. Lewis arranged the University’s buildings in rough symmetry along this axis, adding a great hall, public lecture theatres and faculty buildings to provide for growth. The medical and physical sciences buildings were at the Sullivan’s Creek end of the axis, along with an eight-storey administrative block, which was to be the largest structure on the site. The other end was open, overlooking the lake: here the main feature was a tall tower (soon replaced by a fountain), flanked by ‘community buildings’ and, further out, by houses and flats stretching around the water. The proposed faculty club, described even in these early years as University House, was situated on a secondary ridge and looked towards the tower from an angle of just over 50 degrees to the axis. Lewis assumed that, with the exception of Canberra House and some of the other residences, the existing buildings on the site would be demolished as his plan was implemented: the old hospital buildings, which the axis bisected, could stay for a while, though eventually they would have to make way for the grand administrative building.

Most members of the Interim Council liked Lewis’s plan. As the Academic Advisers had asked earlier in the year for an opportunity to consult with the architect as soon as he was appointed, Council obligingly despatched him to England. That was the first mistake. The Advisers, who were then in a testy mood about other matters, were
annoyed that he had been sent without Council asking them first. Then, having assumed that he had come to discuss the physics and medical buildings, they were irritated when he produced sketches of the overall site. They objected vehemently to the provision of an eight-storey administrative building, on the ground that administration in any well-run university should be small and efficient, and should be seen to be so in the architectural layout. If there were to be a monumental building, it should be the library, ‘a dignified building expressing the solidarity of the University and thus establishing an academic tradition dating from its foundation’. Florey declared that he did not want his medical building to be symmetrical with the other buildings, and so gave the impression that he did not want a site plan at all. The Advisers decided that, for all future plans, the architect would need to be given a comprehensive and exact description of what was required and a clear statement of what the building was for. Lewis and the Council were therefore told that any plans should be regarded as ‘absolutely tentative’.

A sensitive person might have regarded this as a setback—but not Brian Lewis, who thought he had handled the Advisers well: ‘they showed off to each other and were a bit bloody silly’, he told Wright; ‘I made myself a good fellow by saying what sods etc the Interim Council were’. Oliphant was not impressed. ‘We were puzzled’, he later remarked, ‘by the fact that Lewis was able to show us no examples of his work beyond some rather conventional housing and some lavatories for the Great Western Railway’. John Foster was worried that Lewis, though thoroughly primed, did not seem to appreciate the need for showing complete deference to the Advisers’ views.

Back in Australia, his plan met a more decisive obstacle in the form of the Canberra planning authorities, who did not like the amount of space given over to residential accommodation. While not rejecting the plan outright, they did not endorse it. Although this may not have seemed especially significant at the time, it left the design in limbo, with no more status than the various interested parties were prepared to give it. Midway through 1949, Council’s Buildings and Grounds Committee declared that it was too early to consider the general site plan, deciding that the siting of any new buildings in the immediate future should be determined on an ad hoc basis.

Lewis had by now been appointed design architect for the immediate building program. This was to comprise just three buildings, Physical Sciences, Medical Research and University House, together with essential residential accommodation, including the vice-chancellor’s residence. Wright’s idea for a combined building was set aside, as the social science schools and the library could be housed initially in the old hospital buildings.

The requirements of the Academic Advisory Committee, as Lewis reported them after his visit to England, seemed clear enough: ‘the character and construction of all buildings should be unpretentious’ and ‘good taste and reticence rather than extravagance should be expressed’. This was quite in keeping with the architect’s own views. The tradition of Australian university architecture, in so far as there was one, was to try to recapture European university traditions through Gothic spires and grass quadrangles, and then allow less expensive and more functional buildings to grow up around the monumental centre. Lewis, who owed no allegiance to any particular
architectural style, was content to design cheaper buildings better suited to Australian conditions and more in harmony with the local landscape. He was also ready to let each building have its own style, relying on other features to provide coherence: ponds and fountains, tree plantings (especially clusters of crab apples), the use of tinted common bricks, and the massing of buildings along the axis.

These ideas attracted a good deal of interest among architects and enthusiasm from the press. The *Sydney Morning Herald* welcomed Lewis’s refusal to transplant Oxbridge concepts to an alien environment: his contemporary approach, remarked the writer, reflected the expected role of the new University ‘which, with its emphasis on research into practical Australian problems, looks forward to a Pacific tomorrow rather than back to our European yesteryears’.

This could hardly be said of Lewis’s design for University House. While the exterior might have been modern, in most other respects it looked to Oxbridge for inspiration. The concept was Hancock’s, though his colleagues on the Academic Advisory Committee shared his enthusiasm for the project and were keen to give it priority, even ahead of the buildings for Physical Sciences and Medical Research. Along with first-class laboratories and a fine library, it was seen by the Advisers as an essential condition of their coming to Canberra, and as the surest way of softening their landings in the bush. Hancock portrayed it as fulfilling many of the functions of an Oxford or Cambridge college, serving as the centre of ‘academic social life’ for all graduates within the University, and providing accommodation for single research workers and members of staff. It should also offer superior accommodation to distinguished visitors; and lastly, it should provide service facilities—meals, cleaning, household maintenance—to married members of staff and others who were not in residence, thereby helping solve the problem of having no servants. In Hancock’s presentation, the faculty club function took precedence over providing accommodation for single scholars. Here, the ‘wife factor’, as Hancock called it, was at work. University House was, among other things, the most likely means of making Canberra tolerable for his wife, a consideration which also appealed to other members of the Academic Advisory Committee, in relation to their own wives.

So Hancock imagined University House with dining areas, recreation rooms, small rooms for informal discussions, quiet reading rooms, and perhaps a swimming pool and squash courts. Above all, it should follow the pattern of modern university colleges in Europe by providing a corner where ladies might be entertained, and where the female relatives of members of staff might receive their friends. He hoped that older traditions would be sustained at the University, permitting ‘a certain amount of gracious living’—as an inspiration to first-rate work as well as an end in itself. ‘What we want is the twentieth century equivalent of that medieval institution, the Oxford College’, but ‘freed from the tradition of medieval celibacy’.

University House today, except for some later additions, is much as Lewis planned it. The residential section, three storeys high, was built around three sides of a quadrilateral in what the historian of University House calls the shape of a truncated fan. The fourth side, a single-storey building containing the main foyer,
Right: University House in 1955, a year after its opening.

Below left: Scholars’ study bedrooms, with elegant furnishings and heated floors, were luxurious by the standards of college accommodation in state universities.

Below right: The Dining Room was the main meeting place for academics and scholars from all schools and disciplines.
administrative rooms and some of the meeting and sitting rooms, curved gently around the rim of the fan, completing the quadrilateral. Additional buildings, including a three-storey high refectory or dining hall, projected from the two outer corners of the quadrilateral.

Various elements of the design recalled Oxbridge. Following the wishes of the Interim Council, the architect had the rooms and flats in the main residential wings open onto staircases rather than corridors, suggesting that the building was a college rather than a hostel. The dining hall, as Lewis described it, was conceived as the setting for ‘those almost solemn ceremonial dinners which are a feature of collegiate life’. There was plenty to encourage gracious living: the spacious bedrooms, the generous balconies, the heated floors, the double-glazed windows to shield the sitting rooms from the Canberra cold, the ornamental pool which ran the length of the single-storey, communal wing; and Hancock’s ‘place for the ladies’, discreetly isolated from the main residential wings. As the showpiece of the ANU, University House was expected to become ‘something of a museum of contemporary Australian art’. Leading artists and designers, including the sculptor Lyndon Dadswell and the furniture designer Frederick Ward, were chosen to create or select suitable works of art, furnishings and fittings: all this to enhance the impression that University House was a repository of Australian culture, as well as European university tradition.

Luxury and tradition came at a price. Oliphant had suggested that the flats for distinguished visitors should be planned on a slightly extravagant scale, so that academics visiting the University would spread the news of efforts made for their comfort. In the event, the whole of University House was planned and executed on a scale that was more than slightly extravagant, so that constraints had to be introduced as building proceeded. It was by far the most expensive residential college on a cost per bed basis constructed in Australia to that date, and so it remained. What was worse, running costs proved to be much higher than expected, so that an institution which was initially intended to be self-sufficient soon became a burden on the University budget.

The foundations of University House were laid in 1950 and the building eventually opened in 1954. Leaving aside the financial problems, the completed structure was widely regarded as a success, not least by Hancock, who praised it in later years as convenient and beautiful. Even Oliphant and Florey, both of whom had no time for Lewis, thought it worked well. It won for Lewis Australia’s most prestigious award for architecture, the Sulman Medal. On the other hand, the Prime Minister Robert Menzies told Oliphant that it looked like ‘an institution or orphanage from some angles and a seaside block of flats from others’, adding that Lewis (whom he knew from student days) had indulged in misguided and expensive tastes. But no architect could please everyone: and in relation to University House, Lewis came close to keeping his academic masters happy.

The same could not be said about the two other major buildings that were part of his commission. Both Oliphant and Florey had strong opinions about the type of construction needed for each of their schools, and insisted that their requirements be carried out to the letter. Oliphant wanted single-storey factory-style laboratories that
could be altered and added to quickly and cheaply in response to the changing needs of physics: their useful life should not be seen as exceeding fifteen years. To make sure that he got what he wanted, he commissioned his own architect in England to draw up preliminary plans.

But things went wrong in the execution, and before long Oliphant was cursing Lewis and the builders responsible for construction. The problems began when he arrived in Australia and discovered, instead of completed laboratories, a hole in the ground, which was exactly as Florey had predicted. Thenceforth, construction was painfully slow, owing chiefly to the acute shortage of building supplies but also, according to Oliphant, to Lewis’s time-consuming and expensive mistakes. Lewis asserted that the building’s specifications kept changing. Oliphant complained that Lewis refused to take instructions and was incapable of appreciating the technical requirements of a laboratory. It was an unhappy episode; and while the building, when eventually completed in 1953, corresponded generally with Oliphant’s requirements, it was not exactly as he had wanted.

Florey too wanted simplicity in the design of the medical research school. Drawing inspiration from the new laboratories of the British National Institute of Medical Research at Mill Hill, he and his colleagues sketched a plan based on the letter H, with common services, including administrative offices, a tea room and a library, occupying the central spine, and laboratories at each of the extremities. Lewis complied and produced preliminary plans. But again problems arose as the plans were refined to cut costs and to meet the needs of the individual professors, each of whom had specific requirements for his own department. Before long Florey had concluded that Lewis was a disaster; and Copland and Hohnen, alarmed at the architect’s mistakes and evident prevarication, decided that he had to go. Given a hefty push, he resigned in 1953 as architect for the John Curtin School, remaining somewhat ambiguously architect for the site plan which everybody else tended to ignore. University House and an elegant boiler house are his only enduring monuments on the ANU campus.

Lewis brought many of his problems on himself. In retrospect, he lacked the requisite technical skills and support capacity for the job; and his personality did not help relations with his fellow academics. Nevertheless, he had a forbidding task, dealing with academic clients who showed little respect for his professional judgement and who assumed that architects were there to do their bidding. As Florey put it in his inimitable style, he did not intend to be ‘pushed around by an architect for architectural reasons’.
A genuine university

Copland dedicated himself to ‘selling’ the ‘great intellectual adventure’ of the ANU to anyone prepared to listen, especially people who could be useful to the new institution or might be prepared to join its staff. Much of his time was spent talking to small groups of academics and students in universities throughout Australia and addressing conferences, such as the 1949 conference of the Australian and New Zealand Association for the Advancement of Science, where he delivered a paper on ‘The Place of the Australian National University in the Australian Academic Structure’. The title hints at one of his favourite themes, that the ANU would assist rather than threaten the state universities, and help bridge the distance between them. Through publicity and diplomacy he managed to remove much of the resentment that had been in evidence during the Easter 1948 conferences, and to convince the state universities that they had more to gain than lose from the presence of a well-endowed research institution in Canberra.

A tireless traveller, he made several overseas tours. While each had specific purposes, he also regarded them as ‘propaganda missions’. In Oxford he addressed about a hundred members of the Australian Society, where he did his best to counter scepticism that such a well-conceived idea could be hatched in Australia, let alone in Canberra. In the United States and Canada he met academic leaders in several universities, drawing on them for information and ideas, while spreading the word about what the ANU had to offer.

Copland described himself as an incurable optimist, and his optimism infected those he worked with. Oskar Spate, who arrived in mid-1951 to take up the chair of Geography in Pacific Studies, later remembered him as a great encourager.

You’d go to him with some idea and he’d say, ‘Well, that’s a jolly good idea. Might be very difficult to get any money from Treasury. For goodness sake, let’s have a crack at it.’ And you’d go away by no means certain that he’d live up to his words but feeling good.

His optimism also extended to the small band of administrative staff he gathered around him. Chief among these was the Registrar, Ross Hohnen. Born in Sydney and now in his early thirties, Hohnen had worked in a bank while studying economics as an evening student at the University of Sydney, where his seminar leader in fourth year had been Coombs. After war service in New Guinea and Borneo, he had joined New England University College in Armidale as its first Registrar, before joining the ANU in September 1948 as Assistant to the Registrar. Copland took to him immediately as ‘an enterprising person with a real pioneer touch about him’. Like Copland, he was tall, upright, confident and a little brash. Like Copland, he thrived on the excitement of creating a new institution. He told a colleague how it was ‘rather thrilling to see the pattern forming, with piece by piece falling in its place despite the obstacles which oppose us at every stage’.

Behind all the thinking of Copland and those who shared his vision was a determination to create a genuine university, not just in terms of material fabric, but in ambience and culture as well. Most universities were (and still are) defined as such
largely through the presence of students, and the process of teaching and learning. But the ANU in its early years (as Geoffrey Sawer remarked in ironic verse) had few students and no undergraduate teaching. Nor was there yet much in the way of research, the other means by which a university might be deserving of its name.

University House, once built, would be best proof that the University was the genuine article. This would be home to a scholarly community, and the means of maintaining scholarly traditions. Accordingly, much thought was given to the position initially referred to as Warden (as at All Souls), but soon to be styled Master. This office was seen as one of the most senior in the University, next in status to that of the vice-chancellor. Olibphant believed that the warden, more than any other member of staff, would be responsible for the atmosphere and spirit of the University as a whole. Crocker wanted someone in the humanities, possibly a clerk in holy orders of the Oxbridge kind, who would be able to counterbalance the over-specialisation which would come with research. Both wanted someone who would give the University a soul.

The University also needed symbols. As early as 1947 Osborne raised the question of a motto and coat of arms, and people were soon thinking about the need for a distinctive academic dress. None of these came easily. In the case of the coat of arms, the collective effort put into the task might have produced a substantial thesis. The difficulty was to produce a design which was distinctive, recognisably Australian, free of clichés, consistent with the requirements of heraldry, and capable of being reproduced in black and white on a small scale. In 1949 the Interim Council’s Advisory Committee on Art commissioned sketches from several Australian designers. None of them stimulated much excitement in Canberra; and somewhat to Hohnen’s irritation, the Academic Advisers amused themselves in dissecting the one that was sent them, pointing out, for example, that the crowning edifice of the shield, though intended to represent enclosed university life, expressed with equal felicity the confines of a prison. But they could come up with nothing better.

Even at this early stage Hohnen was wondering whether the University could get away without a coat of arms; and Olibphant, referring to both the coat of arms and the motto, hoped that Australia had grown beyond ‘such out-worn conventions’. However, some ‘trade mark’ seemed necessary to place on buildings, stationery and beer glasses; and before long other universities were asking for copies of the shield to adorn their own halls of learning. It was clearly something no university could be without.
Hohnen referred the problem to a dignitary of the College of Heralds, who obliged with a design that was obedient to heraldic traditions but, as Spate put it, ‘too damned conventional for words’. The new professors wanted something distinctively Australian, perhaps with an Aboriginal motif. Having lost patience with the ‘erstwhile Garter Principal King of Arms’, Hohnen decided to leave it to them. Inspiration, however, was slow in coming, and it was not until late 1953 that Council was able to approve a design that everyone was more or less happy with. Ironically, it was Oliphant who saved the day, with a simple sketch incorporating waves (the Pacific), a boomerang and the Southern Cross. Spate, who preferred a much more complicated design of his own, thought this was ‘rather thin heraldically’; but at least it was unambiguously Australian, and everyone understood it because there was so little to understand. He took solace in recounting the epic story of his own design in 29 stanzas of mock heroic verse, in the style of ‘The Ballad of Sir Patrick Spens’, which he called ‘The Ballad of the Scutcheon’.

One concern about the coat of arms was that nothing in it suggested learning. Fortunately, this could be compensated for in the motto, which the academic board, known as the Board of Graduate Studies, discussed in detail once the coat of arms had been chosen. After considering a dozen or so proposals, most of them in Latin, the board expressed a preference for ‘Rerum cognoscere causas’, from Virgil’s Georgics. This had been suggested some years earlier by Leslie Allen, a Latin scholar at the University College. However, as Virgil’s phrase was in fact an adaptation from his near-contemporary, the poet, philosopher and scientist Lucretius, who had written ‘Naturam primum cognoscere rerum’, the board opted for the original version.

The meaning of the motto, as explained by Richard Johnson, a Professor of Classics in later years, is ‘To study first the nature of all that is’. In De Rerum Natura, the poem from which it was taken, Lucretius aimed to dispel the fears and passions that disturbed mankind. He believed this could be achieved only by rational knowledge of the nature of men and the material universe. At the time, the preferred translation was ‘First to learn the nature of things’. Though later subjected to erudite and exhaustive criticism (prompting a registrar to remark ‘who would think translating four words could cause such trouble!’), this simple translation survived all challenges and remained the more or less approved version.

Thus equipped with arms and motto, the officers and troops were ready to be
apparelled. Early in 1950, before either the Interim Council or the Academic Advisers had given much thought to the matter, Charles Franklyn, a physician who held the honorary office of Bedell of Convocation at the University of London and who had recently designed a set of gowns for the University of Malaya, offered to design for the University a complete system of academic dress. As Copland thought he was worth pursuing, Ernest Clark, who had been appointed representative of the University in London, visited him in Sussex, where he found him to be ‘a very voluble gentleman’, expert in the field, but eccentric and intense in his devotion to the subject. Before long Franklyn had come up with elaborate designs for every form of dress the University could ever expect to use, and many more besides. These were magnificent in their detail. Doctors in philosophy, for example, would be entitled to wear in full dress a robe of claret-coloured cloth similar to the London PhD, of the same shape as the Oxford DPhil in full dress, the bell-shaped sleeves being of ‘peacock blue silk shot with green’, which was to be the University’s colour. The fronts were to be faced with five inches of the same silk, while on the yoke of the robe behind was to be a silk-covered button and twisted cord of the faculty colour in which the degree was taken.

This was all a bit much for Hohnen. ‘Just now and again’, he told Clark’s successor Russell Mathews, ‘introduce the idea that we are not so very determined to follow suit in matters of ceremonial’. Already some members of Council had suggested that there was no need for the University to have robes at all. What happened was, from the purist’s point of view, even more shocking. Maurice Brown, Hohnen’s second in command, took to Franklyn’s dress regulations with a pair of scissors, having in mind the cost and availability of local materials. The mutilated garment was then referred to the Board of Graduate Studies, which did a little stitching and unstitching, so that the end result bore little resemblance to Franklyn’s original. Franklyn’s ‘peacock blue silk shot with green’ was replaced by a ‘plain bright blue colour’, the claret gown for the full dress PhD was abandoned in favour of black, and colour distinctions between faculties were cast aside. Franklyn, when he heard what had been done, was apoplectic, describing the destruction of his system as an act of ‘unbelievable vandalism’, and the substitute system as ‘an appalling mess’. Hohnen was unrepentant, calmly explaining to Franklyn that the arrangements took into account ‘the needs of a new University in this country as well as the precepts of tradition’.

Franklyn, before learning of the ravages of the philistines, had suggested that the University might acknowledge his efforts by awarding him an Honorary MA. Hohnen and his colleagues thought this a bit brazen: degrees, honorary as well as earned, were precious commodities which should be jealously guarded, especially in a young university. It might have been acceptable to have an academic dress that was less than de rigueur; but academic standards, symbolised in the award of degrees, had to be protected with rigour. Here there could be no compromise of tradition.

In relation to academic titles, however, tradition’s primacy was less assured. Traditional universities in Britain and Australia had an established nomenclature for the academic hierarchy. The tenured grades were generally ‘professor’, ‘reader’ (or the American import ‘associate professor’), ‘senior lecturer’ and ‘lecturer’. Below the
lecturer were the untenured positions of ‘tutor’ and ‘research assistant’. After considering the matter in 1948, the Academic Advisers concluded that professor and reader should be retained as ‘well-known and honoured’ titles. However, lecturer (and senior lecturer) were considered unsuitable, partly because there was nobody to lecture to, but also because there was a risk of confusion with members of Canberra University College, who had lecturers and senior lecturers but not yet readers or professors. The Committee therefore favoured ‘fellow’ as the grade below reader, suggesting that it should be used in the same sense as in an Oxford college. Council accepted this title, and in due course divided it into senior fellow and fellow for permanent positions, and senior research fellow and research fellow for untenured staff. This was a useful means of proclaiming a unique identity for the staff of the ANU. But the distinction was not to be carried too far. When Davidson and Swan showed egalitarian tendencies by suggesting soon after their arrival that they should have ‘Mr’ rather than ‘Professor’ on their doors, Copland shut his own door on further discussion by declaring that ‘the title of professor is a burden inseparably connected with the emoluments of their office’. And that was that.

Two ceremonies in the latter half of 1952 offered further testimony that the University had arrived as a prestigious scholarly institution. On 5 September Sir John Cockcroft, Nobel Laureate in Physics and Director of the British Atomic Energy Research Establishment at Harwell, opened the University’s first permanent building, the laboratories for the Research School of Physical Sciences. The mood was optimistic. Coombs, as Deputy Chairman of Council, began the proceedings, describing the event as ‘another step in what is probably the greatest adventure in the field of learning in the southern hemisphere’. The Prime Minister R.G. Menzies, whose conservative coalition had displaced Chifley’s Labor government in 1949, declared his ‘unlimited faith in the capacity of the scientist’ to contribute to the well-being of mankind. Cockcroft anticipated that the new laboratories would do for Australia what the great Cavendish Laboratory had done for England. And Copland reminded the audience that the establishment of the ANU was a mark of great confidence in the future of Australia. He then ushered the guests inside the building to inspect the giant machine under construction, warning them, however, that they wouldn’t ‘understand any more than I do about it, so don’t make any mistake about that!’. In the afternoon, Coombs conferred on Cockcroft the honorary degree of Doctor of Science, making him the University’s second graduate, the first, Sir Robert Garran, having received the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws nine months earlier.

The opening ceremony looked to the future. A second function, held several weeks later, looked to the past. This was the installation of the University’s first Chancellor, Stanley Melbourne Bruce, the Right Honourable Viscount Bruce of Melbourne, Prime Minister of Australia for much of the 1920s, High Commissioner to the United Kingdom for over a decade, and now retired and resident in London. On 22 October, the day before the installation was due to take place, representatives of some ninety other universities each presented to the new University greetings on behalf of their own institution, sometimes in the form of a parchment scroll and, in the case of
Oxford, written in Latin. The public installation ceremony the next morning was to have been held outdoors, but heavy rain made much of the campus a bog and forced the ceremony across the river to the Albert Hall. Amid continuing drizzle, almost all the academic and senior administrative staff of the University arrived, together with several hundred visitors: the Governor-General, politicians, diplomats, clergymen, representatives of the armed services, and other dignitaries, many of them dressed in ceremonial apparel. Leading the academic procession, the Registrar carried the University stave, a gift of the University of Oxford and an exact replica of the eighteenth-century stave which was carried by the Bedell of Arts at Oxford; then came the Vice-Chancellor, in the robes of a University of New Zealand DSc, and the Chancellor-elect, wearing Franklyn’s robes which had been carefully fitted in London. The remaining academic staff followed, each in the apparel of a university from which he or she had graduated. The Vice-Chancellor then conferred on Bruce the honorary degree of Doctor of Laws, after which proceedings climaxed with the installation ceremony. It was, said Copland, a great event, especially for a town unused to such grandeur. Each ritual element and ceremonial flourish helped confirm the fledgling University as the inheritor of ancient tradition.

Crocker missed the installation. Several months earlier he had taken leave of absence to accept an appointment as Australian High Commissioner to India. Although marriage had helped smooth some of the jagged edges of life in Canberra, in his view the ANU still had far to go before it resembled the sort of university he had once thought he was joining. He formally relinquished the chair of International Relations in 1954 and continued to serve until 1970 as a high commissioner or ambassador in various parts of the world, from where he looked back to the ANU with critical interest and occasional regret that he was not still a part of it. His departure was a sad loss, from the point of view of his personal contribution as well as of maintaining appearances. If other senior academics were to leave so early, the University would be seriously weakened.

Everyone attending the installation ceremony knew by now that the University would shortly be losing its Vice-Chancellor. Copland was restless by nature, and ever since he had joined the ANU there was a chance that he would be tempted away by a political or diplomatic position. Now he was offered appointment as High Commissioner to Canada; and as his term as Vice-Chancellor was due to expire in April 1953, he decided to accept. Some believed he would have stayed on if Council
had offered to extend the appointment. Sawer thought that, when he announced his decision to a meeting of the academic staff, he half expected—half hoped—that someone would leap to his feet and say ‘No, no, don’t go!’ But nobody did, nor did Council make the necessary overtures. So Copland packed his bags and was gone early in the new year.

Many people in the University were sorry to see him go, including Ennor, Sawer, Hohnen and others who had worked closely with him. Olliphant was unperturbed, suggesting that the University would benefit from a change; and Florey, from a distance, complained as usual that he seemed to have left ‘an intolerable mess’ in the medical school. One reason why Council members might have thought twice about reappointing him was a report from the Commonwealth auditor (which we will look at more closely in another context) casting doubt on various aspects of the University’s financial administration. Some critics argued that he spent too much time on matters outside the University, such as commenting on the state of the Australian economy, and that he allowed Hohnen and the growing administration too much influence.

A larger question mark related to his role in representing the ANU as a university of academic distinction. Crocker, a perceptive and acerbic critic, remarked in later years that he had little instinct for quality and that he contributed no ideas. But that was a harsh judgement; and his own earlier estimate, confided to Hancock early in 1952, comes closer to the mark. Copland’s defects, wrote Crocker, were not concealed and they were very trying: he liked publicity; he was not ‘a scholar and a gentleman’ in the traditional sense; he loved ‘robust and rather undistinguished lunch and dinner parties’; in some respects he lacked sensitivity. On the other hand, he had the courage of the lion, inexhaustible energy, extraordinary patience with his staff, and a better mind and more fineness of sentiment than he was usually credited with. Had he not been Vice-Chancellor over the last eighteen months, Crocker concluded, the University would have fizzled out. Writing again to Hancock, nearly a year later from New Delhi, Crocker expressed satisfaction that Copland was both well-placed and gone: he had made his contribution, and now the University needed a different kind of vice-chancellor and a new regime with more rigorous standards.

Copland was a publicist, an entrepreneur, a vigorous defender of the University and what he believed it stood for. Those qualities were exactly what the University needed in its early years. He was the man for the moment: but as his term neared an end, Crocker and others were beginning to ask whether his moment had passed.

A week or so before leaving Canberra, Copland organised a meeting with the Prime Minister to promote the interests of the University, and especially to combat doubts in Cabinet about the wisdom of proceeding with the medical school. After an amiable discussion between the old friends and colleagues, Menzies asked Copland to present his case to the Cabinet meeting scheduled for two days later. This interview with Cabinet lasted 45 minutes, during which the Vice-Chancellor was subjected to some sceptical questioning. Conceding that the early plans of the University might end up costing £15 million, he managed to explain why the high cost was necessary, and he warned that if the medical professors were not to work in Canberra they would be lost
to Australian science. By this time his case was strengthened by significant research achievements. Perhaps with a glance at critical ministers from the Country Party, he mentioned work in the John Curtin School on myxomatosis, which was having a powerful impact in controlling the country’s rabbit plague. ‘It was my last working day in Canberra’, he recorded in a private note:

and I took advantage of every opportunity opened in the questions to reiterate the aims of the University, its place in the Australian academic structure and the interest that had been developed in it abroad ... when the Prime Minister asked if there were any further questions, one of the Ministers jocularly remarked that he thought Cabinet had had enough of an exercise in the arts of persuasion.

Copland was then asked to wait outside while Cabinet weighed the case before it. Before long, the Secretary to the Prime Minister’s Department Allen Brown (himself a member of the University Council) emerged to say that Cabinet had been persuaded and that the extra funds needed for the medical school would be made available. It was a fitting end to Copland’s regime.

The staff of the University had said farewell to their Vice-Chancellor several weeks earlier, at a function organised by Hohnen. For Copland, it was a moving occasion:

So many came up to me at one stage or another during the evening that I felt that somehow or other we had all managed to achieve in so short a time an extra-ordinary spirit of community of interest in an exciting adventure. I must say that I had a feeling also that I was deserting a rather high-minded group of people ...