To bring to Australia whatever other nations enjoy
(1969-1972)

Abstract for chapter 1

The concept of a Humanities Research Centre at The Australian National University originated in a report by Professor Max Crawford in 1963 urging ‘a constructive re-thinking of the role of the humanities in a modern Australian university.’ Professor Richard St Clair Johnson at ANU wrote a further background paper in 1969 recommending that Australia should examine the position of the humanities in North America, where the Commission on the Humanities had affirmed that, ‘Upon the humanities depend the national ethic and morality, the national aesthetic and beauty or lack of it, the national use of our environment and our material accomplishments.’

Their views were adopted enthusiastically by Max Crawford’s brother, Sir John Crawford, Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University from 1960 to 1967 and Vice-Chancellor at ANU from 1968. He announced on 5 September 1972 that The Australian National University ‘proposes to establish a Humanities Research Centre in the 1973/75 triennium.’

The authors present the argument at the time for an appropriate research school, the choice of Canberra as an attractive venue and the decision to appoint a director and a librarian, in the belief that ‘Australia is excellently placed for such a centre which so far as we know would be without parallel in the world.’

Keywords
Australia, culture, humanities, library, research, The Australian National University

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Professor Richard Rorty, one of the most acclaimed and influential philosophers of the present age, told the committee reviewing the Humanities Research Centre (HRC) in 1995 that in his view the Centre had ‘been the principal means of communication and collaboration between Australian scholars in the humanities and their colleagues throughout the world. It has an absolutely impeccable reputation in the international scholarly community, and is thought to be one of the most successful think-tanks in the world.’ The Centre had come a long way in a remarkably short time. Nobody could have imagined at the outset where the road would lead, what obstacles would have to be surmounted and what new directions would have to be explored. It was a journey without maps.

In the beginning were the words. And the words which gave origin to the concept of the Humanities Research Centre appeared in a most elegantly composed Report on the Future Development of the Humanities and the Social Sciences in the Australian Universities by Professor Raymond Maxwell (‘Max’) Crawford, one-time First Secretary in the Australian Embassy in Moscow and long-time Professor of History at the University of Melbourne, and brother of Sir John Crawford, Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies at The Australian National University from 1960 to 1967 and from 1968 to be the Vice-Chancellor of ANU who would found the Humanities Research Centre. Max Crawford forwarded his report on 4 December 1963 to Sir Leslie Martin, Chairman of the Australian Universities Commission. We can speculate that he also shared it with his brother Sir John.
Max Crawford’s theme was the perennial one of the parlous, not to say terminal, state of the humanities in academe and society in general. Some sections of the humanities, ‘particularly the languages,’ he argued, ‘are bedevilled by a sense of being on the defensive in a world unfavourable to their values.’ However, he believed that ‘the cause of the traditional humanities subjects is less well served by defensive protests or last ditch stands against barbarism, than by a constructive re-thinking of the role of the humanities in a modern Australian university.’ Nor did he have any doubt as to what should be the primary focus of such rethinking. The fact was, Crawford explained in the gender-exclusive language of the times, that it was ‘now possible for an Australian academic in these fields, as in the sciences, to hope to play an honourable part in the world-wide debate of his subject.’ The problem was that it was precisely at this point that:

He finds most frustrating the inadequacies of our resources and the decline of leisure for study . . . For the humanities and social sciences, the most important condition of scholarship is an adequate library . . . If, however, we solve
the deficiencies of our libraries and give our best men the opportunity to establish graduate seminars famous enough to attract students from more than one university . . . [the] stimulus of such men and such seminars would spread through their pupils into undergraduate teaching.

He quoted Professor A.D. Hope’s characteristically vivid declaration that ‘because it has always been the case, the humanities have come to accept a position that the sciences would not tolerate for a moment . . . for a cost equivalent to that of a single cyclotron they could have what they need.’ He accordingly proposed ‘a “crash programme” for the development of university libraries parallel to but on a larger scale than the computer programme of the 1964-6 Triennium.’

These laments would be reiterated over the ensuing decades, in spades redoubled, and with ever-increasing urgency and pertinence. But this was the early 1960s, and it was possible to believe that some appropriate action might actually be taken. The Australian economy had expanded by 39% in the first half of the decade, while unemployment varied between 1.0% and 2.3%, which was to say from nothing at all to nothing of social significance. Posters distributed by the Australian High Commission in British underground stations depicted young, handsome and optimistic intending migrants declaring that ‘In Australia I will!’ Ten years later such persons might well have reflected
that in Australia they probably wouldn’t. But the most compelling cause for optimism on the part of protagonists of the humanities was that there was reason to believe that their cause would find support at the very highest level of Government. Crawford observed in his covering letter to Martin that ‘the personal interest’ of Prime Minister Robert Gordon Menzies ‘in strong development in these fields of scholarship has greatly encouraged those of us who work in them.’ It was a presumption probably never entertained to anything like the same degree in respect of any other Australian Head of Government, before or since Menzies’ time.

There were sufficient grounds for believing such a presumption to be justified in this case. Liberal Party historian P.G. Tiver explained that ‘Menzies thought that education in the humanities made people conscious of their social responsibilities and prevented them from acquiring wholly materialistic outlooks;’ and that this was a good thing in terms of a philosophy of Liberalism that had any claim to be called Conservative. Menzies had indeed given remarkably convincing and consistent indications that he genuinely held such convictions: he had declared in his Commencement Address to the Canberra University College back in April 1939 that it was ‘one of the proper functions of a university to be a home of pure culture and learning in a commercial world full of “practical” men with utilitarian philosophies of life.’ Mere money-making was one of the lowest of arts. He elaborated on this theme as Opposition Leader in 1945, arguing that ‘the greatest failure in the world’, in his lifetime, had not been the failure in technical capacity ‘half as much as the failure of the human spirit.’ War after war had been the result of ‘the fatal inability of man to adjust himself to other men in a social world.’ Menzies attributed this decline to two main factors: the ‘increasingly pagan and materialistic’ quality of education; and the contempt that had fallen upon ‘“useless education,”’ meaning the humanities, the study of which in schools and universities ‘could at least develop a sense of proportion.’

These were not just admirable sentiments. Menzies was actually prepared to put the taxpayer’s money where his mouth had been: the Murray Committee was set up in 1956 to enquire into the needs of universities; the Government accepted the following year the recommendation of the Committee for a massive increase in financial aid to universities; and the Morton Committee was appointed in 1959 to examine tertiary education in Australia. Meanwhile, the number of students enrolled in universities throughout Australia rose from
57,672 in 1961 to 83,320 in 1965 and had almost doubled to 109,682 by the end of the decade; and staff numbers had more than doubled, from 3,396 in 1961 to 7,069 by 1969.\(^5\) It all seems like Camelot, from the perspective of some 40 years later. Camelot didn’t last long either.

But the Golden Years were not finished yet. Menzies was still Prime Minister and he was showing no signs of having lost his personal interest in higher education: a Minister for Education assisting the Prime Minister in the Prime Minister’s Department was appointed in 1964, and a separate Department of Education and Science was established in 1967. Academic planners might well be encouraged to explore the full implications of Crawford’s report. His primary concern had indeed been the provision of vastly enhanced library facilities to remedy what he considered to be ‘the inability of our libraries to support advanced research in more than a few limited fields such as Australian history.’ But something also needed to be done about the problem of finding time for research. The ‘long vacation,’ he observed with feeling, was ‘a hollow mockery’ for those in charge of Departments. Nor was sabbatical leave a full answer to the problem because one is always torn between incompatible objectives. One must establish and renew contacts with scholars overseas, see what is being done in various places, and take the rare chance of digging in archives and libraries. But this can be done only by using up the one opportunity in seven years that might allow uninterrupted thinking and writing.\(^6\)

Library plus fellowships equals some form of establishment in academic terms. A committee appointed by the Faculty of Arts at The Australian National University to consider the future development of the Faculty ‘gave early attention to the question of research in the humanities in the hope that, if agreement in principle was reached, detailed planning could proceed, and preliminary steps be taken possibly in the 1970-72 triennium.’\(^7\) The Committee reported on 13 August 1968 that there was

a clear need for a research school in those areas of the humanities not already covered by the Research School of Social Sciences and the Research School of Pacific Studies . . . Such a research school would, moreover, be of national importance as there is no centre for research in the humanities elsewhere in Australia.
It was considered that ‘physical location should be as close to the Haydon-Allen building as possible,’ presumably so as to be within easy walking distance of the University Library (J.B. Chifley Building), the Union Block and the heart of the University in general. There should be

a relatively small staff (though we would not envisage a number below 20) made up of a small number of permanent appointments, a number of temporary appointments . . . and a number of short-term, high-level appointments from Australia and overseas. All of these should, unless they wish otherwise, be free of teaching commitments (though we would hope that individual members might give seminars and/or public lectures in their own fields).8

The ultimate definition, inspiration and mission statement for the Humanities Research Centre came in May 1969 from Professor Richard St Clair Johnson, Professor of Classics in the School of General

Professor Richard St Clair Johnson.
Studies and Dean of the Faculty of Arts at ANU, in another eloquent Report to the Vice-Chancellor, Sir John Crawford, this time on ‘The development of Humanities at the A.N.U. . . . together with a view of the place of the humanities in higher education in the U.S.A. and Canada.’ It was Sir John, Johnson later recalled, who encouraged him to undertake a research trip in 1968/69 on a Carnegie Fellowship to look at approaches to the humanities in North America, but primarily in the United States. He visited over 16 campuses from Harvard to UCLA. Johnson prefaced his Report with two resounding declarations from the Report of the Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters and Sciences, 1941-1951, Ottawa, and the Report of the Commission on the Humanities, New York, 1954. The first proclaimed that:

> If we as a nation are concerned with the problem of defence, what, we may ask ourselves, are we defending? We are defending civilization, our share of it, our contribution to it . . . Our military defences must be made secure; but our cultural defences equally demand national attention; the two cannot be separated.9

And the second responded to the question, ‘Is it then in the interests of the United States and of its federal government to give greater support to the humanities?’ with the affirmation that:

> Upon the humanities depend the national ethic and morality, the national aesthetic and beauty or the lack of it, the national use of our environment and our material accomplishments . . . On our knowledge of men [sic], their past and their present, depends our ability to make judgments – not least those involving our control of nature, of ourselves and of our destiny. Is it not in the national interest that these judgments be strong and good?10

Such statements left little more to be said. Their North American origin was moreover fundamental to Johnson’s basic argument. ‘An examination of the position of the humanities in North America,’ he considered, ‘has, I believe, more relevance to their situation in Australia than has an examination of their position in any other country. The U.S.A., Canada and Australia are all broadly similar societies . . . ’ It was therefore appropriate that Australian educationalists should take note of the decisions of their North American counterparts, particularly with regard to their view,
especially in engineering schools and in places like M.I.T. and Cal. Tech., that the study of humanities is an essential part of the vocational preparation of their graduates . . . It would take a bold man to claim that Australian management was particularly well educated or needed no improvement. If American top management sees values in the humanities; if schools of management like Harvard’s are happy to accept humanities graduates for professional training; then I suggest that Australia might reasonably follow these models.

It would have taken a very bold man indeed to dispute the issue in the context of the times. But one might not have had to be all that bold to have misgivings about Johnson’s other reason why Australia should be advised to follow North American models in regard to the teaching of the humanities. ‘It is often loosely said,’ he continued,

that Australia is part of Asia. Australia is no more part of Asia than is Greece or Alaska or Egypt; like those countries, we are close to Asia; but we are a nation of Europeans. This is not to deny the importance of studying, understanding and where appropriate adopting Asian culture and attitudes; but inevitably we do these things as Europeans situated between the Pacific and Indian Oceans in an unstable part of the world. The cultivation of the European heritage, “the common background from which have grown the character and way of life of our fellow countrymen,” is for Australia an element of national security and strength, just as it is for the Canadians or the Americans . . . It is an element of national security that Australians should appreciate as deeply and as widely as possible the traditions and ideals which are expressed in their society, in its political and legal structures; these ideals are perceived in the history and literature and works of art of various kinds of those nations which are our intellectual and ethnic past, from Greece to Iceland. The study and teaching of these is the work of the humanities, at all levels.11

It was brilliant, it was elegant, it was witty; it was no doubt a line of argument eminently congenial to a classicist like Johnson; and it reflected a world view which Johnson himself would alter over the years as the world he was viewing altered. Nobody should be
condemned for not possessing the gift of prophecy. It might well have seemed reasonable at the time to suppose that Australia would continue to be at least as European in its ethnic mix as Canada or the USA. There were nonetheless some fundamental problems with Johnson’s basic premise. Nobody ever suggested that Egypt was part of anywhere except Africa. And it might be argued that Egypt, Greece and Alaska were closer or as close to Asia as Australia was. But Greece was even closer to Europe and Alaska to North America than either was to Asia; and all were far closer to Europe than Australia was. Nobody was indeed further from Europe geographically than Australia except New Zealand; and Australia was far closer to Asia than it was to anywhere else.

Moreover, Australia’s defence planning had been intensively focussed on Asia since 1950; Japan had been by far Australia’s most important export market since 1966; and Australia was in the process of extricating itself from a seven years’ military involvement in Vietnam, which had cost 532 Australian lives and divided Australian society as no other issue had ever done, and which had been entered into in pursuance of a total misconception of Chinese and Vietnamese history, perceptions and intentions. The question whether Australia is or is not a part of Asia was and always would be meaningless. What would never be in question was that Australia was inextricably and vitally involved in Asian affairs, more than in those of anywhere else, and of necessity always would be; and that meant that a better understanding of Asian issues was what Australia needed more than anything else, and the sooner the better. It was indeed a time of all others when Australia should cease to fight against ‘the reality of its own geography,’ as perhaps the greatest and most intellectually gifted of Australian Foreign Ministers put it two decades later.12

But Johnson’s real point was that Asian studies were already starting to make increasingly impressive advances at ANU. The Faculty of Asian Studies, established in 1961, was still devoted to historical rather than contemporary East Asia. But Heinz Arndt began to expand the frontiers of Australian scholarship to include contemporary Indonesia in 1963; Anthony Low, soon to succeed the renowned Professor Oskar Spate as Director of the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies (RSPacS) and to become Vice-Chancellor of the ANU two years later, introduced South Asian History in the School in the same year; and Wang Gungwu was appointed Professor of Far Eastern History there in 1968. But students in a still essentially Anglo-Celtic Australia were not likely to gain much comprehension
of Asian cultures unless they had some comprehension of their own culture first. What was really engaging Johnson and his colleagues in the Faculty of Arts was that there was still no formal provision at ANU for research in the humanities at all. The delay in providing such facilities had already created a serious problem. Research Schools had been proliferating like rabbits: the John Curtin School of Medical Research, the Research School of Physical Sciences and the Research School of Pacific Studies had all been established in the 1950s; the Research School of Chemistry and the Research School of Biological Sciences followed in 1967; and the Research School of Earth Sciences was approved to be launched in 1971. But there was still no Research School of the Humanities: it was apparently assumed, as the first Director of the Humanities Research Centre put it later, that ‘people in the humanities simply wrote their books in the intervals between giving lectures, needing no further institutional stimulus or support.’

Nor did it appear that there was likely to be such a Research School in the foreseeable future: the Australian Universities Commission had concluded that seven Research Schools were enough for the time being, in view of the heavy investment they incurred in staffing, facilities and administrative support. It was accordingly decided as a temporary measure to pursue expansion through the more modest
development of small centres and units. It proved to be not just a pragmatic decision, but a life-or-death one for the Humanities Research Centre, as ANU would soon be facing the utterly unanticipated prospect of trying to avoid contraction rather than pursuing expansion. A project for the study of the humanities would get off the ground at all only if it were a very small operation indeed. It would become a classic catch-22 situation: the Humanities Research Centre would always be too small to achieve what it was meant to achieve and could indeed achieve what it did only by placing quite extraordinary demands upon its personnel. But it might not have survived to achieve anything at all if it had been any bigger, as Anthony Low in his capacity as Vice-Chancellor was later to observe.

Johnson was well aware of all this. He had also found, in the course of his visits to the United States, institutions which he regarded as ‘an inspiration and a partial model’ for his project for the humanities in Australia. ‘Some of these institutions,’ according to the first Director of the HRC Professor of English Charles Ian Edward Donaldson, formerly Chairman of the Faculty of English at Oxford and Professor of English at ANU since 1969, had been established by wealthy European refugees who fled to America in the 1930s, and wished to create quiet sanctuaries of knowledge which they hoped would perpetuate the liberal values they’d seen so dramatically endangered in Europe. Concealed in quiet corners of Washington DC or Los Angeles, flanked by luxurious gardens, these institutes served as secular monasteries of the mid-twentieth century. Other kinds of humanities centres had developed at private and state universities during the fifties and sixties, and were often more actively linked to the particular needs and resources of the institutions to which they were attached.14

Canberra certainly was not lacking quiet corners and luxurious or at least abundant gardens to provide appropriate settings for a similar sanctuary to perpetuate liberal values, which it would be within the resources of ANU to maintain. ‘Perhaps the simplest procedure administratively’ to follow the North American models, Johnson suggested, would be ‘to establish a Research School in Humanities. However, in discussions overseas I found no support anywhere for such a proposal,’ any more than he had found in Canberra itself. ‘Nor was there much support for an institution staffed to any large
extent by permanent appointees. What scholars in this area want is, first, books . . . then, time . . . then, contacts and discussion with like-minded people in the university, with others around Australia, with colleagues overseas, and with students. Given these factors,’ he considered, ‘Canberra could prove attractive, especially for periods of one, two or three years, to scholars from all over the world.’ As for the actual structure of the proposed institution, he suggested, making a virtue of necessity, that ‘a Research School of Humanities on all fours with the existing Research Schools is not the best way to encourage the highest level of work in this area.’

Neither would there be much point in setting up the proposed institution as a Social Sciences or Pacific Studies centre, as these areas already had excellent research facilities at ANU. Rather,

some combination of the advantages of a Research School – the freedom for study, the opportunities for travel, the generous provision of resources – with some teaching and with relatively rapid turnover of personnel would seem to be the best formula . . . Fellowships with terms between six months and three years would be much sought by present staff in Australia and, I believe, by overseas scholars.

Some central themes should be pursued, to ‘avoid dissipation of effort and of library resources over the whole range of the humanities.’ These could include, not surprisingly,

the expansion of Europe (the study of the spread of European cultural influence around the globe, and its interaction with other cultures) . . . twentieth-century humanities . . . nineteenth century studies (the period of our national formation and the European background to it); Mediterranean studies (the meeting of Asia and Europe . . .)

‘It surely does not need to be said,’ he concluded,

that we should seek, as senior Fellows and as permanent staff (if permanent staff are desired) leaders in the study of humanities from any part of the world, [of] the highest calibre obtainable; our object is to bring to Australia whatever other nations enjoy.15

It was a noble project, compellingly presented; and it was a well-nigh exact forecast of what the Humanities Research Centre was to become.
A First Meeting on 3 June 1969 of The Australian National University Humanities Research Committee, consisting of Johnson and Professor Percy Herbert Partridge, President of the Australian Council for Educational Research and formerly Director of the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS), 1961-68, agreed that the ‘study of European humanities receives weakest attention in Australian universities. While the study of science, Asian studies, etc., receives considerable effort, there are large gaps in work on European literature, history, philosophy and art,’ as well as ‘too much emphasis on Australia and her environs’ and a ‘tendency among universities to concentrate too much on Asian and Pacific studies.’ The immensely prestigious Professor Oskar Spate agreed that the idea of a new Research School was

almost ruled out because . . . we just haven’t the volume of books (not to mention MSS) needed for such work on the scale of a School . . . Your preference for a Centre is quite right . . . It would not be Eurocentric in the bad
sense; in the good sense, it would provide a much-needed corrective to other people’s ethnocentricities, now in the ascendant,

he added in a generous observation from one who had been so extensively and intensively involved with varied ethnicities and was now indeed Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies (RSPacS). Their definitive proposal was circulated after repeated re-draftings in September. It proclaimed that in adopting its plan for a Humanities Research Centre ‘Australia will do no more than adopt a pattern which is already all but universal in the civilised world,’ and that Canberra would be ‘the ideal site for the proposed centre.’ Nor would the University be undertaking a particularly substantial commitment: ‘the report recommends that the permanent staff will be always small, and in the beginning should consist of only two permanent academic appointments, the Director and the Librarian.’
This of course raised the crucial question,

what kind of man or woman should be sought to be the
director of the centre. Two kinds are perhaps possible:
one would be a senior academic, with the status and
salary of a director of a research school in the Institute;
the alternative might be a younger, less prestigious, more
executive type of academic, appointed at the standard
professorial salary.

‘Possibly,’ the report speculated, ‘the university should try to get a
person who combines both characteristics,’ thus, presumably, being
both senior and younger, scholar and executive, more highly paid and
less highly paid. At least, nobody thought that it was going to be an
easy job. The issue of the appointment of senior permanent staff would
indeed continue to bedevil the operation of the Centre over the years,
even after it was recognised that a full-time Director was going to need
a full-time Deputy, working together on the job, as an active partner and
not just to come off the bench in the absence of the Director. But this
entailed logically the presence of yet a third academic to come off the
bench in such a situation as an active partner of the Deputy who would
then be functioning as Acting Director. At the time, however, the only
other academic appointment to be considered was that of the librarian,
in accordance with Max Crawford’s vision of the Humanities Research
Centre as what Ian Donaldson would describe as ‘a centre in a library,’
on the assumption that what was needed to get good men in and
keep them was first and foremost a library adequate for their scholarly
needs. It was accordingly recommended that ‘the University could
seek a director and a librarian;’ and that ‘in 1973-75, the centre should
become fully established. This full establishment comprises a director,
a librarian, a business manager, and secretarial and clerical assistants.
The total cost of the centre would be about $909,000 in the first
triennium, phased over the three years.’

It was appropriate that the most pertinent response to the draft
proposal came from the man who would come as close as possible to
Johnson’s hypothetical ideal Director for the HRC. Donaldson wrote
perceptively to Johnson that he liked

the sound of the Centre for Research in Humanities – a
really first-rate scheme . . . the only query of any kind is
whether by “man” . . . you mean a masculine man or a
person of either sex? . . . it might be a pity to deter an able
woman from applying for either job?
It might indeed, not only because ANU was not all that flush with women in high academic positions, but also because it was likely to prove singularly difficult to get the right person for either job, regardless of gender.

Ian Donaldson would always be noted for acute insight and realism. So also to an extraordinary degree was Professor Dale Trendall, currently Master of University House and a classicist of world distinction. He had also been Librarian at the British School in Rome, which gave a particular significance to his observation to Johnson that his initial reactions . . . are not entirely favourable, as I do not quite see what a Librarian could do in this particular context, since the fields of study are indeterminate, still less why a business manager should be needed. The whole project seems to me to need working out a good deal more fully – as it stands your director would be little more than an organiser.21

That of course was exactly why it was going to prove so difficult to persuade the kind of academic desired for the position of Director to accept that position. Trendall might have underestimated the need for a business manager to ensure that the Director should have the opportunity to be something other than just an organiser, but he had detected the fundamental problem with the continuing emphasis on the need for a librarian in the proposed Centre: there was realistically little likelihood of the Centre’s ever acquiring enough books of its own to need the services of a full-time librarian. Nor was it obvious that it needed to: the University Library had already acquired about half a million books and was expanding rapidly, and there was also the National Library, which had finally been integrated from its diverse locations in arguably the most beautiful building in Canberra in 1968.

Max Crawford himself recognised both that the original concept needed some modification and that modification needed to be aimed in the first instance at making life easier for the future Director, if there were to be any chance of getting the kind of Director whom the Centre would need if it were to fulfil the hopes of its creators. ‘Your Committee’ he wrote in May 1970 to his brother Sir John Crawford, formerly in the course of a career of remarkable brilliance Director of the Research School of Pacific Studies and then Vice-Chancellor of ANU, ‘thought of the Warburg Institute,’ a famed English Institute for the cultural and intellectual history of Europe from Classical Antiquity to modern times, which indeed possessed a massive library of 300000 volumes
in its own right, ‘presumably, because it justly enjoys great prestige, is primarily engaged in research and succeeds in cutting across a number of stultifying departmental barriers. But the differences between the Warburg and the Centre proposed . . . are important.’ Chief of these was that the Warburg ‘has a permanent academic staff of seven . . . Your Committee proposes only a Director and a Librarian on the permanent academic staff.’ But, as Crawford argued with total realism, the issue that had to be resolved before all else was that the Director would ‘need at least one companion of comparable ability in a related field – someone to talk to about his own subject and to protect him,’ or presumably her, ‘from the subtle temptations of isolated mastery.’ These also were most percipient and relevant comments; but the test of battlefield experience was to show that a Director of the Centre would need a Deputy of considerable ability for reasons even more compelling than having someone to talk to or as a defence against the subtle temptations of incipient paranoia or megalomania: the simple fact was that at least two senior academics would be required on the job, full-time, to operate a Centre which aspired to be ‘without parallel in the world,’ or even without too many parallels in the world.

Crawford was not however yet prepared to abandon entirely his concern that the Centre should be distinguished in the first instance for its attractions as a resource facility. His solution was for the Director to be able to appoint, ‘either as research fellow or as an academic librarian, a first-rate scholar ready to make the building up of a strong library collection his main and absorbing task for the first few years.’22 But somebody whose prime interest was that of a librarian would not necessarily be somebody who could function as an alter ego for the Director. And there were also problems about the actual implications of Johnson’s requirement that the focus of the Centre’s activity should be ‘the cultivation of the European heritage.’ This was now restated as ‘the expansion of the European intellectual and cultural tradition,’ which might sound even worse to non-Europeans as having a certain savour of cultural imperialism.23 It was agreed at length that the broad theme of the centre

involves the study of the major elements in European culture, past and present; it also involves the study of their impact on Australian intellectual life and gives scope for study of the European impact on other societies, both of European heritage (e.g. America) and non-European, such as the Asian nations.
It was not apparently to consider the impact of non-European cultures on European societies, nor was it considered that America might have also had a non-European heritage, even if by ‘America’ were meant only that part of the hemisphere north of the Rio Grande and south of the 49th parallel. These lacunae and distortions of perspective might fairly be regarded as symptomatic of the intellectual climate of the time. The real matter for concern was the extent to which this initial mandate might affect the capacity of the Centre to adjust to the demands of a different intellectual climate. The fact of the matter and the whole burden of the story is that it did so adjust, in the most imaginative and responsive manner, and has continued to do so, responding to challenges that could not possibly have been imagined at the time of its genesis.

Even academics cannot sensibly be blamed for failing to foretell the future. And equally symptomatic of the time was the triumphal affirmation of belief that ‘Australia is excellently placed for such a centre which so far as we know would be without parallel in the world.’ It was the twilight of the Age of Optimism, but of course nobody knew it at the time. Meanwhile, the creative process of The Australian National University rolled on enthusiastically, if not wholly consistently. An Addendum to the Report of the Working Party: Centre for Research in Humanities insisted that the Centre would consist first ‘of a library which will attract scholars from abroad,’ and that the ‘very small permanent nucleus’ of the Centre should be initially ‘probably a Director, a Librarian and appropriate secretarial and administrative assistance,’ although it was surely difficult to imagine how such a library could be established anywhere in Australia except in very specialised fields, or how it could be established in ANU except at the expense of the libraries already on campus. Notes prepared for the Vice-Chancellor for discussion with the Australian University Commission urged that ‘advanced work in the development of European thought and culture in this part of the world’ was ‘as important a part of the task of understanding ourselves and our neighbours as any study of modern economies and science.’ Maybe it was. Advanced work in the development of the thought and culture of our neighbours might have been even more important a task. But perhaps it was thought that RSPacS would be doing enough in that line already.

What was not open to argument was the recommendation of Deputy Vice-Chancellor David Noel Dunbar that ‘it would be essential to have a Director appointed as early as possible . . . in order to
establish lines of future development, to advise on library acquisitions, and to give some stimulation to the project.'27 This would seem to be axiomatic, but appointing a Director was in fact to prove perhaps the most perdurable and vexing of all the problems the HRC would have to confront.

But the great decision was taken. Sir John Crawford announced on 5 September 1972 that The Australian National University ‘with the approval of the Australian Universities Commission proposes to establish a Humanities Research Centre in the 1973/75 triennium.’ The proposed Centre, he advised,

will consist first of a library which will attract scholars from abroad; second, of a programme of visiting fellowships to support them over several months; third, of programmes of Australian fellowships and of conferences to enable scholars from all parts of Australia to benefit from the stimulus provided by the Centre . . . The prime objective is to encourage the co-ordination and stimulation of research in certain aspects of the humanities amongst all Australian universities.28

He wrote to Donaldson the following week to invite him formally to serve on the Advisory Committee to be appointed for the proposed Centre. Its role would be to ‘advise the University generally on the development of the Centre and in particular will have as one of its first tasks the preparation of a statement which might be used in

Professors Manning Clark, A.D. Hope, Anne Paolucci at the HRC, 1970s.
seeking applications for the headship of the Centre . . . ’29 Johnson
would naturally be the chair, and the other invitees besides Donaldson
comprised of course Max Crawford; Director of the Research School of
Social Sciences [RSSS] Professor W.D. Borrie; Professor of Fine Arts at the
University of Melbourne and President of the Australian Academy of
the Humanities Joseph Burke; the august historian Professor Manning
Clark; Professor of English at the Flinders University of South Australia
Ralph Elliott; Dean of the Faculty of Arts Dr E.C. Fry; Professor of
Philosophy in the School of General Studies Peter Herbst; Professor
of Germanic Languages Hans Kuhn; Professor of Philosophy in the
Institute of Advances Studies John Passmore; Director of RSPAS Oskar
Spate; Power Professor of Contemporary Art and Director of the
Power Institute of Fine Arts at the University of Sydney Bernard
Smith; Professor of Economic History in the Faculty of Economics
Graham Tucker; Professor of Far Eastern History Wang Gungwu; and
by invitation Acting Vice-Chancellor and Professor of Physics Noel
Dunbar. It was an awesome assembly of many of the most honoured
and exciting names in Australian academe, drawn not only from the
ranks of ANU, as was appropriate for what should be an institution
truly national.

The prospects for the new centre could not have seemed more
auspicious. What nobody could have known was that it would instead
have its origin at the least auspicious time for such a project since
the outbreak of war in 1939. But times were never going to get more
auspicious for Australian universities.
Notes

7 Faculty of Arts Meeting no. 6, 1968, 14 Aug. 1968.
8 ANU, Faculty of Arts, Proposal for a research school in the humanities, 13 Aug. 1968, 3035/1968.
13 Charles Edward Ian Donaldson to the authors, 25 June 2002.
14 ‘Reconfiguring the Humanities:’ a public lecture by Professor Ian Donaldson at the National Library of Australia. 12 Sept. 2002.
Richard St Clair Johnson, ‘The development of humanities at the ANU. A report to the Vice-Chancellor, together with a view of the place of the humanities in higher education in the USA and Canada,’ May 1969.

The Australian National University Humanities Research Committee: notes on first meeting, 3 June 1969.

Oskar Spate to Johnson, 19 June 1969.

Ian Donaldson to all members of HRC Advisory Committee: Post of Deputy Director and Bibliographer, 12 Apr. 1977.


Ian Donaldson to Johnson, 29 Sept. 1969.


Maxwell Crawford to Sir John Crawford, 4 May 1970.


The Australian National University Vice-Chancellor’s Notes for Discussion with Australian Universities at the Australian National University, 12 July 1971.

David Noel Dunbar to Johnson, 12 Aug. 1971.
