The Centre’s work is gathering momentum (1972-1975)

Abstract for chapter 2

The Centre began operations in 1974, in temporary accommodation in Childers Street and without a permanent Director. The most urgent task for the newly formed Humanities Research Centre Advisory Committee was to find a suitable Director. This chapter describes the search and details the decisions on precisely who would be best suited to run the Centre.

Professor Ian Donaldson was seconded from the Department of English to serve as Director. A brilliant scholar, Donaldson created the style for which the Centre would become internationally renowned as a haven for scholars and a focus for research. Professor Peter Herbst initiated in August 1974 the first of the series of conferences that would also characterise the HRC. Professor Ralph Elliott also played and would continue to play a most significant role in the development of the Centre. A permanent home was established for the HRC in the A.D. Hope Building in mid-1975, to provide a welcoming and congenial environment for visiting scholars.

Keywords
conferences, humanities, library, research institution, staff, Visiting Fellows

Published by ANU E Press, 2004
The world may or may not have changed essentially after 11 September 2001. There is no doubt that it did so after October 1973. US President Richard M. Nixon had effectively unleashed the world-transforming phenomenon of globalisation on 25 August 1971, when, in the words of former Vice-President of the Council on Foreign Relations Ethan Kapstein, he announced that the United States dollar could not be converted to gold, thereby ending the era of fixed exchange rates and ushering in a system of floating rates . . . Floating exchange rates encouraged intense speculation on currencies . . . mobile capital was finally free to roam, giving it tremendous influence on countries’ economic policies.¹

Then Egypt and Syria attacked Israel on 6 October in an attempt to force the Israelis to negotiate a withdrawal from the territories which they had seized after a pre-emptive strike in May 1967, and retained in defiance of UN Security Council resolutions. But the Arab attacks were defeated after the United States rushed military aid to Israel, to avert the catastrophe of an Israeli resort to nuclear weapons. The last chance for the Arab states to achieve a military balance in the region was lost. Their only remaining means of retaliation was economic. The Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries had been established in 1960. Ten members announced on 17 October that they would agree to an Iranian proposal to raise the price of oil on the world market by
reducing their oil production forthwith by not less than five per cent of the September 1973 level, with a similar reduction to be applied each successive month until such time as the total evacuation of Israeli forces from all Arab territory occupied during the June 1967 war was completed, and the legitimate rights of the Palestinian people restored, in other words, until Israel chose to comply with UNSC Resolution 242. This was followed a few days later by an embargo by the Arab states on supplies of oil to the United States. Both endeavours failed, of course. What they did achieve before the embargo was finally lifted on 18 March 1974 was to quadruple the price of oil on the world market, thus creating what has been described as the greatest transfer of wealth in world history. It also precipitated a paradigm shift in social and economic policies in the world outside. Inflation and unemployment soared, placing impossible strains on the benign structures of the welfare state as experienced in most western countries since 1945. Governments ran scared, abandoning Keynesian doctrines of state intervention in favour of cost-cutting exercises that were still being explored and expanded over 30 years later. It was a new world and an essentially less humane one.

All this was still in the future. Horizons were still bright in the last quarter of 1972, all the more so perhaps because Labor was sweeping closer to office, albeit at the worst possible time, under the leadership of the most conspicuously erudite of Australian politicians, of whom it was indeed said that he gave the impression that there was not a book that he had not read, by contrast with some others, who might have given the impression that there was not a book that they had read. The immediate task for the founders of the Humanities Research Centre had naturally been to form a committee. This was done with commendable speed. The Australian National University Humanities Research Centre Advisory Committee invited by Sir John Crawford on 11 September 1972 held its first meeting on 22 September 1972, chaired appropriately by Richard Johnson. It recognised the most urgent task as being that of finding a Director. How far optimism still reigned among the planners of Australian academe was illustrated both by the qualifications expected for a Director and the amount of support which it was assumed could be provided for the appointee.

The Head of the Centre ‘should be pre-eminently a distinguished scholar, with much less emphasis being placed on administrative ability; a Graduate Assistant,’ it was confidently noted, ‘would be available to look after most of the detailed administrative work (although one member suggested that a more senior post might
be warranted). In any case,’ the Committee considered, ‘it was essential that the Head should be kept as free as possible of detailed administrative work so that he [sic] could concentrate on his scholarly activities and on general policy matters.’ All this would indeed depend on ‘the effectiveness of the Graduate Assistant and on the way in which the person appointed to the Headship preferred to work;’ but ‘it would be sufficient to tell any prospective appointee to the Headship that substantial administrative assistance would be available – exactly how this assistance would be used could be decided later.’

Future Directors and Deputies labouring under the Sisyphean burdens of administrative minutiae might well react to such cheerful expressions with bitter laughter; but the 1970s had just begun, and senior academics were not yet expected to type and file their own official letters, collect their own mail, maintain their own bring up systems, make their own work related appointments and travel arrangements, not to mention other even more unfamiliar chores such as moving furniture for seminars and lectures and keeping up with myriad University policy changes and endless minutes of University committees via the internet.

An obvious problem was that a Graduate Assistant could hardly be the kind of senior academic of comparable status which Max Crawford had recognised as being a necessary counterpart to the Director. Neither would it be appropriate for a senior academic counterpart to be lumbered with the detailed administrative work that the Director was apparently to be exempted from. And the requirements for the Director were becoming ever more exacting. He or she was to be not only a distinguished scholar but also an impressive linguist: five members of the Advisory Committee, including Johnson and Hans Kuhn, wrote to Donaldson and Herbst, rejecting the ‘monstrous assumption . . . that what has not been translated into English is not worth reading,’ and declaring that they did not ‘think it extravagant to ask that the future director should be conversant with Latin, French, German and, preferably, another major language.’

Certainly, Johnson, Kuhn, Donaldson and Herbst themselves would have had no difficulty meeting such selection criteria. A draft advertisement for the Director proposed that the successful applicant ‘should be a person of substantial scholarship in some field of European thought and culture; he should also have a sympathetic awareness of developments in fields and disciplines other than his own.’ There would be ‘adequate support staff’ to count on; and the Centre was ‘expected to comprise about ten academic staff’ when developed, the tenured members
to be ‘the Director and one other with primarily bibliographical responsibilities.’

Some reservations were beginning to be expressed about the explicit Eurocentricity of the project, if not about its implicit gender-exclusiveness. Pacific historian Hartley Grattan told Sir John Crawford that to learn that the HRC ‘was actually to come into being was a great pleasure for while it won’t be THE monument to your Vice-Chancellorship, it will be remembered as one of the most creative ornaments of it.’ However, he noted in the advertisement in the *Times Literary Supplement* that ‘there is a reference to European cultural orientation. I hope this is not interpreted restrictively. I hope it will be recognised that too intense focus on “Europe” will narrow the mind.’ Dale Trendall advised Sir John Crawford’s successor as Vice-Chancellor Robert Williams that he had gathered from Johnson that

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\text{it had now been more or less agreed that [the HRC’s] immediate aim should be research into the impact of the European way of life and thought upon Australia and the Pacific. This seems to me a laudable proposal . . . but it of course differs to some extent from the suggestion I made to you that the Centre might concentrate upon the rather broader theme of the impact of European culture upon Asia and the Pacific and the reverse process.}
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However, he supposed that it might be ‘as well to start on the narrower topic . . . since it could be capable of expansion later.’ The trouble was that there was no reason to imagine from Johnson’s original proposal, the terms of the advertisement or anything that had been discussed by the Advisory Committee that it was at all in contemplation that the Centre should also examine the reverse process of the impact of Asian and Pacific culture upon European civilisation, although Trendall had raised the possibility for such a readjustment, observing that it did not matter greatly ‘whether the Director’s own particular field of study lies in the European or the Pacific sector, provided he has some understanding of both.’

Grattan in fact hoped that the HRC might develop as an Australian Studies Centre. He suggested as someone pre-eminently qualified in both European and Pacific fields the author of *European Vision and the South Pacific*, the great Marxist art historian and classicist Bernard Smith. The Committee did indeed consider Smith, who had expressed interest in the position, but noted that he ‘would not be available before January 1975, when he would be 58. This raised the question
as to whether it was desirable to appoint a person at this stage of his career to set up a new Centre . . . the duties could be physically taxing.’

Smith was to become at the age of 60 President of the Australian Academy of the Humanities, a position not incapable of being taxing, and was still in unwearied creative flood at the age of 85, publishing his latest book and posing boldly nude for the Archibald Prize.

The Committee had already resolved on 9 April 1973 to appoint retiring University Librarian J.J. Graneek for a period of 12 months ‘to compile a bibliography of desiderata for the Centre,’ while C.A. Burmester from the National Library of Australia would compile specialist bibliographies. This dealt with the bibliographical side of the business. However, the quest for a Director was becoming more urgent, as 34 applications for Visiting Fellows had already been received by August 1973. This number had been reduced to a short list of 17, reduced further to nine and fellowships finally offered to only two, but something would still have to be done with them and somebody would have to do it.

Johnson had written to Professor J.B. Trapp, Director of the Warburg Institute, back in September 1970, explaining that ‘we will need a director – a scholar of distinction, a man [!] of wide academic contacts,
steeped in Europe, yet not unfamiliar with antipodean or North American society,’ and hoping that he would ‘suggest the name of J.B. Trapp.’ This would certainly have gone far to cement the Centre as a locus of European studies. But Trapp had not responded to the lure. Donaldson for his part had been most impressed, both personally and intellectually, by Bernhard Fabian, Professor of English at the University of Münster. Donaldson had met him at the second David Nichol Smith seminar on the eighteenth century in Canberra in 1970, when they had discussed the issue of critical concern to both of them, ‘what hope for the humanities?’ while ‘walking together through The Australian National University’s gum groves, watching the grass parrots, and guarding ourselves against the occasional predatory swoop of nesting magpies,’ as Donaldson recalled. Fabian had insisted in the comprehensive German manner that ‘we needed . . . to organise ourselves much better; to set up research institutes; to establish information networks; to attract more generous funding, both public and private. Just look at the scientists! And take a leaf from their book.’ A visiting appointment was arranged for Fabian in the English Department at ANU for the third term of 1970. They ‘had all enjoyed teaching together,’ Donaldson recalled; and Fabian had acquired a strong liking for Australia, especially as Canberra ‘had a growing reputation at this time as a centre for eighteenth century studies’ through the series of seminars and later conferences, inaugurated in honour of the renowned Professor David Nichol Smith, in recognition of his immensely valuable donation of eighteenth century English and French works to the National Library. Fabian’s own particular field of interest was admittedly the somewhat specialised one of the history of the book trade in Germany, and in particular the dissemination of English books in Germany during the eighteenth century, on which he became a European authority. However, he also ‘had a good knowledge of cultural institutions and research centres throughout Europe’; he ‘was an up-and-coming scholar of international distinction’; he ‘had ideas about the role the new Centre in Canberra might play’; and he manifestly ‘fitted the Warburgian model.’ He seemed just the man for the job.

The Electoral Committee accordingly approached Fabian, advising him that the purpose of the Humanities Research Centre was ‘to stimulate and advance in Australia generally the study of the humanities, especially the literature, philosophy and art of Europe.’ Fabian for his part reassured the Committee that he did not see the Centre becoming a centre of 18th
century studies as might have been feared by his own interests and those of others in Humanities in the ANU; the range of work had to be much wider . . . One of the Centre’s functions might be, he felt, to encourage greater co-ordination in the humanities among the Australian universities . . . The first task, however, ‘would be to build up the library; one way of obtaining expert advice would be to invite out a scholar-librarian.’

This was how Max Crawford had seen the Centre developing. It was however appearing increasingly unlikely that the Centre would actually develop this way: the University Library and the National Library were continuing to expand; their librarians were unanimously opposed on principle to multiplying separate holdings instead of consolidating them; and growing budgetary constraints were unfavourable to the creation of yet another collection. The Advisory Committee was now convinced in any event that the most pressing task was to find temporary accommodation for the first intake of Visiting Fellows who would be arriving in 1974. The Committee did not feel that there would be any ‘real danger that the traditions and character of the Centre could be pre-empted’ if Fellows were appointed before the arrival of the Director; but where to put them was the problem: it had been hoped that the new A.D. Hope Building might be available by August, but it was not going to be ready for occupancy for over six months and it could be difficult to find space in the Arts buildings, although it might be possible to use the rooms of people on study leave. This would mean however that Fellows would be dispersed; it would be desirable to have them in adjacent rooms. Other possibilities might be to seek space in the Childers Street buildings or in the Chifley library.

Neither would have been wholly satisfactory, however: the Childers Street buildings were undeniably basic though eminently durable prefabs, which had been put up over 20 years before as temporary accommodation for the workers engaged in constructing ANU, and are indeed still enduring, more or less, accumulating evermore historic quality and rustic charm thanks to encroaching greenery, graffiti and barbed wire. All very 1960s Canberra, and doubtless therefore to be heritage listed. And the Chifley was an excellent place to do research, but it was not equipped to provide distinguished visiting academics with private offices or even such technological support as telephones.
Meanwhile, the search for a Director had suddenly gone awry. Fabian was formally invited to take the post in November 1973. However, Donaldson had suspected that Fabian was having some reservations about the venture when he visited him in Münster early in 1974. A severe bout of illness finally decided him to decline on 26 March 1974. This, as Donaldson put it, ‘came as a bit of a bombshell. The first batch of HRC Visiting Fellows was about to arrive, and the first HRC conferences were about to take place. Someone had to look after the new Centre.’ He wrote graciously at the time of Fabian’s retirement in 1996 that it had been ‘Australia’s great loss and Germany’s gain that he eventually decided instead to remain at Münster.’ Perhaps it was. But a person far less modest about their own abilities than Donaldson might have felt that it could have been Australia’s gain after all. Then Graneek resigned on 16 April, creating another staff vacancy. Burmester’s appointment was due to conclude on 9 July, but the Committee agreed that he should be invited to continue until 31 December. Johnson urged that ‘it was essential to have someone in charge of the Centre very soon. There was a budget and visitors were coming.’ The Committee ‘was convinced by arguments that an appointment, even if a temporary one, must be made soon and it was agreed that the Vice-Chancellor should ask Professor Trendall whether he would be willing to accept the headship for a period of up to two years.’ Trendall was then 65, the compulsory retirement age in that ageist era, and seven years older than Smith had been when the Committee had doubted that he would have the stamina for the job. Trendall would no doubt have been a superlatively adept and scholarly choice nonetheless. But he had too much on his plate already, like most distinguished academics in early retirement: he was ‘appreciative of the offer,’ but ‘made it clear that he was not free to take on this work.’ Hopes were entertained of Professor Ralph Elliott who at 53 was in the mid-tide of a most distinguished career, Foundation Professor of the School of Languages and Literature at the Flinders University of South Australia and Emeritus Professor of English there since 1974, world authority on Chaucer and Hardy and remarkable in addition to all that as the only German to have received the Sword of Honour at the Royal Military College, Sandhurst, before joining in the invasion of Germany with the Leicestershire Regiment. Australian Chief of the Defence Force General Peter Cosgrove seemed to find it all rather puzzling when Professor Elliott told him the story.

But Ralph Elliott had just accepted Trendall’s old position as Master
of University House and was accordingly not available either. He would however remain most closely involved with the Centre for longer than anybody else, serving it at duty’s call as Chair of the Advisory Committee, as Acting Director and later as Acting-Acting Director, Visiting Fellow, guest speaker, Honorary Librarian, and generally guide, philosopher and friend, earning the affection and respect of colleagues as Godfather of the HRC, to which he would continue to bring a breadth of vision and scholarship wholly necessary to such an institution.
But what the Centre needed immediately was not a Godfather but a father or even a mother. The first contingent of Visiting Fellows had arrived and with them the problems which had to be expected. Assistant Registrar of ANU Robert Horan told the Advisory Committee that they would really ‘have to try to avoid repeating the experience we are having’ with one of the Visiting Fellows ‘who is disillusioned with the Centre and is considering leaving before the end of his term.’ His complaints, Horan informed the Committee,

seem to lie around the following . . . He cannot understand what the HRC, even in its undeveloped state is about – he is isolated in the Chifley Library without a phone, as we failed to find a room for him in a congenial department . . . He has not found anyone with academic interests close to his own.

Horan suggested that the academic in question carried some blame, since the Visiting Fellows had been advised beforehand that ‘because of our failure to appoint a Director, the Centre has, as yet, no visible presence.’ However, the complainant ‘is coming to the conclusion that he has been misled, and I should not want this to happen with the other Visitors – if only for the reason that they could give us a “bad press” when they return home.’ It was all too likely that this would
be the case, just as it would be all too easy for any academic coming to the Centre from anywhere in Europe or North America to come to the conclusion that they had been misled when faced with such conditions: it would be hard indeed for them to suppose that The Australian National University could not do better than that.

The academic in question came to terms with the current deficiencies of the Centre to the extent that he gave a presentation in the first of its Conference series later in 1974. But Horan’s concern in the meantime was that he was not sure that ANU could do better than that. ‘Obviously the best thing to do with these people,’ he continued, ‘is to accommodate them in some Department where they will find a matching interest, but this seems to be impossible. As a last resort, I have reserved some rooms in Childers Street to be available to HRC until Arts V [the A.D. Hope Building] is completed. This is a last resort,’ he emphasised, ‘as I am not looking forward to telling Visiting Fellows from overseas that this is the best accommodation the ANU can offer them’. 18

The Childers Street prefabs were of course by no means without charms of their own: there was food and entertainment to hand at The Street Theatre and a truly historic pie cart nearby for emergency supplies; and Visiting Fellows had the added attraction of contact with graduate students in the same building, assuming that they wished to have contact with graduate students. One Department indeed found the Childers Street precinct so engaging that ‘they refused to leave their huts for a smart new brick building that had been provided for them,’ as Donaldson recalls. Nothing more could be done about accommodation in any event until the A.D. Hope Building was finished. But something had to be done about the other desperate deficiency of the HRC, its lack of a Director, and done at once. The University at last made a decision which it might well have made to advantage earlier: the urbane, sophisticated and perceptive Ian Donaldson was ‘hauled out of the English Department’ in August 1974 ‘on a two-year secondment to take care of the Centre’ in the capacity of Director until a permanent appointment was made. 19 This may well have been a great loss to English studies at ANU, as Professor of History Ann Curthoys later observed; but it was the greatest possible gain to the HRC.

The HRC Advisory Committee also decided in September that steps should be taken to advertise a single senior post for Deputy Director and HRC Bibliographer, in case the original and fading concept of the HRC as ‘a centre in a library’ might yet be realised. It
never was, but the necessity for a Deputy Director was becoming more evident all the time. It would be two years before one was appointed and seven years before one actually assumed the duties of the office. Donaldson’s appointment was confirmed by the University Council in October. They could have looked far longer and farther and not done nearly as well. Donaldson commented genially a year later that he had been acting ‘on what has unofficially been described as a “caretaker” basis. The term is perhaps rather more exact than any of us at first realised,’ he added, alluding to the extraordinary burden of cares that he would have to take. Fortunately, Donaldson was then a youthful 39 and able to carry the load.

The first Annual Report of the Humanities Research Centre presented in January 1975 recorded that the HRC had ‘made a modest but useful start with its activities this year, despite encountering unexpected difficulties.’ The first had been Professor Fabian’s inability to accept the position of Director due to ill health. The second of course was accommodation. The A.D. Hope Building had not been ready for occupancy at the proposed time, and present estimates were that the Centre would not be able to move into its designated accommodation on the top floor before May 1975. ‘Throughout 1974,’ in consequence,

members of the Humanities Research Centre have been variously located in the Coombs building (Department of Philosophy, RSSS), in the Faculty of Law, in the Haydon-Allen building (Departments of English and Philosophy, SGS), in the Dedman Building (Departments of Romance Languages and Germanic Languages), and in the Chifley Library, while the Centre’s Administrative Officer, Mr R.J.C. Horan, whom the Vice-Chancellor had released from his duties at the Chancery to fulfil that role, along with his secretary and typist, have remained in the University Chancery.

This too was in practice not quite as bad as it sounded: the Coombs building was indeed somewhat detached, but the others formed a not too inconvenient triangle around the Union Block. However, there could be no doubt that what Donaldson considered the ‘wide dispersal of members of the Centre . . . created problems for a new Centre attempting to establish its identity, and for Visiting Fellows hoping to maintain day-to-day contact with the Director, the administrative staff, and with one another.’
At least they would now have a Director to maintain contact with. And contact with Directors and their Deputies was going to prove perhaps the single most important factor in what would prove the amazing, not to say incredible success of the HRC, nationally and internationally. Nothing satisfactory could be done about accommodation and concentration until the A.D. Hope Building was available: the Centre in the meantime would be located in the run-down
and possibly haunted precincts of Childers Street. But even that was not too bad, as Donaldson recalled it: he, Horan, Ms Jennifer Kelly the secretary and Ms Beverley Ricketts the typist, ‘along with the first batch of Visiting Fellows, shared Hut C with a group of PhD students from the Faculty of Arts. There was a good atmosphere, with students and visitors mixing in a central tea-room.’21 There always would be the blissfully welcoming aroma of simmering coffee about the HRC during the Donaldson years: one of the administrative staff recalled later that her first responsibility on entering the Centre was to put the coffee on. It was a gracious, civilised and hospitable tradition which would always represent the essence of the HRC, which was also establishing impressive academic credentials right from the start. ‘Several distinguished overseas scholars,’ as Donaldson observed, had accepted invitations to visit the Centre in the near future; the Centre’s work was ‘gathering momentum, and should soon be in full swing’; and five Visiting Fellows had already been working at the HRC during 1974. First had been Professor Eric Gould, of the Department of English at the University of Denver, who was preparing a book on the development of Australian poetry from 1890 onwards. Professor Stewart Sutherland of the University of Stirling was engaged on atheism and belief in *The Brothers Karamazov*. Dr Tilo Schabert of the University of Munich was examining the existential and philosophical foundations of the modern age. Other areas of study ranged from existentialism and seventeenth
Two aspects of significance were apparent already. One was that the Centre was right from the beginning attracting interest from the very top levels of academic talent. Sutherland for example would become Lord Sutherland of Houndswood, Vice-Chancellor of the University of London, Principal of Edinburgh University and President of the Royal Society of Edinburgh; and Alan Ryan, who in Donaldson’s words, ‘was knocking about with us in Childers Street in the very earliest days of the Centre’ was to become Warden of New College, Oxford. The other was that the Centre had begun already to display an impressive capacity to range widely in the virtually boundless field of the humanities. This would be evidenced ever more conspicuously by the great annual sequence of conferences, initiated most impressively as well as appropriately by Peter Herbst in August 1974 with a four-day conference on ‘The impact of seventeenth and eighteenth century philosophy on modern thought,’ followed by a one-day seminar on Australian lexicography on 30 October. Twenty-five people attended from New Zealand as well as Australian universities. The eighteenth century was a natural area of involvement for the HRC, as the period in which European influences of every kind expanded most vigorously into the world outside, and Donaldson agreed that the Centre should assume co-sponsorship and organisation of the triennial David Nichol Smith seminars on eighteenth century issues, under the guidance of their convenor, Dr Robert Brissenden.
So far, highly satisfactory. But there were still the fundamental and associated problems of what kind of institution the HRC was supposed to be, and how it was to be staffed. ‘Right from the outset,’ Donaldson told University Librarian R.A. Simms, ‘the HRC has been conceived as a Centre with a library of its own.’ This of course was not the same as a library with a Centre of its own, which was really what Max Crawford had originally envisaged; but this was not a practical proposition any longer. ‘The University of London’s Warburg Institute, with its own self-contained library, has been cited as a partial model for the HRC,’ Donaldson continued; and ‘the Vice-Chancellor and the Centre’s Committee . . . agreed that “The quality of the library collection more than any other single factor would attract scholars to the Centre” . . . It was also agreed that the Centre should have a Working Collection housed either wholly or partly in the building in which the Centre was located;’ and the original plans for the A.D. Hope Building, in which the Centre would eventually be located, had made provision for a substantial separate library within the HRC.23

But the [University] Librarian

argued strongly against the establishment of a separate collection of books housed within the HRC . . . After some debate, this argument was accepted. It was agreed that

Colin Steele.
within its own Reading Room the HRC should hold only a small collection of reference materials . . . and a few books of general academic interest.24

It was the only practical decision, given that the shades of the prison-house of government cutbacks in education funding were already beginning to close upon the infant HRC. Donaldson had been assisted in arriving at it through consultations with Robert Rosenthal, Keeper of Special Collections at the University of Chicago Library, who had come to Canberra to advise the Centre on whether efforts should be made to establish a significant library, and if so, what its areas of specialisation should be. Rosenthal would say that it was still perfectly possible to build up a world-class specialist collection in Renaissance literature (for example) if that’s what we really wanted to do, and wanted the HRC to be, and wanted to spend our money on. But aren’t there perhaps other things that are important now – like buying yourselves research time, bringing visitors to Australia, getting your act together?

Donaldson recalled that these ‘teasing conversations with Bob Rosenthal . . . were probably more influential on my own thinking about the possible future shape and direction of the HRC than anything else.’25 Former University Librarian Colin Steele recalls Rosenthal asking what the other academics might feel about the Centre’s acquiring a substantial library of its own, ‘when [at some time in the future] there were 4 million books in the Chifley and Menzies Libraries,’ and the heartfelt response of historian Professor Barry Smith of the Research School of Social Sciences: ‘Euphoria!’26

As well it might have been. But it wasn’t going to happen: the University Library is still two million volumes short of the four million volumes that Rosenthal envisaged. However, the HRC retains its small scholarly collection, constantly augmented by donations from grateful Visiting Fellows and situated currently in the charming, comfortable and appropriately named haven of the Ralph Elliott Library. Colin Steele, [former Director, Scholarly Information Strategies], reflects on the change:

When I arrived in Australia from the Bodleian [Library] in August 1976, one of my first activities was to attend a major presentation in the HRC by Bob Rosenthal, the Curator of Special Collections who was a visiting
fellow at the HRC. His vision of a four million volume University Library sadly never came to pass but his vision of the importance of research collections to the scholarly community, particularly in the Humanities, is still as relevant today as it was then. Since that time, Professors Ian Donaldson, Graeme Clarke and Iain McCalman have all encouraged local and national discussions on library and information initiatives. The debate still continues in the digital era. On a personal note, it gave me great pleasure, with Ian Donaldson’s support, to organise what the cultural history books have now called Australia’s first academic conference on Science Fiction. The conference ‘Speculative Fiction: The Australian Context’ was held in July 1981 and featured some of Australia’s leading SF authors such as George Turner and Damien Broderick, as well as critics such as Bob Brissenden, Van Ikin and Michael Tolley.

The future of libraries themselves has indeed become a matter for speculation in the new century. But that was all in the future, and Donaldson was as ever looking for a compromise which would allow for flexibility of response: he hoped that ‘it would be possible some day for the HRC to find its home in the University Library, and that future library planning could take account of this.’ The HRC senior staff did have an influence on humanities collections in the ANU Library through serving on Library acquisition committees for the next thirty years. Future planning for an HRC library of the type envisaged was alas still in the future thirty years down the track. Experience had shown in any event that it was not the quality of its own library collection that would ever be the major or even a minor factor attracting scholars to the Centre: it was the quality of its Director and the other senior academic staff.

But the Centre could never be a one-person show. It had been presumed hitherto that the other tenured academic position in the HRC would be that of the Bibliographer or Librarian, who ‘would be a person of very considerable importance in the Centre’. But what really mattered in existing circumstances was finding effective support for the Director. Donaldson told Pro Vice-Chancellor Professor Geoffrey Sawer that there was ‘at present administrative work in the Centre equivalent to about a half-time position. But we also need someone to help on the research side.’ He accordingly proposed ‘the establishment of a new post which combines administrative and
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research duties.’ The University agreed without hesitation that there seemed to be ‘no obstacle to the creation of a powerful administrative position in the Centre, whose incumbent would in fact spend part of his time engaging in academic research . . .’ An advertisement was duly published in April 1975 for a Research Secretary to

advise and assist the Director in all administrative matters relating to the work of the Centre. It is expected that the Officer, in consultation with the Director of the HRC and the Business Manager of the HRC, will handle all detailed financial questions concerning budgets, estimates, recommended grants to visiting fellows, purchase of capital equipment . . . assist the Director and members of the University Registrar’s staff in matters relating to the
arrival, accommodation, and general welfare and activities of Visiting Fellows . . . help with the detailed organization and day-to-day running of conferences and seminars . . . serve as secretary to the Advisory Committee of the Centre and also to smaller Steering Committees. From time to time he may be called upon to advise and assist the Centre’s bibliographer on administrative and financial questions.

That covered the administrative side. On the research side, the appointee would be expected to assist the Director, Bibliographer, and the Centre’s Visiting Fellows in their research, and to help survey, and make recommendations upon, proposed conference and seminar topics. Applicants should ideally have had some administrative experience, and have good academic qualifications in an area of the humanities relevant to the Centre’s work.

They should also necessarily possess competent shorthand and typing skills and experience in secretarial work, and a ‘knowledge of foreign languages would be an advantage.’

Those were the days. The services of such an infinitely precious assistant would presumably free the Director to maintain the level of academic research which would have qualified him or her for the position in the first place, and to concentrate on issues of high strategy for the Centre. There were more than enough of those demanding urgent attention even before the research secretary from Heaven could arrive. There were for example the technical questions of how far the Centre should attempt to bring Visitors of similar interests together at one time, and whether special encouragement should be given to research which crossed the boundaries of more than one of the conventional academic disciplines. Then there was the fundamental question of how Visiting Fellows should be selected, particularly with regard to disciplines like music and art, leading practitioners in which might not always be academics. There was also of course the sensitive question of age. The Committee was not deterred, however: it was agreed on 11 April 1975 that ‘the Centre should be prepared occasionally to offer Fellowships to people who might not merit them solely on grounds of academic qualifications.’ The distinction drawn was between composers or practitioners in the Fine Arts, who might be considered more appropriately for Creative Arts fellowships; and ‘artists who drew their inspiration from the inter-play of ideas and the
intellectual atmosphere which the Centre could supply.’ It was also agreed that ‘there should be no rigid age limits, but that older scholars . . . would as a general rule only be invited if the Committee was satisfied that they were still productive, of unusual eminence, and that they were still flexible enough to communicate with other scholars.’

Which was fair enough, and it was only a general rule, anyway.

That defined issues of doctrine sufficiently for the time being. Material issues were also being resolved. Horan was able to report on 3 July that ‘all HRC staff and visiting fellows to the Centre are now located in the A.D. Hope Building.’ Accommodation consisted of eleven study-offices for the Director, Bibliographer, Research Secretary and up to eight Visiting Fellows, two secretarial rooms, a seminar room and a reading room, described as ‘a generous open area to house its Working Collection.’ The new premises were said to ‘provide agreeably both for privacy and sociability, and have contributed to the centre’s growing sense of identity.’ However, Donaldson felt required to warn the Dean of the Faculty of Arts that he was ‘perfectly happy that HRC Fellows be free to enjoy the western view during the winter months’; but ‘some sort of screening will clearly be essential later in the year,’ when the occasionally broiling heat of the Canberra summer would make a western view much less enjoyable. ‘I must add that I feel some dismay at the thought of yet another uncompleted item on this building,’ he added with feeling. He would have felt even more dismay if he had known that that particular item was never to be wholly completed: the seminar space would be airconditioned eventually, but the Director and the Deputy Director would be left to sweat it out for another 25 years.

Donaldson also reported that he was ‘continuing his search for a Permanent Director for the Centre.’ But there was already compelling evidence that the Centre had in its Acting Director the Permanent Director it needed: Kenneth Garrad, the Professor of Spanish from Flinders University informed the Committee that he wished to place on record my profound respect and admiration for Professor Donaldson, as Director of the Centre, as a scholar and as a man . . . the attentions and hospitality which he and his wife have given to myself and all the Visiting Fellows alike have exceeded any conceivable norm of duty. He has, in fact, made everybody feel welcome and at home, and I am sure the other Fellows will be as emphatic as myself in thanking him and congratulating the Committee in its choice of an unsurpassable Director.
Attentions and hospitality were in fact what the HRC would become famous for internationally in the years that followed: a continuing flood of testimonials left no doubt that there was at least one quality in which the HRC might well be without parallel in the world, and that was its capacity to provide a welcoming and congenial research environment for visiting scholars. Nor was there any doubt that it would be the Directors and their stand-ins, in Anthony Low’s phrase, who were responsible for that environment. It had not been one of the selection criteria prescribed for the positions; but it was in a real sense what the HRC was all about.
Notes

2 The Australian National University Humanities Research Centre Advisory Committee Meeting No.1, 3434/1972, 50.4.1.1, 22 Sep. 1972.
9 Johnson to J.B. Trapp, 10 Sept. 1970.
11 Donaldson to the authors, 25 June 2002.
14 Donaldson to authors, 25 June 2002.
16 TANU Director of the HRC Report of Electoral Committee Meeting No. 6, 1496/1974, 14.6.74, 7 June 1974.
17 Director of the HRC Electoral Committee Meeting No. 7, 2168/1974, 12.7.74, 7 June 1974.
18 Richard Horan to Chairman, Advisory Committee for HRC [Johnson], 18 July 1974.
Donaldson to authors, 25 June 2002.


Donaldson to the authors, 25 June 2002.

Donaldson to the University Librarian, 10 Feb. 1975.

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

Donaldson to the University Librarian, 18 Mar. 1975.

Colin Steele in conversation with authors.

Donaldson to authors, 15 June 2002.

Donaldson to HRC Advisory Committee, 12 Apr. 1977.

Donaldson to Professor Geoffrey Sawer, 26 Feb. 1975.


HRC, *Research Secretary, 1, Duties*, 1975.


Horan to Staff Office, Chancelry, 3 July 1975.


Donaldson to Dean, Faculty of Arts, 13 May 1975.

Donaldson to Dean, Faculty of Arts, 13 May 1975.