

Shy historian and benefactor of the highest order

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ALAN GEORGE LEWERS SHAW, AO ACADEMIC, PHILANTHROPIST 3-2-1916 — 5-4-2012



EMERITUS professor Alan Shaw, one of Australia's most distinguished historians, has died at his home in South Yarra, aged 96.

A contemporary of Manning Clark, Shaw lectured at Melbourne University, where after the war he taught the university's most illustrious cohort of history graduates - Geoffrey Blainey, Weston Bate and Geoffrey Serle - and later lectured at Sydney University.

He returned to Melbourne in 1964 as second professor of history at Monash University, and along the way wrote several books that remain leading works on their topics.

Shaw also carried out many administrative roles at Monash, and was the inaugural president of the Australian Historical Association, chairman of the history committee for the celebration of Victoria's 150th anniversary, and president of the Academy of Social Sciences.

In 1982, when he retired from Monash, he was made an officer of the Order of Australia for service to education.

Shaw and his older sister, Mildred, were born to George and Ethel (nee Lewers), who lived in Toorak. Nicknamed AGL, the initials of his Christian names, he was educated at Melbourne Grammar School from 1925 to 1933. After travelling to Europe in 1934 - the highlight was watching Bradman and Ponsford's greatest partnership of 451 at the Oval - he went to Melbourne University in 1935, beginning a life-long affinity with Trinity College. He was going to follow his father into law, but switched to history and was one of three students to get first class honours - the others being Clark (a friend from school days) and Rohan Rivett.

All three went on to Oxford, though the impact of romance and the outbreak of World War II meant that Shaw was the only one to complete his degree in 1940, graduating with first class honours in politics, philosophy and economics. After an adventurous voyage home through submarine-infested waters in late 1940, he was appointed to a lectureship at Melbourne University, where he taught economic history and various economics subjects. His first publications were in economic history, including his first two books, published in the 1940s, *The economic development of Australia* and *The Australian Coal Industry*.

During the war, Shaw taught part-time while working for the government. One task was to go through the lists of World War I soldiers of the Austrian Empire living in Australia and decide who might be a threat to national security and who could be safely released. After the war, he moved to the history department, where some of his students went on to have their own illustrious careers.

He was dean of Trinity College from 1946-50, a role the college history notes he carried out "with admirable grace, tact and fortitude". He famously responded to a question about the college's food budget by saying: "The trouble is not that there's not enough food, but that people eat too much."

In 1950, Shaw returned to England on a Nuffield scholarship, beginning his groundbreaking research on Australia's convict era, and in 1952 was appointed to a senior lectureship at Sydney University. While there, he became the inaugural president of the New South Wales History Teachers' Association and wrote several popular books for secondary school students, including *Introduction to Australian History* and *Modern World History*.

In 1956, the shy Shaw married Peggy Perrins, a talented artist who had trained at the National Gallery school under George Bell, and later studied in Paris. Through Peggy, he was introduced to her circle of friends, who included the eminent artists Fred Williams, John Olsen (who painted Shaw's portrait), and John Brack (who drew a portrait of the couple).

A less happy event during Shaw's years in Sydney was the ending of his close friendship with Manning Clark after he reviewed the first volume of Clark's *History of Australia* (1962) in *Meanjin*. The review was largely favourable, but Clark took great offence at Shaw pointing out errors of fact and commenting that "the inaccuracies taken together are irritating, and add up to create a sense of mistrust in the work as a whole". To the end of his life, Shaw, who in 1939 had been best man at Clark's wedding, was disappointed that Clark had taken scholarly criticism as a personal affront.

He returned to Melbourne in 1964, and his 18 years at Monash were highly productive. He wrote several books that will long remain the leading works on their topics, notably *Convicts and the Colonies* (1966), *Great Britain and the Colonies, 1815-65* (1970), as well as biographies of colonial governors Ralph Darling and Sir George Arthur. At both Sydney and Monash, he taught Australian and British history and was highly regarded as an accomplished lecturer and friendly and sympathetic teacher.

In retirement, apart from his lectures at the University of the Third Age being packed out, he was a long-term council member of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria (president from 1987-91), president of the C. J. La Trobe Society, a founding member of what is now the State Library Foundation, and a member of the editorial board of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* from 1960 to 1999.

Other major projects in this period were the meticulously edited *Gipps-La Trobe Correspondence* (1989) and the definitive history of early Victoria, *A History of the Port Phillip District* (1996).

As *The Oxford Companion to Australian History* (1998) states, "No other Australian historian has demonstrated such a high level of productive scholarship over more than 50 years."

He and Peggy enjoyed travel and saw much of the world together. They also shared a love of the arts, and were frequently at the opera, ballet, classical concerts and exhibitions at the National Gallery of Victoria.

In his younger days, Shaw was a keen squash player, but golf was his greatest sporting love. A member of both Royal Melbourne and Barwon Heads golf clubs, he maintained a handicap in the teens for decades, and he and Peggy played at many famous courses around the world. He was also an accomplished bridge player, for more than 70 years partnering Alan Hamer, and continued to play regularly until shortly before his death.

As a committed philanthropist, Shaw followed the example of his father, George, and of his uncle, Herbert Shaw, who was the principal benefactor of the Hamilton Art Gallery. Through the Alan Shaw Endowment, he and Peggy were major benefactors of the National Gallery of Victoria, Museum Victoria, the State Library, Trinity College, the Howard Florey Institute, the Mental Health Research Institute, as well as many other charitable organisations and philanthropic activities.

The AGL Shaw Dementia Unit at the Binda ree aged care home in Mansfield and the Shaw Research Library at the National Gallery of Victoria both recognise his substantial contribution.

Peggy's health began to fail in 2000, and he cared for her devotedly until her death in July 2009. They had no children.

Peter Yule and Will Kimpton are Alan Shaw's nephews; they were assisted by his niece, Jennifer Dowling.

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