Interrogating Joe Burke and His Legacy

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Art history’s history in Melbourne began with the appointment of Joseph Burke (1913-1992) to the Herald Chair of Fine Arts in 1946. Burke made a number of remarkable appointments with Ursula Hoff, Franz Phillip, and Bernard Smith to create the seminal department of art history in Australia. Burke’s real field of expertise was in the English eighteenth century. Like many intellectuals of the diaspora, he transposed his scholarship to a different society. This article is based on Burke’s correspondence with Daryl Lindsay and Kenneth Clark. Burke’s support for Australian artists is analysed, notably Hugh Ramsay, Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan.

In my formation as a scholar I encountered Joe Burke at three crucial points in my life. Initially, at the age of sixteen, as a first year undergraduate at the University of Melbourne, I heard him lecture on subjects such as Tiepolo’s *Banquet of Antony and Cleopatra.*1 Joe Burke (Fig. 1) remains in my

Figure 1. Joseph Burke at 10 Downing Street, London, then Secretary to the British Prime Minister Clement Atlee. 1943. Photograph. University of Melbourne Archives.

memory as a remarkable lecturer, only comparable with Anthony Blunt, who exerted a similar charismatic effect on his audience. He was fluent, witty, would walk up and down, dressed elegantly in a 1940s pin stripe suit, and somehow communicated that art history was a very special intellectual experience, one that I and many of my contemporaries felt compelled to dedicate our lives to pursuing. Of all histories (and I received a joint honours degree in History and Fine Arts) it was the discipline of art history that mattered most to my generation.

Second, after I graduated I rediscovered Joe in a different way on annual visits to Melbourne from Bryn Mawr College, where I had begun postgraduate studies with Charles Mitchell, the supervisor of Bernard Smith at the Warburg and a former colleague of Joe’s in London. The chain of succession was set. On these visits Joe would take me out to dinner at the Melbourne Club. On one occasion it was with Colin Caldwell, a friend from Trinity College, on another with Mary Woodall, then the Felton advisor to the Gallery. A double portrait by Charles Bush documents Colin and Joe’s collaboration on a joint book on Hogarth’s prints (Fig. 2). Joe was an urbane dinner companion, very much in his element as a college and club man, who made us laugh with anecdotes until the tears ran down our faces. He excelled both as a host and as a guest. He was the wittiest person I have ever known. At a postgraduate level it was the fun of art history that mattered to him and the chosen lifestyle that he wished to communicate.

Figure 2 Charles Bush. Portrait of Colin Caudwell and Joseph Burke at Trinity College working on the Hogarth book. 1964. Private Collection, Melbourne.

I am grateful to Michael Piggott, Tony Miller and Jane Ellen for their help in the University of Melbourne Archives. My thanks to Benjamin Thomas, who is writing a doctorate on Daryl Lindsay, for giving me the quotations about Daryl and Joe towards the end of this article; also to Patricia Fullerton, for sharing her knowledge of Hugh Ramsay with me.

1 Anderson, 2003
2 Burke and Caldwell, 1968. In 1989 Caldwell left a generous bequest to Trinity College, part of which was to fund a visiting lectureship to the College in art history and law, alternating every five years, cf. Trinity College Newsletter, April 1990, No 41.
Thirdly, I became acquainted with Joe posthumously when I succeeded to his chair in 1997. In this new role I became increasingly aware of his presence through innumerable documents in departmental files and his multifarious activities, such as participating in degree ceremonies (Fig. 3). Amidst the dreary anodyne trivia that characterizes much academic administration, Joe’s letters always continue to sparkle. Shortly after I was appointed I was asked to give permission to destroy the entire archive of the Department of Fine Arts. I refused to do so, and made out a case for preserving the documentation about one of the earliest departments of art history in the English-speaking world. I consulted the student files and found them enthralling. Joe had an authoritative writing style, enlivened by infectious humour. Like Benvenuto Cellini’s autobiography, Joe’s letters were dictated and have that enviable fluency of a conversational style. He wrote in an age when there was no fear of litigation. His references for students were short masterpieces, always generous, humane, and invariably successful. This archive documents the early careers of many famous art historians whom the department produced, for we have much to boast about. But of all Joe’s students it was Patrick McCaughey who was the favourite, and in this archive there are letters Patrick wrote to Joe from his early travels to America that document a young man’s intellectual discovery of American abstract painting in the 1970s.3

Figure 3 Sir Joseph Burke and Sir Robert Menzies, Prime Minister of Australia. Photograph. University of Melbourne Archives.

In the University of Melbourne Archives, there are some 150 boxes of papers that Joe Burke deposited when he retired in 1979 after 32 years as Herald Chair. He kept almost everything from his tax returns to his personal correspondence. There is no doubt that he expected to be studied,

3 McCaughey, 2003, pp. 52-61.
for he lived his life in the belief that he occupied an important role in Melbourne society and that Fine Arts mattered to Melbourne and to its institutions. In his correspondence with Lionel Lindsay there is some suggestion that Joe contemplated an autobiography, but nothing came of it.

How Joe came to Australia and the reasons for the creation of the Herald Chair are best recounted by the architect of the chair Daryl Lindsay (Fig. 4), director of the National Gallery of Victoria, when Burke was appointed:

Over dinner one night with Sir Keith Murdoch [owner of the Melbourne Herald newspaper; Fig. 5] and Sir John Medley [the Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne], I pointed out that there was no training ground in Australia for expert staffing of galleries and art museums, personally adding that the Melbourne University with the gallery collection behind it was the logical place to set up a Chair of Fine Arts. Murdoch, counting on his fingers asked Medley, how much money would be required to set up such a Chair and Medley said ‘40,000’. Murdoch, after considering the matter said “I’ll get the Herald to put up the money”, which he did.

As I was going to Europe and the USA, I was asked to try and find a suitable man for the job… it was suggested by Professor Sizer of Yale, that I should consider Joseph Burke, who was then Secretary to Lord Atlee the British Prime Minister. Burke had taken an MA degree in London and at Yale and had been an assistant at the Victoria and Albert Museum under Sir Leigh Ashton, who told me he was the best assistant he ever had.4

Figure 4 Sir Daryl Lindsay before a Florentine profile portrait of a woman that the National Gallery of Victoria had acquired on the advice of Sir Kenneth Clark. Christmas card to Ursula Hoff. December 1953. University of Melbourne Archives.

4 This was the version sent by Daryl to Joe for approval, now in Burke’s correspondence with Daryl Lindsay, University of Melbourne Archives. Also see Lindsay’s autobiography, Lindsay, 1965, pp. 149-50, for a slightly edited version of the same text.
Between Daryl and Joe there developed an extraordinary alliance, a friendship which was much needed after the death of Daryl’s brother Lionel in 1961. We may find this hard to believe, but both recognised in one another the qualities of an eighteenth-century English gentleman. We all choose our historical pasts for reasons that we would like to believe are historically objective, but are inevitably personal. I have been in love with everything in Venice from the moment I went there as a fifteen year old, but for Joe it was the English eighteenth century, Hogarth, Reynolds, and their age that provided a continuing source of inspiration not only for his own writing, but also for collecting for Melbourne institutions, and for the development of his own art history. Shortly after his arrival Burke founded the Society of Collectors, which was basically a support group of a sophisticated kind for both the University Collection and for the Department of Fine Arts, based on an eighteenth century model. In this he was a characteristic intellectual of the diaspora. Burke described the society significantly in a letter to his American friend, Professor Wilmarth S. Lewis, ironically known as Lefty, an eighteenth-century specialist of great distinction, the editor of the correspondence of Horace Walpole.5

There are fifty members from all over Australia, of whom perhaps seven or eight can properly be described as serious collectors. Sir Keith Murdoch was our first President, and he was succeeded by Sir Russell Grimwade, and Sir John Medley now holds the office. In addition to those who have build up private collections, like J.R. McGregor in Sydney, Kim Bonython and Bill Hayward in Adelaide and Aubrey Gibson and Leonard Cox in Melbourne, the remaining members have been selected from those who buy regularly, either old paintings and antiques or contemporary paintings for their homes. These consist very largely of professional men, like Sir

Edward Morgan who was Chairman of the Trustees of the Adelaide Art Gallery
and is now a senior judge. The tail is wagged by a handful of gallery officials and
University people like myself.

We dine formally once a year in tremendous style and each member brings at least
one – and not more than three – works of art which he has acquired during the year.
The dinner is held in the Audubon Room at the University, with silver borrowed
from Melbourne homes and the pictures, ceramics, books, manuscripts, silver and
even small pieces of antique furniture are displayed in the dining room and in the
Gould ante-room next door. We dine by candlelight and it is really quite an
occasion.

The aims of the Society are to promote collecting in Australia and to help the
University build up a Fine Arts Collection. Medley, in a brilliant speech, once
defined the principal object as being ‘to exist beautifully’, but amongst the Society’s
achievements can be listed representations to the Government, resulting in the
abolition of Customs Duty on works of art more than 100 years old, the presentation
of a Victorian period private dining room to the Faculty Club, a regular grant for
purchasing works of art for the University and – last but not least – the
encouragement of a group of younger men to take up collecting in earnest.

The idea for the Society of Collectors was loosely taken from the eighteenth-century dining society
of the Dilettanti, shown in two famous paintings by Sir Joshua Reynolds, when in 1777 he
portrayed the collectors in candlelight surrounded by their objects. Both pictures are still in the
possession of the Society, but are on permanent loan to Brook’s Club, London. The Dilettanti
Society was founded at London in 1734 by a group of British men who had returned from the
Grand Tour, had discovered the colleting of antiquities and indulged in the patronage of neo-
classical artists. Joe brilliantly transposed the idea of a society about historical and contemporary
collecting to an Australian context. He created a group of gifted wealthy amateurs into a genial
Melbournian institution, a show-and-tell society for local Victorian collectors. Medley defined
Joe’s society as how ‘to exist beautifully’, which might be taken as a metaphor for Joe’s aspirations
and way of life. Social occasions were important to him, as were his carefully prepared speeches,
many of which still exist in his papers.

Who was Joe Burke? What were the essential elements in his background? Joe was born in 1913 in
London, the youngest of five brothers. His grandfather was an Irish Catholic Sea captain, his
father a banker with whom he frequently travelled abroad. He was educated at the Benedictine
school, Worth Abbey, in West Sussex, where he remembered his education as harsh, with much
corporal punishment. He was myopic, no good at games, but excelled in drawing. He elected to
study Fine Arts at the newly created Courtauld Institute of Art at the University of London. His
first appointment was at the National Portrait Gallery in London from 1934 to 1938. When war
broke out his eyesight prevented him from enlisting and he was put on civilian duty at the Victoria
and Albert Museum, where staff were packing up the collection. The war afforded many famous

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6 The room still exists as the Society of Collectors created it as The Victoria Room in University House, at the University of Melbourne.
7 UMA, Burke Papers, Joseph Burke’s correspondence with W. S. Lewis.
8 Penny, 1986, pp. 281-83.
art historians the opportunity to study a collection properly. Soon after Burke was appointed private secretary to a War Cabinet Minister, Sir John Anderson, later Viscount Waverley, for whom he acted as a speech writer.

When Clement Attlee succeeded Anderson, Joe continued in this role. Thus from 1938 until 1945 he was private secretary to successive Lord Presidents, and from 1945 to 1946 to Attlee as Prime Minister. In some ways the association between a prime minister who formulated the concept of a socialist Britain, the origins of the modern welfare state, and an art historian in a pinstripe suit may appear an unusual one, but Joe’s papers show that they shared similar views and that their very real friendship continued for many years. Eric Osborne remembers an anecdote that Joe would tell about entering St Peter’s Church, in Rome, with Attlee. Attlee’s reaction was to say ‘How very vulgar it all was’. Somewhat this encapsulates the quintessentially elegant eighteenth-century British tastes that was the basis of their friendship.

In his application for the Melbourne Chair, Burke was supported by the most celebrated man in British art history, Kenneth Clark (Fig. 6), later Lord Clark, whom he had known in those crucial war years when Clark was Director of the National Gallery of London.

Following the appointment of the first Herald Chair on the 25 March 1946, Clark wrote to the Vice Chancellor, John Medley, that Burke ‘is a good scholar, has a wide range of interests and gets on well with everybody. The positions he has held during the war have given him an ease and confidence in dealing with people, which are rather rare among scholars. I cannot think of anyone else who would be as good. It is excellent news that the University is offering this Chair, and I believe that Burke would make a real success of it’.10

Burke’s friendship with Kenneth Clark was influential in other matters. For a brief period, 1945-1947, which coincided with the beginning of Joe Burke’s appointment, Clark acted as advisor to the Felton Bequest.11 The most significant of Clark’s acquisitions for the Felton was Nicholas Poussin’s _Crossing of the Red Sea_, from the collection of the Earl of Radnor, at Longford Castle, Wiltshire. With the exception of Tiepolo’s _Banquet_, it is the most significant work of art in Melbourne. Clark also bought many other important pictures, including the Florentine profile portrait of a lady, sometimes attributed to Pollaiuolo or Uccello, and Antonio Vivarini’s _Garden of Love_, the earliest profane painting known in the Venetian Renaissance, as well as significant modern British works by Sickert and others. In short Kenneth Clark was one of the greatest advisors to the Felton, a circumstance that came about through his friendship with Joe. In fact I would rank Clark the equal of Rinder. Clark tired of the role fairly quickly, due to difficulties with the Felton Trustees, and in the early 1950s preferred to act as advisor to the Art Gallery of South Australia in Adelaide. Clark has often been dismissed as someone who brought a dodgy Claude, but in fact he bought some of the best-known pictures in the National Gallery of Victoria, and should be remembered positively as the man who got the Poussin.

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9 Professor Eric Osborne in conversation with the author.
10 University of Melbourne, Human Resources, Burke Papers. On 3 March 1946, from 10 Downing Street, Whitehall, Burke wrote to Clark to thank him: ‘Dear Clark, I have just received a cable from Medley offering me the Chair. I need hardly say how delighted I am. It will be a great opportunity. I shall do my best to make a success of it and to justify your confidence in supporting my application. With heartfelt thanks. Yours very sincerely, Joseph Burke.
11 See Lindsay, 1965, p. 156.
Like all of us in Melbourne Joe tried to come to terms with the history of the Felton Bequest, and unerringly decided that it was Frank Rinder who was the most influential person to have occupied the office in the years from 1918 to 1928. ‘Rinder’, he wrote to Clark, ‘who got the Blakes, Van Eyck, Memlinc and a superb Courbet, was the only one to do a creditable job’ for on the whole ‘the Trustees have been disgracefully served.’

In the same letter, two years after he had arrived in Melbourne, Joe described his adopted city:

Melbourne is a pleasant city geographically not unlike Rome – a winding muddy river, a few gentle hills, and then a flat volcanic plain terminating in some beautiful mountain ranges some twenty or thirty miles away. The two remarkable features are the Botanical gardens, laid out about seventy years ago by a landscape genius, [William] Guilfoyle, and the Blake illustrations to Dante. You should try and see these before they are spoiled: ever since they were bought by the Gallery, they have been kept in a drawer and the colours are as fresh as when Blake laid them on – someone who is only familiar with the Blakes in the Tate and the British Museum can have no adequate idea what a great colourist he was. Some day they will be exhibited and suffer a sea change that seems to be the sad fate of all

12 UMA, Burke Papers, Personal Correspondence, 20 January 1948, Burke to Kenneth Clark.
These letters from Joe’s first years in Melbourne reveal how he fell in love with Australia, with the landscape, with the eternal eucalypt, with the climate, with the art and with the architecture. When asked what he found most surprising about the University of Melbourne, he is said to have replied ‘the distinction of the University’.

More surprising for an eighteenth-century man was his immediate response to Australian contemporary art. ‘Australia has’, he wrote to Clark, ‘some first-class contemporary artists – Russell Drysdale, an eccentric called Ian Fairweather who sends his less good pictures to the Redfern and won’t part with his best ones, Eric Thake and an extraordinary Byzantine Justin O’Brien, whose work is quite unlike anything else I have ever seen’.14

Joe’s correspondence with contemporary artists among his papers is of extraordinary interest. His first book published in Australia was an elegant short monograph on The Paintings of Russell Drysdale, printed in Sydney by Ure Smith in 1951. The introduction reveals how Daryl discovered Tas, as he was known, when a jackeroo, and sent him to art school in Melbourne, with George Bell. Burke chose pencil drawings to illustrate beside the paintings, choosing a classic form for art historical publishing. His book remains one of the best texts on Drysdale, and has the authority of a friend, with some quotations from Joe’s correspondence with Tas.

Of all the Australian artists it was Sydney Nolan whom Joe considered ‘the most imaginative and original painter whose work I have seen in Australia. He is young and technically immature but shows great promise. Reed, a rather eccentric young man, owns the cycle of paintings illustrating the life of Ned Kelly, the bushranger anarchist and hero of the local schoolboys and communists.’15 Joe promoted his favourite Australians to Kenneth Clark, who arranged exhibitions for them in London. It is hard to underestimate the importance of this connection, because the first significant exhibitions of Australian art in London from the late 1940s through the decade of the 1950s occurred in this way.

In turn Clark reported back that:

Drysdale’s show has had a fair success here. The honest and personal vision in his work has been much appreciated. The trouble is – and this is true of Nolan also – that, living so far away from la bonne peinture, his work seems to be too deficient in purely pictorial qualities. He is very conscious of this himself, and so is Nolan, and I think that both of them would like to spend a fairly long time over here in order to study the means by which great artists have made their vision acceptable through mastery of their medium.

Drysdale lunched here last week, and I have seen Nolan once or twice. They are both genuine artists and charming men. As for their wives, they too are worthy of one another. It is a nice question, which is the more horrible. In such cases, one always inclines towards

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13 UMA, Burke Papers, Personal Correspondence, 20 January 1948, Burke to Kenneth Clark.
14 UMA, Burke Papers, Personal Correspondence, 20 January 1948, Burke to Kenneth Clark.
15 UMA, Burke Papers, Notes made by Joe Burke about Suggested Engagements and Excursions, for Clark’s visit in 1949.
the one seen last. It is a disaster that they should both be stuck with such women, as they are doing them a lot of harm over here.\textsuperscript{16}

Increasingly Joe became enthralled with Australian painting, and he wished to begin a series of monographs on Australian artists, beginning with one on Hugh Ramsay, as he wrote to Lady Ramsay in 1949: ‘Ramsay is one of the most distinguished of Australian painters and has not yet had the overseas recognition that he deserves’.\textsuperscript{17} Joe had in mind a short book, with Ramsay’s letters to be illustrated by drawings, which Lady Ramsay presented to the University of Melbourne. In preparation for this lecture I discovered the sketchbook that Burke was given by Lady Ramsay in his correspondence file with the Ramsay family. Among our distinguished alumni we have the expert on Ramsay, Patricia Fullerton, who confirmed the identification and dated it to 1900, some of the images being from on board the ship on his way to England. The volume adds some 100 new images to the Ramsay corpus, beginning with two compelling \textit{Self-Portraits}, one serious, one ironic (Figs. 7-8), and a \textit{View of Clydebank} (Fig. 10), the preparatory study for a landscape painting. The rapid sketches of passengers in deck chairs (Fig. 9), views of the coastlines (Figs, 11-12), reveal that this was an important volume begun in Melbourne, and continued during his boat trip though the Suez Canal.

\begin{figure}
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\includegraphics[width=0.5\textwidth]{figure7.png}
\caption{Figure 7 Hugh Ramsay. \textit{Self-Portrait}. Pencil drawing. 13.8 x 10.3 cm. 1900. University of Melbourne Archives.}
\end{figure}

\textsuperscript{16} UMA, Burke Papers, 20 December 1950, Kenneth Clark to Burke.
\textsuperscript{17} Letter from Joe Burke to Lady Ramsay, 15 March 1949, Melbourne, Private Collection.
Figure 8 Hugh Ramsay. *Self-Portrait*. Pencil drawing. 13.8 x 10.3 cm. 1900. University of Melbourne Archives.

Figure 9 Hugh Ramsay. *Passengers on Deck Chairs*. Pencil drawing. 13.8 x 10.3 cm. 1900. University of Melbourne Archives.
Figure 10 Hugh Ramsay. *View of Clydebank*. Pencil drawing. 13.8 x 10.3 cm. 1900. University of Melbourne Archives.

Figure 11 Hugh Ramsay. *Drawing of Coastline from the boat*. Pencil drawing. 13.8 x 10.3 cm. 1900. University of Melbourne Archives.
I have chosen to highlight one of the more sensational discoveries in his correspondence with contemporary Australian artists, but the whole subject of Joe and art in Australia would make an excellent study, or even an exhibition in its own right. The intensity of Burke’s correspondence with Clark is so revealing about artistic life in Melbourne in the late 1940s that I am publishing significant extracts as an appendix at the end of this article. When visitors came to Melbourne Joe took a particular pleasure in showing them artists’ studios and promoting his friends’ works. He was a considerate person, who even went so far as to suggest to his European visitors the kinds of thank-you letters they should write to their Australian hosts. To take one item from his correspondence – a 1971 itinerary for Lord Talbot of Malahide, known to his friends as Milo, and who was well-known for his publications on the flora of Tasmania. Joe’s itinerary for Milo reads:

9.30 pick up Lord Talbot.
10.00 Donald Laycock’s 16 Moor Street, Fitzroy.
10.30 Noel Counihan.
12.00 Asher Bilu.
lunch with Fred Williams.
3 ish. Guy Boyd.
5.30 Sir Clive Fitts.¹⁸

Figure 13 Margaret Plant, later Professor of Art history at Monash University, Sir Joseph Burke and Ann Galbally. Photograph taken in 1978 for the launch of their book, *Studies in Australian Art*.

When it came to having his portrait painted, artists quarrelled over who should have the commission. John Brack, well-known as a portraitist, demanded to do it. ‘Joe’s mine’, Brack is said to have growled to Williams. But it was Fred Williams, a close friend and neighbour, who rarely painted portraits, who was triumphant (Fig. 14). Patrick McCaughey recalls that Williams told him that Joe walked up and down the studio reciting Gray’s *Elegy* while he sat, or rather stood, for the picture. It is worth remembering that for Burke the poem was a radical text when he discussed it in his lectures. It proved a trying commission for Williams. ‘The first oil sketch made from life was a brisk and ebullient affair. When he tried to translate it to a larger, full-length canvas – between sittings – the portrait sagged…Fred had to start all over again.’¹⁹

Joe was keen to promote the first publications on Australian art history. A photograph shows him congratulating Margaret Plant and Ann Galbally on the launch of their edited book *Studies in Australian Art*, published by the Department of Fine Arts in 1978 (Fig. 13).²⁰ Joe Burke’s first years in Australia were directed to raising a consciousness of the subject, and the gradual establishment of a department. Burke made a brilliant appointment in his first year (1947) with Ursula Hoff, a German art historian who had studied at the Warburg Institute, Hamburg, and who had written a doctoral thesis on ‘Rembrandt and England’ (1935). Rembrandt was well represented in the Gallery and her appointment was a joint one with the Department of Prints and Drawings at the Gallery. Among her young friends were scholars such as Walter Horn, author of a great

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¹⁸ UMA, Burke Papers, Correspondence with Lord Malahide.
monograph on Botticelli, Robert Oertel, author of many volumes on Florentine art, Charles De Tolnay, the Michelangelo scholar, and Rudolph Hoffman.

In 1950 Franz Philipp was appointed lecturer in early modern Art History, primarily giving lectures on medieval and Renaissance subjects. His appointment was followed by that of Bernard Smith in 1956, the first Australian-born art historian to hold a post in a University and whose lifelong activity, in contrast to the others, was to be the study of Australian art. It was not easy to make good appointments, and Smith’s appointment was the result of three years effort, as revealed in Daryl Lindsay’s letter to Joe, 12 August 1953, regarding the possibility of the Smith appointment:

Figure 14 Photograph of Sir Joseph Burke with Dame Elisabeth Murdoch in front of the portrait of Joseph Burke by Fred Williams. University of Melbourne Archives.
Regarding this possibility, there is nothing I would agree with more wholeheartedly. He is an exceptional chap and his knowledge of Australian painting is second to none. I have grown to have a great respect for everything he does – he is a first class scholar and would be a wonderful addition to your staff if you could possibly get him, and would relieve you and Philipp tremendously. It would further place Melbourne in the position of having at the Chair of Fine Arts and the National Gallery the best collection of brains – if I may say so in the country.21

In these early years lectures on indigenous Australian art were given by Leonard Adam, a brilliant Jewish scholar from Berlin who was both a jurist and an art historian. When Adam died in 1960, while visiting Switzerland, Burke summed up his achievements thus:

Dr Adam was an avid collector of Australian aboriginal bark paintings and totems, and the system of barter which he practiced with anthropologists in all parts of the world resulted in what was probably the finest ethnological collection in Australia. One of his dreams was the establishment in Melbourne of a museum along the lines of the great museums of ethnology in Paris and Berlin, with special emphasis on primitive aboriginal art.

As a fitting memorial to a man who has made an extremely valuable contribution to Australian culture, the incorporation of such a museum into the new cultural centre would bear thinking about. Our Australian primitive aboriginal art is a treasure whose value few people here realise: we realise it when we go abroad and discover that it is probably more highly prized than pre-Columbian, Oceanic, African or any other primitive art form, and indeed the one aspect of Australian art that most people want to hear most about.22

Joe was sustained by a great number of friendships, but it was with the Lindsays that he was most at home. His papers include a play that Joan Lindsay wrote about him, Floreat Anglesea, which is a hilarious account of an absent-minded professor thinking only about Hogarth and Blake in the Australian landscape at Angelsea. Joe says ‘Lovely, lovely’, which we all remember as the highest accolade. He quaffs a lot, as he was wont to do, like his mate Daryl Lindsay. And William Blake makes a posthumour appearance.

In letters from Daryl to Lionel, 24 August 1955, Joe emerges as the character we all remember:

I had a pleasant interlude with Joe Burke - who paced my room like a demented caged tiger under the stress of some ethical problem until I shouted – ‘for God’s sake Joe sit down I can’t hear you behind my back’ and he ended up asking me how I had the courage to disagree with the Governor, with Menzies + with others – He said ‘I can’t it’s a weakness of character that I have + you have not. They all think you (D.L.) are difficult but in the long run they respect you.’ Poor Joe. I love him for his great, sometimes, worry headed enthusiasm but he has a noble mind.23

Somewhat later Daryl wrote to Lionel, on 9 December 1955:

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21 UMA, Burke Papers, correspondence with Daryl Lindsay.
22 UMA, Burke Papers, Draft of an obituary for Leonard Adam.
23 SLV, Lionel Lindsay Papers, Box 2003, MS 9242/730-787, 24 August 1955, from Daryl Lindsay to Lionel Lindsay.
I had Joe Burke to dinner the other night, a couple of snapper steaks, some good cheese + a bottle of white wine + we had good conversation – Joe has a fine madness about him getting up + walking about the room with a glass of wine in his hand + the food untouched – Talking wildly + yet intelligently with a grand sense of values about things + people – Like you + me he detests the second rate + rails against Authority – Trustees in particular – When he’s slightly in his cups he’s magnificent. When you can clamp him down to a point + get his attention focused he can frame minute in the best tradition of the highest level of the English civil service – 24

I have concentrated on Joe Burke’s brilliant beginnings as Herald Chair, because his beginnings in Australia were important in the definition of his strategic ambitions. When he arrived in Australia he had the plumb commission from Oxford University Press to publish the most significant volume on the greatest age of English painting, the eighteenth century, in their new series *The Oxford History of English Art*, which he completed only shortly before his retirement in 1976. He suffered from what we call the tyranny of distance, for it took him most of his academic life to complete the commission. When it was published it received an accolade of praise and has remained a fundamental work of reference. In many ways though, Joe’s most successful book was his edition of Hogarth’s *The Analysis of Beauty*, published by the Clarendon Press in 1955 at Oxford.25 It is an unsurpassed classic, a work of impeccable scholarship, lucidly written, and more enduring than many other books on Hogarth. Unlike scholars of our generation, it was difficult to travel abroad, and he went rarely.

Burke had other projects in mind, for on 30 June 1977, he announced to a friend:

Now that the Oxford history volume is out and I am clearing the decks for my retirement in 1978 I am thinking over one or two ideas for books. I have a long-term project on Benjamin West and the Anglo American Revival of History Painting but this will almost certainly have to be subsidised by an American Foundation or a comparable source. I have however, some material for books, which I could do fairly quickly. For example, one of these could be on the 18th century monuments in Westminster Abbey if – and I stress if – really superb photographs could be taken ...

I first began my study of these when I was seconded to the Home Office. I know them visually by heart and I have collected a considerable amount of documentation on both the sculptors, Roubiliac, Rysbrack, etc. and the subjects, the Duke of Argyle, General Hargreaves, etc.26

Nothing however, ever came of this project, which would have required some time in Europe.

Shortly before his retirement, on 14 November 1978, Joe wrote to his old friend Sir Anthony Blunt, then director of the Courtauld Institute:

Because I hold a Chair of Fine Arts founded to further the appreciation of art in the community at large I get involved in lots of strange activities i.e. strange for an academic

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24 SLV, Lionel Lindsay Papers, Box 2003, MS 9242/730-787, 9 December 1955, from Daryl Lindsay to Lionel Lindsay.
26 UMA, Burke Papers, Letter 30 June 1977.
art historian. In particular, I have been actively engaged in Committees on the teaching of
art in schools and technical colleges and because of this I am frequently approached by
artists and art teachers for testimonials and references to bodies like the Arts Council in
Australia and the British Council in London. This in turn has meant very close personal
contacts with a large number of artists and art teachers. 27

His papers show that he was tireless in the promotion of the discipline of art history in the
community. There are many today who remember him with considerable affection, for the great
public service he rendered Melbourne, as well as for the creation of the discipline within the
University of Melbourne.

27 UMA, Burke Papers, Correspondence with Sir Anthony Blunt.
Appendix

Extracts from letters between Joseph Burke and Kenneth Clark form the archive of the Tate Gallery, London.

1. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1055/1
Burke to Clark, 9 March 1948

My dear Clark

This is just to send you an eyewitness account of the reception of the latest batch of Felton pictures. There was quite extraordinary enthusiasm. The Pisanello may have looked lovely in London but under the much brighter light of a sunny day here its richness of colouring is almost indescribable. The Landseer is the best I have ever seen in my life and has delighted the most reactionary and progressive critics alike. The Antonio Moro lady has won everybody’s hearts (although I much confess to being a little disappointed in the actual craftsmanship of the painting and the Murillo illustrates a sort of shamefully superb decadence in a way indispensable to any teacher of the
history of art. There was less enthusiasm over the moderns, particularly the Nash and Mailol and Duncan Grant (although I myself admire the last). The Sickert is, of course, wholly admirable and with *The Raising of Lazarus* makes the Gallery’s representation of this artist a very distinguished one.

I need hardly say I wrote to the Felton Bequest to express my very sincere congratulations on the acquisition of the Radnor Poussin. This Poussin, the Van Eyck and the Blakes will constitute the great trilogy of the Melbourne Gallery – three masterpieces in the higher sense of the word.

I opened the Henry Moore exhibition to an audience of five hundred, which is unusually good for a National Gallery show. Moore has had an extremely good press. Anything you can do to dispel the impression that Australians are suckers who are fooled by the second rate will do a great deal to improve relations with the mother country. Needless to say, the Wakefield Collection had the sorriest of all receptions. In fact Daryl had bought very much better Steers, Johns, Nashes, Sickerts, Tunnards and even Nicholsons and Russells of the older school, and there was no comparison between what was permanently on the walls of the Gallery and the other pictures sent out with so much publicity and blowing of trumpets from England. I am glad to say the Moore Exhibition has completely rehabilitated the reputation of the British Council.

Yours very sincerely
Joseph Burke.

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2. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1056
Clark to Burke, 19 March 1948

Your other letter about Felton purchases interested me greatly. As you know, I only come in for works, which cost more than £500, and therefore have not seen the moderns to which you refer. (The Sickert *Raising of Lazarus* I bought before McDonnell came on the scene). One of them, however, cost so much that I had to approve it, McDonnell is away at the moment, so that our buying activities have been suspended. Also I gather that the Felton Trustees feel alarmed at the amount of money they are spending.

I am particularly interested by the last paragraph of your letter, and am taking the liberty of sending copies to the British Council, and other people who may not already realise the truth of what you say. It would be a great tribute to the Australian public if they could make something of Henry Moore at first sight, for although he is undoubtedly a great artist, he is not at all easy to like until one has seen a good deal of him. I hope you will not mind my sending a copy of what you say to the British Council. It may strengthen the hands of those members who want something different from the Connards, Mackevoys, and other secondary members of the New English Art Club who are considered safe and desirable exports.

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3. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1057/1
Burke to Clark, 2 April 1948

Russell Drysdale is shortly sending two pictures to London and I enclose for you information a copy of a letter I have written to Rothenstein at the Tate about them. An interesting young artist of promise who has recently gone from Sydney to London is Justin O’Brien. He has been very deeply
influenced by Byzantine art and has a fine sense of colour and design. If you run across him you will, I think, find him encouraging.

P.S.
... I have just written to Henry Moore to tell him about the success of his Exhibition. The way had, to some extent, been paved by the Hebert Read book, which was sold out very quickly in this country. There are three or four good abstract sculptors here, including Olga Cohn who has been a pupil of Moore’s in London. Naturally the appeal has been mainly to the enthusiasts and the younger generation but he has drawn unprecedented crowds to the Gallery and started a good many people thinking. It is very generous of you to give a talk to the students here. It would mean a good deal to them and I shall be extremely grateful.

4. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1059
Burke to Clark, 2 August 1948

Dear Clark

I was delighted to hear that the arrangements for your visit are now firm. When you come you will be deluged in the most appalling manner with invitations to open exhibitions and go to parties. My advice would be to place yourself almost unreservedly in Daryl Lindsay’s hands. He has an unrivalled knowledge of places and people in Australia and his judgement is extraordinarily discriminating and sound. You ought to try and visit one of the big country stations like ‘Urcildoune’ and ‘Golf Hill’ under his aegis. I have done so and in each case it was an experience I shall never forget.

The only suggestions that I should like to make myself are firstly, that you should give a lecture at the University and secondly, that you should make an excursion to see the pictures of a young artist working in Melbourne, Sidney Nolan. You very kindly offered to do the former some time ago and it would be a tremendous thing for the students and incidentally, a great encouragement to me in my work here.

I am sending over by airmail a copy of an article I have written for Meanjin on the buying for the Felton from its inception to the last war. It is a sad story on the whole, but I am glad to say the present system seems to be working better than any evolved in the past.

5. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1061/1
Burke to Clark, 12 February 1949

This is the weekend before lectures begin – the pause before the battle – and I should like to take this opportunity of writing to you and giving some account of the good aftermath of your visit. Firstly, you have raised the morale of a number of people who try to serve the arts in Australia. Daryl is keener and greatly encouraged; the status of Ursula Hoff in the community has risen out of all recognition (Sir Alexander Stewart stopped me in the Club to ask whether I knew how seriously underpaid she was!); Russell Drysdale and Sidney Nolan have been cheered and feel that their environment is somehow less hostile; Sydney Ure Smith is still talking of your visit and kindness. Secondly, your visit has revived interest both in the Gallery and the modern painters amongst influential people as well as the public. All this is in a sense incidental to your task of advising the Felton, but its influence is incalculable.
You worked very hard and unselfishly, but it really was worthwhile and I can think of nothing, which might have been done differently. The Cezanne lecture was an immense success in achieving its object. Naturally it wasn’t so easy for all the audience to follow as the one on the Gallery, but as you know, it is better sometimes to speak a little above the heads of one’s audience - I think you said you yourself did not grasp everything Warburg said during the lecture in Rome which impressed you so profoundly …

I look back on the Sydney excursion as one of the pleasant experiences I have ever had. Like you, I particularly enjoyed the visit to the zoo, but the evening with Ure Smith was perhaps the high spot, because the old boy was so bucked, and he means such a lot in the art history of this community. It was a wonderful thing to hear, during those tête à tête dinners at the Club, about Roger Fry and Warburg and Berenson, whom I had never met but now seem to have done.

6. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1063
Clark to Burke, 30 March 1949

I do realise that although Australia was a great treat for me, those of you who have to work there have a continual struggle to get recognition for the Arts. I was greatly impressed by the way in which you and your friends were handling the situation, maintaining the autonomy and integrity of scholarship, but preventing if from sinking into obscurity …

On thinking it over, the most important thing that could be done for Australian art would be to remove or modify the tax on the importation of pictures. The cause should never be allowed to die. They are a most talented people, and they suffer solely from not having enough examples of evolved painting to permit of a creation of a style. This is particularly unfortunate in a country where, to my mind, the future does not lie with naturalistic painting, but with a considerable stylisation.

7. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1065/1
Burke to Clark, 8 November 1949

Hoff’s Gallery book has had a good reception here and sales are very good. It is a pity that the Byzantine paintings, the Pisanello and the Antonis Mor came too late, but we shall soon have enough for a second edition. Daryl has made an eighteenth century room with pictures and furniture together, very well, and the Richard Wilson and Stubbs and Gainsborough enjoy one another’s company. If only the Earl of Illchester could be persuaded to part with his Hogarth of the Emperess [sic] of Mexico.

Both the Lindsays are well – Daryl recently having an exhibition of sporting pictures to coincide with the Cup, and he and Chiddy Manifold, the Chairman of the Victorian Racing Committee made excellent speeches – Manifold, talking rather more about pictures, and Daryl rather more about horses. So many squatters had never been seen at one time in the Gallery before. Murdoch is taking things rather more quietly and talks of leaving his pictures to Canberra. I have just bought a really beautiful Constance Stokes for the University, and Medley will probably open an exhibition of recent acquisitions, centering round the Turner watercolour which Stephen
Courtauld presented, about July of next year. Sidney Nolan is lunching with me tomorrow; he is applying for a British Council Scholarship but I don’t know what his chances are.

... It will be amusing to reread Shaftesbury and Walpole and Reynolds in a small farm on the upper reaches of the Murray, and to look from the pages of Fiske Kimball and the ‘Handbuch’ volume on the Rococo, onto the primeval melancholy of the Australian bush.

8. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1068

*Burke to Clark, 15 March 1950*

Sidney Nolan has recently finished his group of central Australian paintings. Some of the most interesting are aerial views. One or two show a marked advance even on the ones we saw in Sydney, and I think they would be appreciated if they could be seen at home.

9. TGLA: 8812.1.2.1071/1

*Burke to Clark, 16 November 1950*

Your stray remarks in praise of the very deserving Nolan also benefited the artist if anything too much so, since he has gone from the extreme of neglect to the extreme of lionisation.