Introduction

One can work in an institution, even a new institution, for a very long period of time without really understanding its history. There is, of course, the institutional folklore which is handed down in bits and pieces — usually at social gatherings and sometimes on official occasions. What is remembered is episodic and fragmentary and tends to revolve around particular individuals or events. Institutions, unfortunately, have very short collective memories: it is alarming how quickly events fade as the individuals associated with them move on or retire. Although we have each taught at La Trobe University for over twenty years, it was only in editing this volume that, for the first time, we felt we fully grasped the idealism that surrounded its establishment, the implications of the early struggles to define the direction of the new institution, and the way in which internal and outside pressures have shaped the development of the campus. Producing this volume has therefore, a rewarding, if rather arduous, experience.

For La Trobe University, 1989 is a peculiarly appropriate year in which to publish this volume. The twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the University is an event worth celebrating in its own right and an appropriate occasion to reflect on how the institution has developed and where it is headed. However, for La Trobe, this anniversary year also coincides with perhaps the greatest upheaval in tertiary education in Australian history. The federal government has decided that bigger is better as far as institutions in the tertiary sector are concerned. For La Trobe University, which has just completed one amalgamation with the Lincoln Institute, the new government policy will probably mean additional amalgamations with the neighbouring Phillip Institute of Technology and with the Swinburne College of Advanced Education. This year will mark not just the first quarter century but the end of the first era of La Trobe’s history. It seems likely that the second era will witness the emergence of a very different institution, much larger, much more diverse in its offerings, and catering to a broader range of student needs than in the past. One hopes that in the amalgamations La Trobe will manage to preserve the best of its own past as reflected in this volume.

The idea for this volume originated in 1986 in a report to Council from the Archives Committee. Council accepted the concept and appointed a 25 Year History Committee chaired by Professor John A. Salmond of the History Department. In addition to Professor Salmond, the Committee was composed of Professor D. Elwyn Davies of the Physics Department (shortly to be appointed Pro-Vice-Chancellor (Academic)), Emeritus Professor John S. Gregory, recently retired from the History Department, Dr John G. Jenkin, of the Physics Department, Dr Margaret James, Research Fellow — Status of Women at La Trobe who later accepted an appointment as Equal Opportunity Co-ordinator at Monash University, and Dr William J. Breen of the History Department. When it met, the first issue facing the committee was to define the type of volume that would be appropriate for the twenty-five year celebration. A proposal that it should be a formal, commissioned history was rejected by Council and the Committee then recommended the publication of a collection of essays written by individuals who had some past or present connection with the institution.

The first group of essays by the founding Chancellor, the first Vice-Chancellor, the Master
Planner, and the foundation Chief Librarian, are autobiographical in style and reflect their own views on how they wanted the institution to develop. The second group of essays, written by academics still working at La Trobe, details the struggle over organisation, the experimentation with teaching methods, and the considerable research achievement of the first quarter century. The next cluster of essays analyses the changing nature of the student population and details some of the ways in which the University has responded to student needs. It is followed by the autobiographical reflections of two former students of La Trobe — one who came in the first intake of undergraduates in 1967, the other who entered as an older student under the innovative Early Leavers’ Scheme. Of the two essays in the final group, the first reflects on relations with the community and, in the second, the current Vice-Chancellor, in what is effectively an apologia on his forthcoming retirement, glances backward over his years in office and takes a look into the future of the institution.

The production of this kind of institutional history depends upon the willing and generous co-operation of a broad range of people. We would like to acknowledge the assistance of the members of the 25 Year History Committee who were helpful and supportive and the various contributors to the history who not only wrote their essays more or less on schedule but who also responded generously to editorial suggestions. To some extent all of the contributors were dependent on the co-operation of various individuals in the university administration. On behalf of the contributors, we would like to thank Ralph M. Gallagher, Director, Planning and Development, and Allen D. Gravier and the staff of the Management Information Unit for their assistance particularly with the statistical information contained in the essays. Various other members of staff in the Central Administration, especially in the Registry and the Staff Office, have been extremely helpful. In the Borchardt Library, Ann Miller, Government Publications Librarian, deserves special mention. Joan Price, the University Archives Officer and the secretary of the 25 Year Committee has also been of great help. Although no longer directly connected with the University, Allan W. Martin, the foundation professor of history at La Trobe who is now at the Australian National University, was also very generous in his support for the project.

On a more personal note, the editor would like to thank Donne Simpson (formerly Sherwin), Personal Assistant to both Vice-Chancellors, who agreed to return from an active retirement to act as research assistant to the 25 Year Committee and as assistant to the editor. Her detailed knowledge of the early years at La Trobe coupled with her fine eye for detail has saved the volume from some egregious errors and her assistance has been invaluable. Finally, we would like to thank the History Department for providing the secretarial support for the history and, in particular, Merelyn Dowling whose unfailing good humour and good sense in deciphering both original manuscripts and editorial amendments greatly eased the task of the editor.

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