

# Obituary

Rachel Lilburn  
(1961–2019)



Rachel Lilburn. Photo courtesy of Trish McCormack

Over the past seven weeks the love and affection felt for Rachel, by her former friends and colleagues, and not least by her former students, has been manifested in many ways: in touching appreciations in the online Tribute Book; in the emails many of us will have received individually, expressing shock, sadness, and recognition of the part Rachel played in so many lives; and in conversations, often on the brink of tears, which then dissolved into laughter as anecdotes were retailed. The personal tributes have stressed her kind-heartedness, integrity, dynamism, also her charisma, her wicked sense of humour.

While beneath the public face life might not always have been

joy for Rachel, the image she invariably presented was that of a bubbly and fun-loving personality. As one of her earliest colleagues at Archives put it: 'Rachel certainly warmed up one's day, she made you laugh, which was great'. In the words of a former manager: 'She was just such a lot of fun'. But Rachel was also a consummate professional. She genuinely cared about her vocation; it was never simply a job. The word most frequently used in respect of her commitment to archives and records management is passionate. As an advocate, she had backbone; she was unafraid to take a stand on principle when others tended to melt away.

Taranaki born and bred, Rachel came to archives work at the then National Archives in 1983, fresh with a double degree from Auckland University in history and art history. Appointed an Assistant Archivist, she soon demonstrated her abilities. By late in the following year she had been promoted to the new position of Local Authority Advisory Archivist, first working from Wellington, then from late 1985 in Auckland. In Auckland she worked closely with the Northern Archives and Records Trust, the brainchild of the unforgettable Jolyon Firth, facilitating his attempt to counter a senior archives figure's labelling of Auckland as 'the black hole of New Zealand archives'. After nearly two years helping shine light into the black hole, working closely with local bodies, Rachel was awarded a Rotary Graduate Study Fellowship to study in the United States. When she returned to New Zealand in 1988 it was to the responsible post of Head of Appraisal Services at the National Archives, where she further honed her skills, and those of others. As one of her former staff has recorded: 'she was the most inspiring, enthusiastic "Boss" any graduate could have ... she made working in the archives profession relevant, meaningful and enjoyable'. In the words of another, working with Rachel was always: 'fun, sparkling and bright'. How much would most of us give for such staff commendations?

After nearly four years, however, Rachel was ready to once more spread her wings. In early 1992 she took up an Assistant Lectureship in Victoria University's Department of Library and Information Studies, charged to develop elective courses in archives

and records management, to be taught both on campus and at distance. This was a move she was well qualified to make. At Western Washington University, Bellingham, she had studied for a Masters degree in archives and history, her thesis fittingly entitled *A History of Local Authority Archives in New Zealand and Manual for their Care*. Experience was thus backed by academic study. By this point, too, Rachel had already tutored students in the National Certificate in Archives Management course then taught through the Wairarapa Polytechnic, an experience which led to friendships and mentoring relationships extending to the present.

Promoted to a Lectureship after two years, Rachel was to remain on the Victoria staff for a further fourteen. During that time, by my calculation, she either taught or significantly contributed to the teaching of more than a dozen separate courses, principally in archives and records management, but also in allied specialisms such as repository management and preservation. Following the ARANZ-sponsored 1994 Ham Report on Education and Training she played a major part in making a recognised New Zealand post-graduate professional qualification a reality. What always struck me when our paths crossed on campus was Rachel's boundless enthusiasm, her determination to be innovative. The success of her approach is reflected in recent comments from her former students: 'she made archives seem exciting'; 'an inspiration to so many'; 'she stood out from the crowd in pretty much every way'; 'her legacy is all the students she inspired to become record-keepers and archivists'. What university teacher, I ask, could hope for greater tributes? Moreover, Rachel remained a mentor for many of those students as through the years they progressed in their careers. Beyond the university there were a host of other teaching commitments: seminars and workshops for Archives New Zealand, ARANZ, NZSA, and for groups such as the Solo Archivists; the regular presentation of papers at conferences. Rarely was a request or invitation to participate turned down.

First and foremost a dedicated teacher, for which she will principally be remembered, Rachel nevertheless managed to produce a respectable number of publications. (It is a matter of regret that she

never completed the Doctorate she once enrolled for – probably there just wasn't time). There were the essays for book collections, others for overseas journals, but given her commitment to the New Zealand recordkeeping scene it should be no surprise that the majority of her writing was for journals such as Archifacts, The New Zealand Archivist, and to a lesser extent Library Life. While perhaps insufficiently highly rated in the tertiary sector's dreaded PBRF assessments, these contributions addressed real issues about professional practice and the recordkeeping profession itself in this country. In her writing Rachel was never afraid to tackle elephants in the room, as evidenced by two articles produced during the battles over the future of the National Archives in the mid and late 1990s, both published in the prestigious international Government Information Quarterly: in 1996, 'The restructuring of the National Archives of New Zealand: an ideological experiment?'; and two years later, 'Public archives: heritage happiness or horror story?'. Her personal views re the proposed restructurings were therein made crystal clear. And, as Rachel's professional mana grew, she became increasingly involved in lobbying, in the preparation and presentation of submissions, in meetings with Ministers and senior bureaucrats. She was a valued member of consultative committees and appointment panels. It is surely an indication of her standing beyond the confines of the university that in 2006 she was appointed a member of the first statutory New Zealand Archives Advisory Council. In that role - or so I'm told - she was typically forthright, perhaps too forthright for some officials, with the result she was not appointed for a second term.

I'm almost certain that my first real personal contact with Rachel was through ARANZ, in the mid 1980s. Candour compels confession that initially I suspect we regarded each other a little warily, especially in those years when bitterly divided factions within the archives community battled over very little. Those reservations quickly eased when we served together on the ARANZ Council for nearly a decade from 1989, being replaced – certainly on my part at least – by deep respect. Rachel rendered ARANZ distinguished service over more than two decades, serving eight terms on Council,

as the chair of branches in Auckland and Wellington, and as a long term branch committee member in Wellington. She edited the Association's newsletter for seven years. She was directly involved in the organisation of several conferences, and she also acted informally as a conduit with kindred organisations such as ASA, RMAA and PARBICA. The list of services is long. It was in recognition of this that when in 2001 I was editing ARANZ's 25th anniversary publication I invited Rachel to prepare a paper on a topic of her choosing. The result was a trenchant essay entitled 'Why are there no female Honorary Life Members of ARANZ?'. By memory, the text was delivered to me personally, together with a feminist verbal flea in the ear. (I hope I was appropriately contrite, but was not able at that point to tell Rachel two had already been nominated for the pending AGM!) There is a point to this reminiscence. Why, given her record, was Rachel herself never nominated for Life Membership? More than likely it was because, if nomination was ever properly considered, it always seemed there was plenty of time. There may be a lesson here. Three years ago three distinguished early members of ARANZ were belatedly so honoured. Two of them are no longer with us.

For whatever reason, I never knew and I never asked, Rachel left the university in 2008. My own view, and I also know it to be that of many who benefitted from her teaching, from her pastoral care of students, is that this was Victoria's and future students loss. The departure by no means meant, however, that her passion for archives in any way diminished. Perhaps not so obviously, she continued as a mentor, as a willing sounding board, for a number of the students who had passed through her courses. As far as other professionals were concerned, many coming later to the profession, she was prepared to offer advice to those prepared to ask. She was willing to assist small organisations and groups in making sense of their records. Further, she continued to stand by her principles. When in 2010 Archives New Zealand was forcibly reincorporated within Internal Affairs she made plain just how retrograde she considered that move to be, urging ARANZ to again take up the cudgels.

We kept in touch sporadically after Rachel left the university, and when an opportunity presented in 2014 it was my genuine pleasure to be able to invite Rachel to become a member of the board of the Ian McLean Wards Memorial Trust. A key function of the Trust, as many will know, is the promotion of research in archives and records management, also the care of specialist library collections. We could think of no better person to offer professional opinions. It was an appointment that Ian himself would have heartily approved. In the five years since Rachel's sound and sensible advice on the funding applications received annually has been invaluable. She will be so hard to replace. Of recent years Rachel would now and then ring me just for a natter, a natter which sometimes could extend over several hours. Current issues in the New Zealand archives and records world would be extensively canvassed. I shall greatly miss those chats, her propensity to pinpoint flaws in current public recordkeeping thinking, the keen sense of the absurdity of much of what presently passes for policy.

Reading through the contributions in the Tribute Book, some of which I've borrowed from this afternoon – often they express feelings far better than ever I could – there was one in particular that captured the way in which I would like to remember Rachel. It was the one visualising Rachel huddled in the corner of some ethereal pub with her old buddy the late Ken Scadden, gossiping scandalously and roaring with laughter. So apt; so touching. I can only echo the comment of another contributor: 'there will never be another Rachel, and we are all the poorer for that'.

Brad Patterson