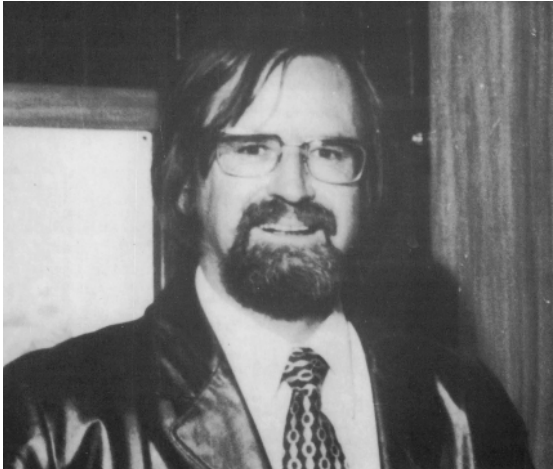


# Obituary

Ray Grover  
(1931–2019)



Ray Grover, pictured here in 1974. Photo courtesy of Archifacts, June 1981

*Eulogy delivered at funeral service, Old St. Paul's, Wellington, 1 February 2019*

The 1992 edition of *New Zealand-Aotearoa Who's Who* contains a brief entry: **Grover, Raymond Frank: Archivist and Author**. The scant details that followed, supplied by Ray himself, were typically modest, a skeletal depiction of Ray the public man. There were then, and have remained, so many other Rays: the political junkie with distinctly liberal views; the voracious reader and book collector; the avid acquirer and supporter of New Zealand art; the jazz aficionado; the man's man who also delighted in feminine company; the devoted

family man, father and later grandfather; the friend of many. Ray has been a man of many parts, and of many achievements. His has been a life well lived.

Born in Matamata, the eldest son of a transient school teaching family, Ray's early years were in small rural settlements at the Bay of Islands and on the Whānganui River. After secondary education as a boarder, he enrolled at Victoria University College in 1950, graduating with a BA in political science three years later. Study for an Masters soon lost appeal, however, and he spent six years overseas, picking grapes near Bordeaux, serving in London bars and restaurants, labouring on a hydro-electric scheme in the Scottish Highlands. Returning to New Zealand in 1959, before embarking on what became his chosen career, he supported himself with casual jobs as he worked on his first novel.

The 1992 *Who's Who* entry rightly places emphasis on Ray's role as New Zealand's Chief Archivist. Yet before becoming Chief Archivist in 1981 he had already had a distinguished career in librarianship, first taking up employment at the Alexander Turnbull Library in 1959, subsequently heading all sections before being appointed Assistant Chief Librarian in 1968. Ray was to hold that position for a decade, before serving briefly as Chief Librarian at the Auckland College of Education. Arguably the culmination of Ray's career as a librarian came with the publication by ABC-Clio of his bibliography of New Zealand in 1980, recognised by the New Zealand Library Association's John Harris Award in 1982, followed by his election as a Fellow of the Association in 1981. It is surely indicative of his ongoing standing in the field that in 2000, 10 years after retirement, he should be appointed to a five-year term as a National Library Trustee.

It's fair to claim, I think, that the apotheosis of Ray's professional career came with his 1981 appointment as first Director of the then National Archives of New Zealand, combined with the position of Chief Archivist 18 months later.

The appointment came at a time when Archives was at low ebb. Indeed, in the late 1970s the impoverished state of the institution, both in terms of resources and leadership, had become a matter of public

controversy. Viewed as a change agent, Ray was shoulder-tapped. There was general agreement he was the man for the job, combining demonstrated management skills, a deep concern for historical documents, and significantly, the sensitivities of an individual who was also a user of archives. For Ray this was never just a job, hence his antipathy to generic managers. Over the next decade Ray was to be the single most important influence in raising the status of the National Archives from that of a stunted, subordinate Internal Affairs sub-branch to that of an emerging, respected professional institution.

A critical factor in the transformation was his insistence that while Internal Affairs might still be the parent department, the proper management of National Archives was the responsibility of the Chief Archivist; the constitutional responsibilities of the office demanded no less. Inevitably, this stance brought differences with the department, but in the end Ray prevailed. Appreciations delivered on his retirement outline many of the ways he lifted standards: a major increase in staff numbers; the encouragement of proper professional training; also the opening of regional offices. But Ray's principal monument is Archives House, just a few doors down the street, the first time the institution had an appropriate and visible home. That we will be repairing there after this service is therefore symbolic.

Ray provided a sound platform for further progress for his successor, at least until a new mid 1990s neo-liberal regime at Internal Affairs sought to carve up the Archives, and to once more exert stronger departmental control over professional decision-making. Incensed, he strongly supported stakeholder initiatives challenging the so-called reforms in the High Court and Court of Appeal, supplying cogent affidavits in support of the appellants. Ray rejoiced, therefore, when a change of government in 1999 led to National Archives becoming Archives New Zealand, a separate department of state, believing that what he and others had fought for so hard was in the process of being achieved.

Understandably, then, he was both frustrated and angry when in 2010 the Key government announced that Archives New Zealand was to be reintegrated into Internal Affairs, and at a lower

administrative level than when it was cut loose. Given Ray's nature, there can be no surprise that ever since he has kept up the fight, contributing criticism to journals, writing to newspapers, lobbying existing and prospective Ministers of the Crown. Many will be aware that the future administrative placement of Archives New Zealand and the National Library is currently being considered by a Ministerial Committee, with a decision reportedly not far off. Last August Ray actively participated in a related workshop, making his views clearly known. He produced an outstanding written submission, based on his long experience, on what the role of national archives should be, and the need for it to be removed from the possibility of bureaucratic meddling. As well as formally putting in the submission to officials he also sent copies directly to the Ministers concerned to ensure they knew just what he thought. When I saw Ray last week, just the day before he died, although it took him considerable effort, he gave me a clear message: 'Keep up the fight for an independent Archives'. I, and others, will try Ray. The thought occurs that if the Ministers concerned *don't* free the Archives from the oversight of, or connection to, any other agency, there is a strong likelihood Ray's spirit will ensure them much disturbed sleep in the near future! Ray has always been a doughty fighter for what he believed in, this encapsulated in the inscription on the flyleaf of the copy of *March to the Sound of the Guns* he gave to us: 'Don't let the bastards grind you down – Ray.'

Then there is Ray the writer. I believe Ray to be one of the foremost, if not the foremost, of New Zealand writers of 'documented historical fiction' (he disliked the label 'fiction'). His preference for the genre arose, he explained, from his belief readers related better to first person views of history. Overall, his oeuvre of major works is not large: only 4 titles in 50 years. But these have been significant books, dealing with important topics, ranging from the morality of capital punishment in *Another Man's Role* (1967), through colonial race relations in *Cork of War* (1982) to the impacts of war on ordinary people in *March to the Sound of the Guns* (2008) and last year's *Province of Danger*. There are several reasons why Ray was not more prolific. One was time; until he retired writing was something that had to be squeezed in, as and when

he could. As importantly, Ray was a meticulous researcher, indeed an object lesson to many professional historians, not just in files and the extant literature, but in familiarising himself with the landscapes in which his books were based (he tramped the Western Front battlefields before writing about them). And it should be remembered that while for Ray writing was addictive, something he tried to do every day, by his own account it was never easy. His manuscripts were worked and reworked, each sentence and paragraph worried over.

Rightly, what have been termed his war books have received considerable critical acclaim, in the view of one reviewer they may be regarded as 'a tour de force and, overwhelmingly, a success'. My own favourite is *Cork of War*. Winner of the New Zealand Book Award in 1983, it examines the clash of settler and Māori cultures in the southern North Island in the 1840s. A favourite perhaps because I also researched in that area, or perhaps because at Ray's request I checked references for him while he was in Auckland. Such books can have unrecognised impacts. In the last few days I had an email passed on to me, the writer noting that many years ago he had read the book when 'a semi-employed dropout from an unfinished zoology degree'. He had thought of New Zealand history as 'generally pretty dull'. *Cork of War* convinced him otherwise, serving as a key signpost on 'a long and twisted path' which led to him becoming a professional historian specialising in New Zealand history. What would most writers give for such a tribute!

Nor should Ray's other services to literature, and scholarship generally, be overlooked. His professional articles and numerous book reviews were prepared with characteristic care. He served as president of PEN NZ (New Zealand Society of Authors), has been a member of many judging and advisory panels. The list of other public services, almost too long to recite, includes membership of such bodies as the Ministry of Culture and Heritage's History Group Advisory Committee, the Kippenberger Museum and Library Trust and the Rongotai College Trustees.

But we are here today to celebrate Ray as much, conceivably far more, as the devoted family man, the loving father and grandfather,

the warm and fiercely loyal friend. His deep affection for, and pride in the life decisions and achievements of his siblings – Dorothy in education, Colin as a man of the land, Pam’s distinguished legal career – was always evident. He was deeply affected by the recent deaths of Colin and Dorothy. Ray was around 50 when Tom was born. For his son there has always been only unconditional love, demonstrated in so many ways. They communicated regularly, Ray being always eager to share news of Tom’s doings, his views on the American situation, most recently his thoughts on the United States’ president. I hope Tom won’t mind if I share a comment from an email he sent me the day following Ray’s death: ‘I couldn’t have asked or received more in terms of love from him’. And in more recent years that love has extended to encompass Tom’s wife Linda, and the grandchildren, Amelia and Aiden. The photograph on your order of service conveys far more than I can offer in words.

The breadth of Ray’s friendships is evidenced by the numbers who have assembled here this afternoon – they extend across the social spectrum and involve many diverse interests, so much so that to some there may seem to be conundrums. On his reference shelves *Men in Black: An Encyclopaedia of New Zealand Rugby* sits alongside more weighty scholarly tomes. While unusually well read in high literature, he also cherished well-written detective novels. Though he spent much of his life in the city he was a lover of the outdoors, the country, regarding inland Whanganui and the river as his turangawaewae. Ray was blessed with an impressive vocabulary, which became even more colourful when he was irked. Ray was happy with glass in hand, shooting the breeze with mates. He was a man who had worked with his hands as well as his mind.

Thinking back, Kathryn and I had the privilege of knowing Ray for around 45 years, and it was a friendship that became steadily stronger. For Kathryn, he was something of a mentor as well as a friend. It was Ray who in the 1970s encouraged her to move from National Library Extension Services to the Parliamentary Library. He was also a strong supporter of her application to succeed him as Chief Archivist, support which continued unchanging. My association with

Ray dates from the formation of the Archives and Records Association in 1976, and although we have subsequently shared many other interests, archives remained a constant linking thread. It was not that we always agreed, far from it. Not that long ago I said to Ray 'you know, at times in the past you could be a cantankerous bugger'. The response, with characteristic grin and lift of eyebrows, was an emphatic 'you bet'.

Late last week I emailed an even older friend of Ray's, Vincent O'Sullivan, to let him know the sad news. He responded how pleased he was that visiting Wellington in November he had unexpectedly run into Ray that they had had the opportunity to just sit on a bus bench outside the St James and yarn for half an hour. Vince had these words to say, which I pass on with his permission: 'Ray was as decent a man as I knew – good at what he did, modest, generous to others, a better writer than he was given credit for, and a man who didn't in the least compromise his values ... I'm very glad I had the chance to know him'. Well said Vince - these are sentiments we would all share. Ray was a quintessential Kiwi bloke. What many of us will always remember and cherish is that warm smile, so ably captured by Webb in the cartoon on the front of your order of service, the smile that lit up his face when encountering friends.

We will miss you Ray.

Farewell old friend.

Brad Patterson