

The inside story

WHO WOULD YOU GET to write the history of your company or institution? Universities sometimes turn to insiders – as in the case of the University of Melbourne's recent volume, and sometimes to outsiders as the Australian National University did, when recording its first half-century. Companies, municipalities and organisations only occasionally have "insiders" who can tackle a major history, and so they turn to academic historians (Geoffrey Blainey got his start this way) or to freelance historians like Ann Moyal or Susan Priestley.

The first unusual feature, then, of "the history of the CSIRO laboratory at 343 Royal Parade, Parkville" is that it was written by Don Rivett, Colin Ward, Lisa Belkin, John Ramshaw and Jack Wilshire, all CSIRO staff members who have laboured at "343". Their history is entitled *The Lennox years*, and the authors' respect for Gordon Lennox's vision, leadership and undoubted political skills shines through the first part of the book. Part I is entitled *People, properties and politics*, with each section introduced by a cleverly chosen quotation, the first of which is Ralph Waldo Emerson's "an institution is the lengthened shadow of one man". Lennox, obviously, but the other Gordon – Crewther – also features large in their story.

The changing designation of the institution is a second unusual feature, and it has led the authors to describe this as the history of a laboratory at a certain place. The research group began its life in 1940 as the Leather and Fellmongery Section of the Division of Industrial Chemistry, with Gordon Lennox as Section Leader. It became the Biochemistry Unit in 1942, separated from Industrial Chemistry in 1949 to become attached to the Wool Textile Laboratories, and became a Division in its own right – Protein Chemistry – in 1959, with Lennox as Chief. After 29 years, there followed a further period of change. In 1988 the laboratory became part of the Division of Biotechnology, renamed Biomolecular Engineering in 1990, and then – to go beyond the scope of the book – merged with Chemicals and Polymers earlier this year. This last



change is a stunning rebuttal of the authors' guess that the history of "the Division of Biomolecular Engineering ... will no doubt be written some time, long into the future"! Along the way, its location shifted from Albert Street to Flemington Road to Flinders Lane and finally to Royal Parade, when CSIRO purchased the building which had been the home of William Charles Kernot, Melbourne University's first professor of engineering and the first Melbourne graduate to be appointed to a chair.

Many histories approach their subject from a specific angle, leaving the reader to wonder about other matters that might have been covered. I guess we are all familiar with the sort of municipal history that concentrates on the elected representatives and local churches, or the "theme" histories that fail to link the different threads together, so we never see the whole fabric. The advantage of an authorial team, who consulted many former staff members, is that they have covered their subject from different angles so that the table of contents, taken in conjunction with the index, enables us to enter the history from a number of directions. As well as a rich text, they have provided a selection of photographs that includes – along with the standard buildings and standard posed shots of scientist and apparatus – such things as Mike Jermyn's cartoons (the thoughts of Chairman Pond), experimental results, and social events like the bicycle ride around the Cyril Curtain Reserve!

While Section 1 takes us year by year through the history of the labora-

tory, Section 2 is entitled *Science, support and statistics* and gives detailed accounts of wool research, collagen and leather, plant proteins and viruses, veterinary vaccines and diagnostics, and the influenza virus and vaccine research. Thus is mapped the changing scientific endeavour of the laboratory, as it moved away from wool research (and dependence on wool funds) to align itself more closely with pharmaceuticals. While the emphasis is on the scientists, each of whom is identified in connection with particular projects, the section concludes with information about support staff and with statistics such as staff lists, longest serving staff, and most cited publications. Morton Gillespie, with 42 years, sets the standard for service (runners-up Gordon – Crewther and Keith Wood with 40), but is pipped for most-published by Bruce Fraser with 146 papers. Finally, the book includes a complete listing of patents and publications from the laboratory during the 46 years of its existence.

If I have a criticism, it is that one might gain the impression from *The Lennox legacy* that the laboratory was the only bit of CSIRO to be affected by the waves of change that have swept through the organisation over the years. This would be an unfair criticism, since the authors set out to tell the story of their laboratory and not that of the whole organisation, but it's about the only thing I can find to criticise. After years in academe I am reluctant to give more than 9.9 out of 10. Read it for yourself, and see what you think: it's available from CSIRO Publishing by fax on (03) 9662 7555; by email at sales@publish.csiro.au, or on the Web at <http://www.publish.csiro.au>. The price is \$25 (paperback), \$45 (hardback).

Finally, I should let you know that I have resigned from VUT to enter a sort of retirement, in which I shall continue to participate in public life and will take up an honorary appointment in History and Philosophy of Science at my alma mater, the University of Melbourne. Thus I will have more time to savour books like this one: please keep writing them.