

Harold A. Rooksby (1907-2001)

by John Maidment

A paper presented at the Melbourne Organ Weekend, 21 October 2000, in the hall of The Scots' Church, Russell Street, Melbourne.

EXTRACT FROM OHTA JOURNAL, OCTOBER 2002, pp.20-23.

Harold Rooksby, whom I am about to talk about, is still I am happy to say very much alive and well; he and his wife Elaine apologise for their inability to be with us today and send their good wishes for a successful event. [Harold Rooksby subsequently died on 18 October 2001].

Harold was born in 1907 at Ealing, a western suburb of London, noted for its tree-lined streets and gracious houses. He first remembers hearing an organ at St Paul's Church, Ealing at the tender age of four years and was allowed to touch the keys, thus stimulating a life-long interest. His parents both had musical interests: his father, who worked in general business, sang in the local choir as a tenor while his mother had undertaken singing lessons. When Harold was around six to eight, his mother staged some childrens' operas. He was educated at Colet Court preparatory school for four years followed by another four years at St Paul's School at Hammersmith, one of England's noted public schools, leaving at the age of 18. There was an outstanding three-manual Willis organ in the school's hall, said to be one of the three best of its type in London. Harold used to practise often on that instrument at lunchtime, sometimes to the detriment of his homework!

At the age of 14 or 15, Harold was given permission by his parents to travel into London for the day by train, spending the morning and afternoon attending lecture tours at the British Museum and listening to midday organ recitals in the city at midday. Harold has had a lifelong interest in history and books as well as music.

Moving into a more central residential area, the family attended St John's Church where there was a good choir and a three-manual organ (thought to be a Walker). Cliffe Forrester was the organist. Harold became a choirboy there until the church was burnt down, when the family transferred to St Mary's. This was the Parish Church in Ealing, a large high-Victorian brick building designed by S.S. Teulon where there was a Walker organ later rebuilt by Rushworth & Dreaper. Herbert J. Dawson was the organist (Mus.B. Cantab. LRAM, FRCO, examiner of Trinity College London) with whom Harold studied the organ. Owing to his examining commitments, Dawson sometimes had to be away from St Mary's and left things to Harold, who recalls playing for services at the young age of 11 or 12. At St Mary's, there was a partly professional choir.

He played the organ for six months at All Saints', Ealing which was a deputy church of St Mary's. He was also an assistant organist for a short while at St George's, Hanover Square under Dr Charles E. Jolley. This church had a Hope-Jones organ and was sited in an important area 'socially'. In those days, gentlemen wore ankle-length laced boots. Harold remembers an amusing incident when Dr Jolley was performing. While crossing his legs, a loop of the laces connected on the hook of the other boot, but he was unable to break the laces and there was a truly calamitous situation! At the time, he also was also called upon to assist at other City churches where a relieving organist was required. He also remembers visits to St George's Chapel at Windsor during his 'teens and sitting in the organ loft during services.

Harold can well remember several important events in the 1920s. In 1924, he attended the Wembley Exhibition and heard the famous Hill, Norman & Beard organ later to be rebuilt in Dunedin Town Hall. He also travelled in 1926 to Liverpool Cathedral on a special train organised by the London Society of Organists to attend the opening recital on the new Willis cathedral organ. This was followed in the afternoon by a recital on the fine Willis organ at St George's Hall.

Harold entered insurance in London in 1925 and worked in this area in London before his emigration in 1929 at the age of 22. News of the vacant organist position at All Saints', East St Kilda (following the death in 1928 of H.J. Inge) had reached Britain and Harold hoped to apply for it. In Australia, he continued to work in insurance. He was appointed Victorian Manager of the Assurance and Thrift Assurance Company Ltd in 1932 and the following year was transferred to the National Mutual Life Association Ltd in investments. He was given an introduction to Dr Floyd at St Paul's Cathedral by the Archbishop of Melbourne who was a friend of Harold.

Harold remembers the opening recital on the new Hill, Norman & Beard organ in the Melbourne Town Hall which was a farewell recital given by Dr William G. Price, the city organist. It was very well attended and a major artistic and social occasion. The blowing plant 'played up' on the occasion, drowning out most of the lighter, small stops. HN&B appointed a man in charge of the maintenance of the organ (H.M. Palmer). Harold never missed an opportunity for a chat with Palmer (they had mutual connections in England). Palmer interestingly had worked on the Hope Jones console for St George's, Hanover Square. Apart from being custodian of the organ, Palmer arranged the midday recitals for the Melbourne City Council. Harold frequently gave recitals on the Melbourne Town Hall organ from 1931 to 1955, some for charitable functions, such as the Red Cross.

He didn't remember Dr Price as he officially retired at the time of the opening and was only kept on until the position of City Organist was taken by William McKie who gave his first lunchtime recital on 8 April 1931. Harold gave recitals at the Town Hall from the 1930s until the 1950s and was frequently engaged to play for church-related events there. He considered that a heavy programme was inappropriate for midday recitals and therefore incorporated many 'arrangements', endeavouring to present several 'attitudes' to introduce organ music to the general public.

Harold was invited to take on the post of organist and choirmaster at St Mary's, Caulfield around 12 months after he arrived in Australia. Initially he performed on a two-manual Fincham organ of 1875 with tracker action. When this organ was to be replaced by a new organ, he put on a final service supported by trumpets, trombones and kettledrums. All the daughter churches of St Mary's were invited. The concert created a lot of interest in the parish.

He was responsible in 1934 for the installation of a new Fincham organ at St Mary's. Fortunately, the Vicar, the Revd H.T. Langley (later Dean of Melbourne), was a musician; he could accompany a simple service and was very interested in the organ. An appeal for £2,000 was launched and a detailed prospectus issued explaining the project and including a drawing of the proposed console prepared by George Weickhardt. Except for the pedal Open and the façade, all other pipework of the new organ was imported from Alfred Palmer in England. Harold was faced with a dilemma: Finchams had little experience with electro-pneumatics; could their electric actions survive? The other option was to go to HN&B on a much smaller specification. Harold decided to proceed with tubular-pneumatics and considered that electric action could be installed later. H.M. Palmer, who was the expert adviser, designed a very clever action for the organ. There was pneumatic coupling and an enormous stack of action. The organ was opened and dedicated on 29 October 1933. At the morning service, which was broadcast through 3AR, the organ was opened by the Vicar, Canon Langley and the dedication by Bishop R. Stephen DD took place at Evensong. Harold gave the opening organ recital in the afternoon.

The daughter churches of St Mary's were again invited to assist in these opening events.

Harold wrote up the organ in *Musical Opinion* in 1936. The action was later releathered and electrified and Bill Glasson subsequently modified the console, fitting a new piston and drawstop action.

In the same year as the new organ at St Mary's was opened, Harold was elected the first honorary secretary of the newly-formed English Public Schools Association and also of the Old Pauline Association in Australia.

Harold gave many organ recitals at St Mary's, some under the *aegis* of the Society of Organists. The church was wired for ABC recitals with the Post Office installing landlines which avoided the provision of an outside broadcasting van. St Mary's had one of the leading church choirs in suburban Melbourne, with a semi-professional choir, and services were frequently broadcast over the radio. Harold was also an organ recitalist for the Australian Broadcasting Commission from 1950 to 1970. He remained as Organist and Choirmaster at St Mary's until November 1973, when he retired after holding the post for the long period of 43 years. He was then appointed a diocesan lay reader and was called upon to take services and preach in many churches in the Diocese of Melbourne.

There were not many major recitalists in the interwar years and general interest in organ recitals was not great.. However, Harold was very active in this area, giving several series, presenting recitals with a specialised theme. A good example of this was the lecture recital he gave at St Mary's, Caulfield for the Society of Organists on 15 August 1939 entitled 'The Development of Organ Music (German School, 1600-1750)' which included, unusually for the period, compositions by Scheidt, Pachelbel, Kuhnau and Bach. Harold didn't play too much contemporary music but enjoyed performing older original compositions for organ. The Guilmant Sonatas were a special favourite. Harold later gave a programme for the Society of Organists on 16 August 1948 entitled 'Off the Beaten Track in Organ Music' in which he performed works by Merkel, Saint-Saens, Coleridge-Taylor, Stanford and Cyril Jenkins, a pupil of Stanford, who emigrated to Australia in 1922.

He bought much of his organ and church music at Allens or from the Diocesan Bookshop, building up a very extensive music library. Thomas Heywood mentioned that he played and recorded Best's Sonata in d minor which belonged to, and was signed, by Harold Rooksby. Later, Harold gave the State Library of Victoria all his books and music including a textbook of 1473 by Zarlino. It is interesting to note that Harold was a founder of the Public (State) Library Society in 1953. An enthusiastic book collector, he regularly scoured overseas booksellers' listings of antiquarian material and kept a written catalogue of his library and music. He initially subscribed to the *Bach Gesellschaft* edition (along with John Cowan and Leonard Fullard) but later passed the subscription over to Eric Gamon. He still has a very extensive collection of books on music, history and travel, including many Batsford imprints and 41 volumes of the Arthur Mee *Counties of England*. Unfortunately, many printed objects and memorabilia were lost in the disastrous bushfires which swept through the Ferny Creek area a few years ago.

It was Harold's idea that led to the founding of the Society of Organists (Victoria) in 1938. Organ recitals happened in a very much *ad hoc* fashion (unlike Britain) and there was a need to coordinate activities. Harold was very friendly with the then Anglican Archbishop (Archbishop Head). The Archbishop was invited to become Patron of the SOV on similar lines to England; he was very highly regarded. There was a group of organists centred around Collins Street, including Lawrence Warner, of the Baptist Church, Herbert Davis, of Scots Church, Frederick Nott, of the Independent Church and these people became involved in the Society, which was affiliated with the IAO right from the start. Harold served on the Council of the

Society from 1938-1940 but lost his position as a Councillor when the size of the Council was reduced. He remained as a member for more than 35 years.

Harold used to perform also on the organ in the St Kilda Town Hall where he was later appointed by St Kilda Council (together with R.E.V. Church) to advise on the rebuilding of the organ. He recalls that there were many Saturday evening dances in the Hall. Dance floor wax powder was liberally splashed around the floor. Unfortunately it was applied to the area of the pedalboard and caused serious problems at a recital Harold was giving the next day (slippery feet)! Sadly, this organ no longer exists as it was totally destroyed when large sections of the Council buildings were lost in the 1991 fire.

Harold remembers many of the important names of the Melbourne organ world in the 1930s and later. Harold knew Welsford Smithers well, who had been a predecessor of his at St Mary's, Caulfield before moving to St John's, Toorak. Welsford was Director of Music at Shelford (where Harold's wife Elaine was a teacher) and wrote the school song, but didn't give many recitals. Harold was fortunate to have the run of the St John's organ when he was practising for Town Hall concerts. Welsford and Harold were members of the Savage Club in the City (as well as R.E.V. Church as we have heard). Harold had a particularly close relationship with Reg Church where at St Mark's, Camberwell he had a very good choir. Reg was temporary organist at St Paul's after Dr Floyd left and later St Kilda City Organist. Arthur Nickson was well remembered as an all-round musician and an excellent choir trainer. Horace Weber he remembers playing at the Plaza Theatre and has a high opinion of his musical skills. Of course, he knew Herbert Davis very well and was closely involved with him in the formation of the Society of Organists. He remembers Mansley Greer at Scots Church and Claude Monteath. W.F.G. Steele was manager of the Orchestrelle Company.

Other well-known names he was familiar with: included Alfred Lenton, Leslie Curnow and Lance Hardy, who had been a predecessor at St Mary's, close to his home in Kooyong Road, Caulfield.

Following the retirement of Dr Floyd in 1947, Colin Campbell Ross was appointed cathedral organist. However, it proved to be an unfortunate appointment as it transpired that Ross was more interested in obtaining a conductor's appointment through the ABC. This did not materialise and Ross resigned as cathedral organist, returning to England, where he soon became organist at Newcastle Cathedral. The large grand piano, together with the model railway which belonged to Ross, were returned to England at considerable cost to the Cathedral!

Harold was a correspondent for *Musical Opinion* and *The Organ* in the 1930s and 1940s. He wrote a very interesting technical article for *The Organ* in 1949 on mixture stops. He was fortunate to have the first 54 volumes of *The Organ* in original binding: these were extremely useful to pick up information.

In the business world, Harold joined the National Mutual Life Company and later, when the Company decided to enter General Insurance, it was Harold who was told to start an appropriate company the National Mutual Fire Insurance Company Ltd - leaving every detail to Harold. Armed with nothing else but a blank piece of paper, and no further assistance, he had to do everything, including the recruitment of staff. He went through all the legal niceties, setting up branch offices in various states and all was working within nine months. He says he wouldn't do that again!

On a previous visit to England, Harold and his wife Elaine were introduced to 'monumental brasses' by a cousin. They collected a few rubbings and on their return to Australia they decided to make a study of this interesting art form. This necessitated spending many evenings in the State Library writing up and cataloguing the collection which then amounted to 200 items some of which for one reason or another will never be rubbed again. They joined the Monumental Brass

Society a scientific society devoted to the subject, also holding research passes to the British Library. Sections of this collection were shown at several local art galleries in Victoria and New South Wales, where they created much interest.

In November 1973 Harold retired from the position of organist and choirmaster at St Mary's and was succeeded by Bill Glasson, with Eric Gamon as assistant. Following his retirement from active music making, Harold no longer has a keyboard. "Don't try to keep alive something that has finished its proper course". With Harold's books, "this opens a vast door to other things". "What would you do to fill in your time if some live music was not available?" [Difficult question]. Harold then showed us his wonderful philatelic collection. "Don't hang on to the past". It was at a meeting of the Friends of St Paul's when the organ restoration was being talked about, that Harold gave a talk on the cost of organbuilding and what goes on in the works, at the same time coming across a stamp with a picture of an organ. So this began a new interest. Harold has collected organ stamps, famous buildings and their organ stamps, composer stamps, and the most beautiful Lillium stamps. All these are meticulously documented and researched and mounted into albums, Harold typing up all the sheets with associated facts. He has obtained stamps through stamp sellers and checks out stamp catalogues and then makes his requests. In the course of his research, he has discovered that many biographies of composers do not disclose the full facts.

Harold and Elaine had a most extensive garden on the hillside at Ferny Creek and specialised in growing Rhododendrons, of which they had several hundred until the recent bushfire wiped out their garden. Elaine Rooksby is an avid gardener and collector of garden books which complement Harold's collections in other areas. Sadly, they also lost in the fire their significant and valuable collection of brass rubbings collected in England which were destined to go to the State Library.

9 July 1999 & 1 October 1999