The writer and the state: Patronage, national security and secrets

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In October 2003, I launched a series of research guides about Australia’s Prime Ministers at the National Archives of Australia. The Archives brought up my personal file of correspondence with the old Commonwealth Literary Fund (CLF). As a hungry, desperate young writer in my early twenties I persistently applied to the CLF every year. So the Archives held a perfect record of my early career – where I’d been published, prizes I’d won, what my income had been – things I had forgotten. It was this discovery that prompted my project at the Archives to study the relationship between the Australian writer and the state.

It seemed to me that files of the meetings and subcommittees of the CLF could prove revealing on a number of matters, including the politics and philosophies that played a part in decisions about Australian literature, the evolution of thinking about the participation of government in arts funding, and the relationship between the state and the writer.

The Fund was established by the federal government in 1908. In 1968, it was incorporated into the Australian Council for the Arts – which evolved from the Elizabethan Theatre Trust – and was established to administer assistance to all the arts. In 1973, the CLF was reconstituted as the Literature Board, with its later incorporation into the statutory body, the Australia Council, formally established in 1975. In many ways, the patronage and recognition by the CLF crucially created what would today be seen as the literary establishment.

As well as being interested in the relationship of the writer to the state, I saw this archival research as the basis for a much wider examination of literary writing in Australia today and the infrastructure that has grown around it – funding bodies, the teaching of writing, writer-in-residences, mentorship schemes, festivals, and writers’ centres.
Briefly, literary writers can find themselves in six relationships with the state when they:

- seek patronage from the government
- come up against censorship
- become classified as possible enemies of the state and a national security risk because of their writing, or their status as writers
- are asked to participate in public (or ‘soft’) diplomacy through representing Australia officially as exchange artists or on government-funded tours or speaking engagements
- through taxation with its special arrangements for the writer, and
- through legislation, which defines, enables and protects the work of writers – copyright and public usage rights (Public Lending Rights, Educational Lending Rights) and the free library system.

I approached the National Archives to investigate the role of the state by examining the forms of endorsement, encouragement and discouragement; the ways government funding initiated writing careers and sustained these careers; the role of the CLF in creating today’s writing establishment; and the evolution of the ways in which writing and the arts were assisted through a variety of means, including fellowships, residencies and international publication. I was also interested in the role of writers’ organisations, such as the Fellowship of Australian Writers (FAW) and the Australian Society of Authors (ASA), as lobby groups that helped form the policies of the CLF.

Although I have concentrated on what I have termed literary writing – by which I mean serious novels, short stories, verse, belles-lettres (including important biography, autobiography and other non-fiction) – this paper inescapably throws light on publishing and writing generally.

The historical background

The federal government’s involvement with writers began in 1907, following a meeting of ‘men of letters’. It was called to consider what could be done to assist Australian writers who were in poor circumstances, or families of deceased writers who were poor.

This led briefly to the establishment of a non-governmental Australian Men of Letters Fund, which then changed its name to the Commonwealth Literary Fund. It was formally established and gazetted by the new parliament and, according to Alfred Deakin, ‘should be of a non-political character’.

The model for the CLF was the British Royal Literary Society which was founded in 1832 under the patronage of George IV. The Society assigned 1100 guineas for pensions and a prize for an annual dissertation, with Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Thomas Malthus among its first recipients.
In parliament at the passing of the CLF bill in 1908, Joseph Cook, Member for Parramatta, said:

It is our first recognition [by the new federal parliament] – and a very small one – of Australian Literature, and as such we should pass it unanimously.

The structure, that evolved and changed over time, was to have an advisory board of ‘men of letters’ and a larger decision-making committee, which included a public service secretary, the advisory board and members of parliament – usually the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition, the leaders of other parties represented in parliament and/or the Treasurer. The advisers – usually professors of English but later representatives of writers’ organisations, writers or publishers – considered applications, made recommendations, and then met with the full committee for final decision-making. For many years they met once or twice a year. The committee had three defined and gazetted functions:

A. pensions for aged or infirm writers
B. pensions for families of literary men who died poor
C. pensions for literary men doing good work, unable because of poverty to persist with that work.

The Fund was first administered by the Department of External Affairs, then Home Affairs and then the Department of the Interior. For a time it came under the Prime Minister’s Department, and then later under the Minister for the Arts. The first budget was £1050 and, of the 51 applications, 14 pensions were granted, four at £1 and ten at 10 shillings per year. At that time, one pound was roughly three times the old age pension.

The stages of evolution

My first discoveries while working through the minutes of the CLF – with diversions into cabinet papers, Hansard, reports and related documents – was to identify four significant evolutions in the history of the federal government involvement in literary writing. They were:

- welfare
- the nurturing of the literary arts through cultural promotion and stimulation
- concerns of national security and the political test, and
- the use of the arts as part of public diplomacy.

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1 The members of the initial committee were Rev. EH Sugden MA, Principal of Queen’s College, Melbourne University; Reg. H Roe MA, Queensland; Sir Langdon Bonython, South Australia; JW Hackett, MLC, Western Australia; and Sir NE Lewis, Tasmania, with FM Bladen as Secretary (See Commonwealth of Australia Gazette, 1908, no. 24, p. 883).
Welfare: 1908–38

During this period the Fund’s only activity was the awarding of pensions to elderly or sick writers and their families, that is, using sections A and B of their gazetted functions. Between 1908 and 1973, when the CLF became the Literature Board, 172 writers or writers’ families were given financial assistance. For example, in 1920 Henry Lawson, then 52 years old, was given a pension of £52 a year. His mother Louisa Lawson also applied but it was decided that ‘a pension has been granted to her son and that there are not sufficient funds available to enable an adequate pension to be granted to her’.

Similarly, in 1930, the CLF received an application for assistance on behalf of Arthur Hoey Davis (Steele Rudd). At age 61 he had no dependents and was author of 25 books and two books in manuscript, four four-act comedies, two scenarios, seven years’ editorship of Steele Rudd’s magazine and three years of Steele Rudd’s Annual. He was also destitute. His friends applied for assistance on his behalf, resulting in a grant of £52 a year.

Other better-known writers who received pensions during this period were Louis Becke, CJ Brennan, Zora Cross, Frank Daly and Molly Skinner.

Cultural promotion and stimulation: 1938–73

In 1938, the CLF began to formulate a wider role under the ‘New Charter’ that took up the hitherto ignored third function of the original committee to grant ‘pensions for literary men doing good work, unable because of poverty to persist with that work’.

From the late 1920s the CLF had been lobbied to expand its activities. Despite this, the Fund remained singularly focused on granting pensions under sections A and B of its charter. It wasn’t until 1936 that the CLF’s role began to change as a result of former Prime Minister, and then Member of the House of Representatives, JH Scullin. He argued in parliament for general assistance for writers to devote time to writing and for the reprint of classics.

The impetus for this dramatic expansion came from an approach through him from the New South Wales FAW, which had prepared submissions on how the government might more adequately assist Australian writing.

The FAW was established in Sydney in 1928 by a group of writers that included Roderic Quinn, Mary Gilmore and J Le Gay Brereton. Its aim was to advance the interests of writers and provide social and professional services. Branches were established in Victoria and Western Australia, with other states following. Although the state branches remained autonomous, the New South Wales and Victorian groups lobbied federally.

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2 For a list of recipients of pensions see Shapcott, Thomas, 1988, The Literature Board – A Brief History, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia.

3 Hansard 691–695.
Led energetically by Scullin, the then United Australia Party Prime Minister JA Lyons received a deputation from the FAW in 1938. In April 1939, a new advisory board within the CLF was established, which included two members of the FAW. The new Fund listed as its policies:

A. The award of fellowships to writers of proven literary ability to enable them to devote their time for a period to working on a project they specified.

B. Assistance to publish manuscripts of literary merit which, without financial assistance, would probably remain unprinted.

C. Assistance to re-print standard Australian works out of print.

D. Grants to universities to encourage the study of Australian Literature.

E. Pensions.

Government funding to the CLF was increased from £1500 to £4500. New fellowships were established, and Frank Dalby Davidson and Xavier Herbert were the first writers to be awarded the two 12-month fellowships of £250. However, this new thinking first expressed itself in the assistance given to a writer named Vernon Knowles in 1938 before the term ‘fellowship’ was in use. His case reveals the function of the CLF, the sort of problems and thinking that were preoccupying the Fund at that time, and the way they evolved and implemented a new philosophy.

Vernon Knowles

In 1938, the CLF made a bold move that was historically remarkable and admirable. For the first time in its 30 years of operation the Fund gave a young Australian the largest lump sum of government money given to any writer. The writer’s name was Vernon Knowles and he is all but forgotten.

The story of Vernon Knowles tells us much about Australian life or, at least, what might be called the life of the intellect and the arts in the 1930s, and the ethos towards which the CLF felt we as a nation should be headed. It tells us much about the fundamental problems and questions of policy making in arts funding. It tells us much about the life of the arts, aspiration and failure. It tells us about the question of how much a writer is worth, and about human frailty. It is a sad story.

In 1938, the CLF received a letter from Vernon Knowles that was quite different from the letters it received from ageing writers and writers’ families who were in need of financial assistance. The writer was from Adelaide (not in the literary circles of Melbourne or Sydney) and, at 39, he was far younger than anyone who had previously received assistance from the Fund.

After growing up in Adelaide and spending a little time at the University of Western Australia, Knowles, then a 22-year-old writer, left Adelaide for London in 1921 with manuscripts of stories and poems in his luggage. In London it appears that he managed to meet literary establishment writers GK Chesterton and John Masefield, and to enter the bohemian literary life.
He wrote in his diary in 1922:

> Am becoming pleasantly excited over England, – England! All is there that I desire: my future. My destiny awaits me, – & England holds it.4

As we shall see, the lines about his destiny awaiting him must have haunted him in later life. But, at that time, good things were happening for Vernon Knowles. His book of stories was accepted for publication in the United States and, in 1924, his first book *The Street of Queer Houses and Other Stories* was published in America and Britain with illustrations by William Saphier. Knowles’ career was taking off.

In Britain in his late twenties, he was interviewed by the leading papers and magazines and began to contribute what we would call opinion pieces. But as he rose as a literary name in Britain and America, Knowles remained virtually unread in Australia. Which brings us to 1938 when the CLF received a desperate letter from Vernon Knowles, now in his late thirties, asking for help. He was living in Adelaide once again and was destitute.

The Public Service Secretary of the committee put the submission for funding from Vernon Knowles before the CLF in summary form. The Secretary wrote:

- Born Adelaide, 39 years, single, author of 3 novels, 5 books of tales, 3 books of verse and a book of criticism. He has in prospect a number of other books of tales novels, stage plays and verse.

Vernon Knowles was for some time living in England but returned to Australia where he has been entirely unsuccessful financially.

The records show that his earnings for the previous three years were well below the poverty line and the basic wage. The Secretary’s summary of Knowles’ submission went on:

- During the past twelve months he has been called upon to pay £18 for doctors fees and has found it impossible to provide himself with sufficient clothes.

He is now entirely without funds and is facing complete destitution and considers his sole hope is to return to England where he could resume his literary career.

The first member of the CLF Advisory Board to speak on Vernon Knowles’ application was the Chair, Sidney Talbot Smith MA LL B, an Adelaide lawyer and man of letters from Knowles’ home town, who said:

Vernon Knowles is a good man out of place. I have known him since boyhood when he was commended to me by Professor Darnely Naylor [Professor of Classics at Adelaide University] as having remarkable gifts … he was badly advised to return home from London. And his delicate fancy is quite wasted [here].

I can certify that he has a better claim than two thirds of our pensioners.

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What he wants is ‘passage money and then enough to keep me for a year
till I get going …’

If he stays here … his real gift for fanciful writing must [inevitably] be
lost.

Sidney Talbot Smith did not believe Australia was ready for Vernon Knowles and I
think he was right. In an accompanying letter Talbot Smith stated, ‘He seems to
know the literary men of importance in London and to have some future there’.

The next member of the Board to speak was Professor WA Osborne, Professor of
English at the University of Melbourne, who said:

This is an unusual case. I have given the application some thought and
delayed a day before making a decision. I believe the money would be
well spent but … [I] doubt that we have the power to make a
recommendation … If approval is unanimous I will place the matter
before the Minister and ask for his ratification.

Then Board member, Dr George Mackaness, Head of the Department of English at
Sydney Teachers’ College, spoke, ‘We cannot, I believe, allow a man of Mr Knowles’
merit to perish through destitution’. Mackaness urged paying the fare to London
plus sufficient money to sustain him for 12 months.

Knowles’ case went with a unanimous recommendation from the Advisory Board to
the full committee of the CLF on which sat the Prime Minister, the Leader of the
Opposition and the Treasurer.

In a note accompanying the recommendation Talbot Smith said:

I should translate Dr M’s [Mackaness’] verdict as meaning at least £156 –
a three years’ grant, at once. If so allowed, I would suggest half down,
and the other half in London next March. The man is in deadly earnest
and is going by cargo boat to save money and to give him leisure for his
writing. Do your best and promptest.

Knowles received a grant of £46 and five shillings for a ticket to England, being the
lowest steamer fare available, and sailed on the Jervis Bay. He was given an
additional £13 and 15 shillings to keep him going pending employment. He received
a total of £60, the equivalent of a three-month literary grant. It was not a large sum,
but it was unique in the history of the Board which had hitherto simply granted
pensions to aged writers and their families.

It was, in fact, a literary fellowship, something never before granted. The CLF had
moved to the principle of patronage to a writer for what they might do, as well as for
what they had done to date. It was even more unusual in that it was a grant for a
writer to leave Australia.

Other sources in the Archives confirm that the idea of moving from pensions to
encouraging practising writers had arrived in the thinking of the CLF. In the
immediate years following they created a defined policy of fellowships and began to
use the word ‘fellowship’.
Although neither the CLF nor Vernon Knowles could have known it at the time, when they gave him £60 in 1938 his literary career was over. He was never to publish another book, although he was to go on writing, unpublished, for another 33 years.

Knowles’ name appeared in the National Archives one last time, in 1951, when he applied to the CLF for assistance from London:

At present I am working on a new volume of tales and a second volume of autobiography (set of course in Australia) but owing to personal circumstances have reached the end of my financial tether.

The loss of the years taken by the War [Knowles worked in the censorship office] and its unsettling aftermath must be made up somehow: my plan of future work includes a third autobiographical book and a long poem, which latter I hope will be my most important work.

He did not mention that for 13 years since receiving his 1938 grant he had not been able to published a thing. But this time, unlike in 1938, he was refused, and the minutes of the CLF do not provide reasons.

In 1962, sick and in the last years of his life, he received a pension from the Royal Literature Society in annual installments of £200 until his death six years later. In 1968, Vernon Knowles died in London in what writers call, for want of a better word, obscurity. No library in South Australia held a copy of any works by Vernon Knowles at the time of his death.

Paul Depasquale says in his privately published life of Vernon Knowles that:

This book seeks to perpetuate the memory of one who aspired to greatness as a writer and as a son of the city of his birth, Adelaide; and who … did not achieve the greatness to which he aspired …

I would argue that in 1938 the CLF exhibited the very best of attitudes in arts patronage: they affirmed the imagination; they were not dissuaded from their decision by fear of the scandal of difference, although Adelaide may have been relieved to see poor Knowles sail away in his steamer back to London and off their consciences; they were willing to take a risk on a still emerging talent; and they trusted the judgment of the author as to his needs, while also trying to assess and meet his needs. In Knowles’ case they turned out to be wrong, but in arts patronage you have to be prepared to be wrong, as long as you are not consistently wrong. Here the candidate failed, not the committee.

**Deliberations of the Fund**

Following the Fund’s adoption of its new charter, there began to be significant changes in policies and new ideas, especially after World War II. A number of deliberations proved interesting.

In 1955, the question of censorship was raised by board member and poet Kenneth Slessor. He said, ‘… most states had enacted censorship laws as it could so happen that a book sponsored by the fund could possibly be banned [under] this legislation’. This prompted the first discussion of the question of literary censorship by the CLF. It was to become a serious issue in late 1960s in Australia, but not for the Fund.
In 1962, the CLF discussed the establishment of a national writing school but considered such schools ‘not of great value’. It did, however, consider favourably ‘student writing fellowships’ for young promising writers (formal teaching of creative writing in the US model began in Australia in the 1960s in the Workers Educational Association (WEA)/University of Sydney’s adult education program).

Later that year, on 23 August, a crisis occurred when the Prime Minister, RG Menzies, considered withdrawing from the CLF upon which he sat as Prime Minister. It was reported by the chair of the CLF that:

PM is thinking of withdrawing from the CLF as he felt that submissions of the advisory board were in certain respects failing to fulfil the objectives for which the Fund had been founded and indeed were wasting public funds as the original intention had been to subsidise work of high standard.

His criticisms were mainly directed against the low standard in the award of fellowships: the poor standards in the submission of poetry and the plethora of demands that the Fund seemed likely to face from the literary magazines.

Thought that such action apart from the reflection on the Board would be a serious blow to Australian literature to which the PM and his predecessors had rendered great services.

The Prime Minister was persuaded not to withdraw.

In 1963, Kath Walker’s book *All One Race* resulted in an interesting deliberation. The CLF noted that the two readers were of the opinion that in ordinary circumstances the verse could not be considered as being of sufficiently high standard to warrant sponsorship although some of the poems had merit. It was noted that this was the first book of verse written by an Aboriginal which had been submitted to the Fund. Because of these special circumstances the publication of the book was assisted.

**Shaping future policies**

In 1963, the CLF called for submissions about future policies from the Australian Book Publishers’ Association (ASA), established 1948, and the newly-formed Australian Society of Authors, established 1963.

The ASA grew out of the feelings of writers, including members of the FAW, that writers needed a single national organisation or lobby group that concentrated purely on the economic needs and professional problems of writers. The submission by the ASA stated that its objective was:

… to achieve acceptance of the idea that writers have a decent and essential function in society which merits more consistently practical recognition than they receive at present, namely a decent economic status for writers who have proven capacity to produce major work of good quality or who might reasonably be expected to do so.

A creative professional writer merits a status that might reasonably be compared to that of a professional journalist or an ‘academician’ and in
general terms his average annual earnings should match the salary range applicable to these professions, margins of skill, experience and particular brilliance.

Although the nature of the work, the practicalities of the publishing business at present inhibit the fixing of a minimum salary or wage scale system for writers it is nevertheless desirable that writers should have some sense of continuing security.

This can only be achieved if a writer is able to maintain a continuity of creative activity which is difficult if not impossible when even the granting of a fellowship is sufficient to sustain a writer for only 12 months after which he or she must resume the worrying hunt for bread and butter.

We think that a fellowship of say £8000 should allow writers to save something during the 12 months and so budget for a buffer period of adjustment.

The ASA argued for:

… fellowships of £2000 to ‘spare time writers’ poets, essayists, and short story writers to allow such writers to free themselves periodically from their regular domestic or professional commitments in order to concentrate for a time on polishing, editing and refining their otherwise catch-as-catch can output.

It expressed concern about contractual questions with publishers, copyright protection, the introduction of Public Lending Rights, and the establishment of minimum fees for freelance writing.

The amount of aid should not only be related to the developing standard of living of the community in general but to the special need of writers in a society that is becoming more sophisticated and international in its outlook.

The ASA estimated that there were 1000 practising writers in Australia. They suggested at least 12 fellowships between £6000 and £8000. They also argued that a case existed for long-term fellowships, which would stabilise a writer’s financial status over three years, during which time income from all other sources – royalties, etc – would be balanced and supplemented by an annual grant sufficient to bring the total year’s income to a predetermined figure of, for example, £8000. The ASA advised the CLF to take into account factors such as the writer’s other incomes, family responsibilities and the need for research or study. Three such awards would be made each year and, in time, there would be nine financially secure writers working on long-term programs.

The ASA suggested the creation of the Governor-General’s literary awards (based on the Canadian model) for creative writing, fiction, history, biography, poetry, plays and so on, and that these awards be sufficiently substantial to stimulate the keen and active interest of writers and publishers, booksellers, the public and the mass media.
In its submission to the CLF the Australian Book Publishers’ Association (ABPA) expressed its support ‘in the greatest measure possible’ for the ASA’s recommendations. The ABPA also praised the CLF for the fair, friendly and impartial way it was administered. Furthermore, it stated that but for existence of CLF a number of important books would never have been published, and that creative literature – poetry, drama, the short story and novel – would have fallen into neglect. It also reported that the Australian patronage scheme was admired in other countries.

The ABPA’s submission went on to argue for grants to publishers for publication; grants against loss; grants to lower prices of books; grants to encourage the production of books in Australia; travel grants for young people in publishing; and support for a scheme ‘Books for Asia’ – where Australian books were donated to Asian libraries, schools and universities – run by the Department of External Affairs.

National security and the political test: 1952–72

In October 1950, RG Menzies took over as Prime Minister at a time when the Cold War tension between the USSR and the United States and its allies had become a matter of central political concern. The next significant historical development in the relationship between the government and writers was in the period 1952–66, with concerns about national security. The Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO) and other agencies were used for the political vetting of writers applying for funding during the Cold War.

In essence, Prime Minister Menzies introduced a political test for awarding assistance to writers. The intention was to exclude writers who were members of the Communist Party of Australia, sympathisers and ‘fellow travellers’ from government assistance. For a time, security checks were also made on the referees of writers applying for assistance. It was a period during which the Prime Minister took a very hands-on approach to the Fund and attempted to dominate it.

The first concern about national security and the functions and philosophy of the CLF was publicly expressed in May 1947 when the leader of the Country Party, Sir Earle Page, moved a formal motion for adjournment to discuss a matter of urgent public importance:

… the extent to which the CLF is being used to subsidise Communist and former Communists in the production of Australian Literature … the fund is not established by statute. It depends on an annual appropriation by the Parliament. It seems to be somewhat like Melchizedec – it had neither father nor mother and it has neither beginning nor end …

His motion concerned a writer, JM Rawling, who it was later established was once a communist but had broken with the party in 1940 to become an active anti-communist. He had applied for assistance to write on the poet Charles Harpur.

5 Hansard, vol. 191.
Page’s various errors were challenged in parliament and the matter was later dropped. However, on 18 February 1952 a series of events began where Menzies attempted to apply a political test to applicants to the CLF.

HS Temby, then a public servant acting as Secretary of CLF, wrote to Menzies following a security check on Melbourne writer Judah Waten, who had received funding from the CLF and had applied for further funding. The letter recorded allegations by journalist Stewart Coburn, Wilfred Kent-Hughes, a Liberal Member of the House of Representatives, and Edgar Holt, Public Relations Officer for the federal Liberal Party, that Waten was a communist. The Temby letter said that subsequent inquiries made to ASIO revealed that Waten had been expelled from the Communist Party in 1945 but was still ‘a communist at heart’. A note written on the Temby letter signed by RGM [Menzies] says, ‘In future all names put forward should be investigated by Security. This case is scandalous and embarrassing’.6

Following this instruction, each year the Secretary of the CLF would submit names of applicants and referees for assistance to the Director-General, Attorney-General’s Department ‘D’ Branch. On the memo accompanying one set of applicant names Temby said, ‘As you know, each year your Branch supplies this information for the information of the Prime Minister’. The D Branch would phone through the details if they were urgent and then follow up with a written memo. From the minutes it appears that the citizen members of the CLF Advisory Board did not have the D Branch report formally revealed to them.

A secret document would come back to the Secretary of the CLF indicating either that there was no file, that the file was insubstantial, or with a report confirming Communist Party membership, or association in Communist Party activities or with members of the Communist Party. These reports appear to have gone only to the Secretary of the CLF and to Menzies.

The role of the Secretary to the Fund in advising the Prime Minister was not restricted to security matters. He wrote this note to Menzies about the poet Francis Webb who had been recommended for a fellowship by the Advisory Board:

Francis Webb. This chap is the Board’s No. 1 choice. As you will see from the notes on the agenda, he has had a nervous breakdown, has been in an asylum, is now under medical attention and is recovering rapidly. Despite this, the Board has placed him first …

Another significant ‘security’ issue was the DR Stuart/Lady Mawson Case. The Secretary to the CLF, WR Cumming, wrote to Menzies:

Stuart application deferred because of his political affiliations. Stuart reapplied in 1956 for completion of trilogy *Yandy and the Winds* which has an Aboriginal motif. Occupation Native Welfare Assistant, Chisholm read the earlier books and report that Stuart was ‘a very fine artist and

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the books give no evidence of any communist propaganda and the philosophy is decidedly not Marxist but democratic’.

In the memorandum to Menzies, Cumming said:

The poet Douglas Steward [now member of CLF] reports that ‘Mr Stuart can write admirable prose … he knows both the country and the people he is writing about. It is a story of the postwar efforts of the Aboriginal people of the Pilbara to make a future for themselves and their children. Dr Grenfell Price [chair] intended discussing the Advisory Board’s recommendation for funding with you before the Committee meeting because he felt that his matter was rather delicate and he did not wish you to be embarrassed at the Committee meeting. The Advisory Board is, I think, aware of Stuart’s communist affiliations but notwithstanding they have recommended him as a recipient of a fellowship … I thought I should bring these matters under your notice because you might feel that something should be done about them. You might, however, think that all of them should not be discussed by the full Committee with the Advisory Board in attendance because they raise contentious issues. As you know Dr Evatt will be leaving Australia on Sunday and he no doubt would be interested in these particular items. Therefore you might feel in all the circumstances that despite the urgency they could await your return from London …

Within the same memo referring to Lady Mawson, another applicant for funding, Cumming wrote:

Cheshires [a publishing company] want a guarantee against loss of £300 on an edition of 1500 copies. The Advisory Board has recommended approval. The CLF has never approved a guarantee as high as £300 … usually about £150 … one report on ms says it would be expensive printing but impressive contribution to Aust Lit and a major chapter in Australian history. Prof Jeffares of Adelaide is enthusiastic about it …

Menzies instructed Cumming to ‘approve Lady Mawson defer other’. Lady Mawson had applied for assistance in publishing a biography of her father, GD Delpratt, which was to be, in effect, the story of BHP. A subsidy to Lady Mawson was approved and Stuart’s was deferred.

The citizen members of the Advisory Board of the CLF, if they were informed formally or informally of security reports, which I do not think they were from internal evidence in the file, still recommended writers with adverse reports for funding. Menzies usually wrote ‘defer’ against such recommendations. Ultimately those with adverse reports, if they kept applying, received funding after Menzies’ retirement in 1966. For example, in 1969 Judah Waten was recommended, and received, a 12-month fellowship of $10,000. Ric Throssell also received funding in 1971. But the reports and Menzies’ deferments did deny funding to some writers for a few years, Christopher Koch being a good example.
Christopher Koch
In 1953, aged 20, Koch applied for a grant to publish a joint volume of poems with Vivian Smith which was deemed to be ‘immature’ by the CLF, based on reader RG Howarth’s assessment. As a result the grant was not recommended.

Five years later Koch applied again for assistance for a novel, *The Vagrants*, about Australian expatriates or travellers who leave Australia in their early twenties. His first novel, *The Boys in the Island*, had been published in Britain by Hamish Hamilton. Having also published poems in the *Bulletin*, *Southerly* and the *Penguin Book of Australian Verse*, Koch was considered by the members of the Board to be ‘a brilliant writer’.

The CLF recommended Ernestine Hill, Cyril Pearl and Christopher Koch for one-year fellowships, but noted ‘if the committee were not prepared to accept the recommendation in respect of any of the above mentioned then the advisory board recommends that as an alternative a fellowship be granted to another applicant, novelist, Dal Stivens’. The idea of the alternative was suggested by Cumming because he knew that an adverse security report on Koch had been sent to Menzies.

The security report said:

Koch is recorded as having been a leading member of the Australasian Book Society [Communist front organisation] in Tasmania in 1953 and having associated with Communists at this time. He was also reported to have been a member of an Anarchist group at the Tasmania University. In 1955 he was reported to have been in touch with certain Communists in the UK, and he is currently reported to be a supporter of Communism.

Two of his referees are recorded as follows:

John Joseph Meagher Thompson – during the early 1940s Thompson was reported to have made no secret of his Communist tendencies and to have married a full-time functionary of the Communist Party in Western Australia. However, since then he is reported to have been disillusioned by Communism and was reported in 1955 as appearing to have no sympathy for Communism whatever, and currently as being anti-Communist.

Vivian Brian Smith – is recorded as a member of the Advisory Committee of the Australasian Book Society in Tasmania and as having associated with Communists in 1953. In 1954, he attended meetings of the Australasian Book Society and World Films (a society which screens pro-Communist films).

Cumming wrote to Menzies:

… you will find one [security report] about Christopher Koch and his two referees. The Board feels, without knowing anything about this side of his activities, that Koch, who is 26, is a writer of brilliant promise … I suggested to the Board that they ought to have another recommendation up their sleeves if for some reason or other the Committee did not agree to grant a Fellowship to one of the nominated persons. The board chose
as their 12th man – Thea Astley … Thea Astley is 31 and the majority of the Board considers she shows great promise …

The Advisory Board and the full CLF committee, which included the Prime Minister, Leader of the Opposition and the Treasurer, met on 25 September 1958. Cumming suggested deferring the fellowship to Koch because Menzies needed time to read The Boys in the Island, and the CLF then approved fellowships for Hill and Pearl. In a note to Menzies, Cumming said, ‘… [we] deferred it until you had a chance of reading Koch’s book The Boys in the Island. I know you have no intention of agreeing to a fellowship for Koch’.

Then in February 1959 Koch wrote to the Fund requesting reconsideration in light of good reviews of The Boys in the Island. ‘I have not since 10 Sep 1958 received any communication regarding this [the application] I have assumed that the application was unsuccessful. I am wondering whether be possible for my application to be considered …’

On 27 February, Cumming’s minute to Menzies read:

There were security objections to Koch and you suggested that consideration of a fellowship be deferred until you and Dr Evatt had a change of reading Koch’s Boys on the Island [sic] Dr Evatt agreed … I suspect that the Board will want to discuss this at its next meeting on 12th March Melbourne. They may want to put him to you again. Because of his communist leanings you will not want to have anything to do with this.

Have you read this novel? You may find some reasons to knock the application on literary grounds, otherwise, I shall have to try and dissuade the Board from approaching you again.

Other examples of the wishes of the prime minister overriding the Advisory Board were to crop up in the minutes. Menzies talks of Koch’s ‘crude language of his characters’. He wrote a hand-written note to Cumming saying, ‘This can wait until my return. I have read the novel, which seems to me to have all the worst defects of what is called, I believe, “the modern idiom”. RGM’.

On 24 March, Cumming wrote to Koch informing him that the Advisory Board members ‘had not had at the time or opportunity to read your recently published book’. Koch replied, offering a copy of his book for reading by the committee members and asking when the CLF would make decision, saying, ‘I am to take up a post with the NSW Public Library on the 18 May but if I were given a fellowship I would not wish to do this’.

On 4 May, Cumming wrote:

… not possible to have a decision in your case until the committee of the Commonwealth CLF meets. It is not expected that this will take place until the Prime Minister returns from overseas … not before latter part of July … This, of course, does not help you with your problem but I wonder whether the principle of ‘the bird in the hand’ would apply.

Finally, on 30 October 1959, Cumming informed Koch:
I have to advise you that your application for a fellowship from the CLF was again considered at a meeting of the Committee of the Fund held last week. The Committee carefully perused and considered your application and decided that it was unable to offer you a fellowship.

In 1965, Koch applied to the Fund again for a novel titled *The Dwarf of Melbourne*. Cumming had been replaced as Secretary by AL Moore. The Advisory Board recommended £2000 fellowships to Thomas Keneally and Koch, £1000 to MH Ellis, and £500 each to Lawson Glassop and Patsy Adam Smith. This time Koch was awarded the fellowship to be taken up in 1966. Menzies resigned as Prime Minister in January 1966.

As a footnote to this case, in a conversation with Koch in 2005 he said that never at any time did he have communist leanings or sympathies. He was, in fact, opposed to communism throughout his life.

After the retirement of Menzies in January 1966, I found no minuted evidence of the use of fresh ASIO reports nor anything in the CLF files that explicitly stated that this practice had ended. Earlier reports were sometimes produced by the Secretary of the CLF to the Prime Minister but to no detectable effect. According to Thomas Shapcott, a Literature Board foundation member and then director from 1983, security reporting on applicants had ceased by 1973.

**Incorporation of the CLF into a statutory body: 1968–75**

In 1968, the government used the Elizabeth Theatre Trust as the basis for the Australian Council of the Arts to administer funding of all the arts by the government, and the CLF became part of that. The planning and establishment of the Australian Council of the Arts occurred under the prime ministerships of Harold Holt and John Gorton.

In 1973, the CLF changed its name to the Literature Board and made important changes to its policies which still continued along the philosophical directions of the 1938 new charter. For example, the Board introduced three-year fellowships of $9000 per annum and the concept of three-year ‘guaranteed income’ awards of $6000. Funding under the prime ministership of Gough Whitlam was increased from $250,000 to $1 million. It also ‘softened’ accounting and bureaucratic requirements on recipients.

In 1975, the Australian Council for the Arts was given statutory authority and became the Australia Council, in a design created by the Whitlam government based somewhat on the examples of the other national bodies with long-standing organisations for funding of the arts. They also introduced some new approaches to the funding of writers and new administrative procedures. During its existence up to 1972 the CLF awarded 248 grants to writers, 249 if Vernon Knowles is included. In conclusion I would like to return to Vernon Knowles.

The Archives is a huge zoo of sleeping stories waiting to be woken up by someone who comes in and prods them. Vernon Knowles was the revealing sleeping story I

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7 For a complete listing of writers see Shapcott.
discovered. The story he has to tell is of a change in thinking, as a daring and compassionate committee began to nurture this young country’s artists. Those three members of the CLF Advisory Board back in 1938 who awarded Knowles his ‘fellowship’ laid the foundations of the Australia Council today which, in general, shows the same spirit. The heroes of this story are the committee, who bravely attempted to create a new cultural ethos, and the Archives, who so carefully preserved this story so that I was able to stumble across it and wake it up.

© 2005 Frank Moorhouse. Frank Moorhouse is an internationally renowned novelist and essayist whose novel Dark Palace (2000) won the Miles Franklin Prize for Australian Literature. Frank Moorhouse was the National Archives’ 2004 Frederick Watson Fellow.

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