OBITUARY

Thomas Peter Wilsted, 1943 – 2024
ARANZ first President and Life Member

By Stuart Strachan

Of Danish settler parentage, Tom Wilsted was born in Detroit, 16 April 1943, and grew up in Greenville, small town Michigan, where his parents had a furniture store. From 1962 he attended Kalamazoo College, where he met Mary, his future wife of 57 years, before going on to the University of Wisconsin at Madison. Here in 1968, he graduated MA in history with his American Civil War thesis: Roger A. Pryor: Secessionist and Soldier, 1849-1865. So, a lifelong fascination with history and its sources was confirmed.

While a student he received early archives training working part-time in the manuscripts section of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin before taking up a position as a field representative with the Illinois State Historical Society at Springfield, where he was responsible for all Library acquisitions including manuscripts, books and newspapers. He quickly became an active member of the Society of American Archivists, from 1971 serving on its Collecting Personal Papers committee. He also became a member of the Midwest Archives Conference and the Organisation of American Historians.[1] Jim Traue, then Chief Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library, is credited with spotting Tom on a visit to the United States, leading him to come to New Zealand in November 1973, with his wife Mary and young son Jeffery, to take up the position of Manuscripts Librarian at the Turnbull in succession to Margaret Scott.



Figure 1.

Thomas Peter Wilsted, 1943-2024
Source: Author

Tom's arrival here came at a watershed moment in the development of archives within New Zealand, both institutionally and professionally after a long period of slow growth. On arrival he very happily joined forces with a small number of other engaged archivists: Rosemary Collier, Stuart Strachan, Peter Miller, Robin Griffin, Ian Matheson, Ian Thwaites and others, who then had as their vehicle the Archives Committee of the New Zealand Library Association with its fledgling journal *Archifacts*. It soon became apparent that remedying the arrested state of our governmental National Archives and the disparate arrangements for archives preservation outside Wellington required more forceful advocacy and a gathering of interest than could be provided through the Library Association. So supported by sympathetic seniors, Jim Traue at Turnbull, Michael Hitchings at Hocken, and Judith Hornabrook at the National Archives, the group collectively resolved to form its own dedicated association, with Tom taking on a leading role.

Encouraged by the formation of the Australian Society of Archivists in 1975 and with much testing of the water beforehand to establish interest, the inaugural general meeting of the new Association was held in Wellington on 2 October 1976. However, unlike the Australian Society, its membership was made broadly inclusive, welcoming interested academics, genealogists and local historians, as well as archivists and records keepers, to gain better numbers and give a greater national presence. Tom was elected President. He was an obvious choice, with his professional experience of archives associations in the United States and his key position as Manuscripts Librarian at Turnbull. Moreover, he had shown considerable initiative and energy in the lead-up to the inaugural meeting. Subsequently, he was instrumental in instigating the invitation to Dr Wilfrid Smith, Dominion Archivist of Canada, to report on the state of archives in New Zealand, much as Dr Kaye Lamb had earlier reported on archives in Australia in 1973. The resultant Smith Report (1978) had success in gaining some additional resources for National Archives from its parent department, the Department of Internal Affairs, and in giving fresh urgency to a long overdue look at its dated governing legislation, the *1957 Archives Act*.

Within Turnbull Tom was also busy. He introduced special sub-collections on personal war documents to help stem their loss to overseas collectors, on women's papers and organisations as feminist history began to take hold, and on the relatively neglected field of records of members of parliament. These did not always endear him to those reinvigorated institutions outside Wellington which now had their own ideas for collecting these!

He also raised Turnbull's standard of physical care by importing in bulk direct from the United States preservation-quality folders and Hollinger boxes, as well as introducing standard archives transit boxes. Equivalent locally made or sourced supplies are now generally accepted for most of our archives and manuscript collections.

Tom was with us for just a further two years, during which he proved a strongly engaged President promoting seminars,

writing articles, touring the country and raising ARANZ's profile generally. But in the end the call of his native land with family and friends proved too strong for us to hold him. He left in June 1978 to take up the position of national Director of the Salvation Army Archives in New York, but not before a special dinner was held for him and the conferment of the Association's first life membership.[2] Tom's time here and his presidential incumbency were seminal and in retrospect may regarded as an all too brief honeymoon. Foundations were surely laid, but tougher times lay ahead.

In the United States Tom was to have a long and distinguished archives career. Following his directorship of the Salvation Army Archives, he was appointed Associate Director of the very voluminous American Heritage Centre archives at the University of Wyoming in Laramie, and then in 1996 was appointed Director of the newly opened Thomas J. Dodd Research Centre at the University of Connecticut, Storrs, remaining in that position until retirement in 2008. Here Tom was probably at his happiest. His colleagues remember him as a strong leader, who "established the prominence of many of the programs and collections of the archives, most notably in Human Rights."[3]

At the same time, he began publishing, authoring several books on archives management, particularly on the design and build of repositories, beginning with co-authoring *Managing Archival and Manuscript Repositories* (1992), which won the Society of American Archivists Waldo Leland Gifford Prize. He followed this up with *New and Remodelled Archival Facilities* (Society of American Archivists, 2007).

On his retirement in 2008 Tom and Mary moved to Green Valley, Arizona, for its greater warmth. At the same time, he founded Wilsted Consulting, simultaneously leading the team with Michelele Pacifico that in 2009 produced the very comprehensive *Archives and Special Collections Facilities: Guidelines for Archivists, Librarians, Architects and Engineers*, which was endorsed by the Society of American Archivists as its national standard. It won glowing reviews both nationally and internationally from such luminaries as Britain's Tim Padfield and Australia's Ted Ling. Not surprisingly, it was awarded the Society of American Archivists 2010 Preservation Publication Award. He had already the previous year deservedly been made a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, his nominator describing him as "a dynamic and visionary leader who sees the big picture and commands respect in a very natural and unassuming way."[4]

As a consultant, up until his second retirement about 2015, Tom is reported by the Society on its website as having "worked with dozens of architects, planners and building owners in planning and designing archives and archives-museum facilities".[5] He was also much in demand across the country as a lecturer and teacher, leading seminars and workshops.

Tom and his wife Mary had all their lives been people of committed Christian faith, supportive of their local church wherever they were. This expressed itself most forcefully in their later years in Green Valley, particularly with programmes of assistance given by their church to distressed migrants from across the southern border, including the leaving of water where it could help them. This was not popular and took congregational courage, but certainly accorded with Tom's keen interest in human rights from his days at the Dodd Research Centre.

It was then also that he rediscovered his interest in road biking, riding almost every day, whatever the conditions, with local groups, including the Posada Peddlers and GVR Cycling groups, both of which he founded with a colleague. He wrote and edited their newsletters, organised bike drives for local charities, and volunteered generally within La Posada retirement village. Each year he would ride his age in miles, a considerable achievement that he would proudly post.[6]

Tom retained a strong attachment to New Zealand and would regularly send back links and snippets from the United States concerning our country. And he revisited at least three times, last in 2017 when in succession he rode with me the West Coast Wilderness, Roxburgh Gorge and Clutha Gold trails. It was an unforgettable experience for us both, then in our seventies.

Tom rode for the last time on 6 April 2024. When out riding he died of a massive heart attack, just ten days short of his 81st birthday and yet another post. A born organiser and dedicated archivist, Tom Wilsted, our first president and life member, will be well and kindly remembered for his selfless and important contributions to archives and the archivist profession in two countries, New Zealand and the United States.

I wish to thank Mary and Jeff Wilsted for their assistance with the writing of Tom's obituary.

ENDNOTES

1. 'News Notes', *Archifacts* 2 (June 1974), p. 2/7.
2. 'Analecta', *Archifacts* 6 (June 1978), p. 139.
3. University of Connecticut Facebook Page.
4. Society of American Archivists, 'Fellows', 2008, available at www2.archivists.org/recognition/2008/fellows, accessed 6 August 2024.
5. Society of American Archivists, 'Thomas Wilsted', n.d., available at https://www2.archivists.org/prof-education/faculty/thomas-wilsted, accessed 6 August 2024.
6. Memorialsource.com, 'Thomas Wilsted', 2024, available at https://memorialsource.com/memorial/thomas-wilsted, accessed 6 August 2024.