

Letters from a cultural icon



(l-r) Joan Sheldon MLA, deputy premier, treasurer and minister for the arts; Rob Borbidge MLA, premier of Queensland; and Pat Corrigan

It is interesting ... to note how three generations of a family practically cover a century, for Grandpa Williams, if he arrived in Fiji in 1840 — possibly earlier — must have been born in the early years of the century, when Australia was a convict settlement with a few thousand inhabitants. You and I, who had contact in youth with Grandpa Williams, have lived to see it swollen — I won't say developed — into a polemical section of the Earth's crust with rocket ranges and atomic bombs building.'

(Norman Lindsay, in a letter to his sister Mary, n.d.)

The Lindsay family — Norman, Lionel, Ruby, Darryl, Jack and Rose — are known as Australian cultural legends. For the last part of the 19th century and the first half of the 20th, the art, writings, scandals and secrets of the Lindsay family have enthralled generations of Australians. Whether fascinated, intimidated, threatened or enthralled, those who knew the legendary Lindsays were changed by them.

Much has been written both by and about the Lindsay family. And we continue to be interested in the complex web of relationships, revelations and recriminations of this volatile family of artists. However, despite numerous articles, biographies and a feature film, the most fascinating insights into the Lindsays' colourful history still come from the family itself.

Thousands of letters were exchanged among members of the Lindsay family: from Norman to his brother Lionel and sister Mary; from Norman to his mother; from Mary to Norman's daughters, Jane and Helen; and from Norman to his sons, friends and acquaintances.

The letters, which are sometimes whimsical and sometimes profound, but always thoughtful, give a glimpse into the

family's private life. However, some people believe that the letters were always intended for a wider audience — most of the family were aware of their unique position in society and probably planned on eventual public consumption of their words. Whether public or private, the Lindsay knack of turning a phrase makes for enjoyable reading:

'I'm not sure of my figures, of course, as I am completely devoid of the mathematical faculty, which gratifies my self esteem as I regard it as the lowest of all mental exercises.' (Norman to Mary Lindsay, n.d.)

On 7 October 1997 Gold Coast businessman Pat Corrigan presented the State Library of Queensland with a collection of 3000 Lindsay letters valued at more than \$1 million. This collection, which also includes press clippings, an original pencil sketch and four linocuts, is one of the largest donations to a library in Australia by an individual. Mr Corrigan said that 'By giving to a State Library, one never loses the pleasure of the material because one is able to visit it again and again, knowing that it is well looked after and accessible to all'.

This latest collection of Lindsay family letters will be added to the extensive Lindsay Family Archive, which Mr Corrigan has donated to the State Library over the past five years. The archive is held within the James Hardie Library of Australian Fine Arts, which is recognised as Australia's premier fine arts library.

A keen collector from the age of nine, Mr Corrigan's interest in collecting Australian art began in 1970. By 1980 his collection of books on Australian art and artists was sufficiently substantial to attract the interest of James Hardie Industries, who purchased the collection to launch the museum of fine arts. ■

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