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How are arts leaders from a hundred years ago remembered today? This unusual, intriguing and well-written book draws on a range of archival material, from a historian’s perspective, to chart the career of one of the longest-serving directors of the National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne, Australia. L. Bernard Hall served as director (we would now call him director and CEO) of the Gallery for 43 eventful years. This would be unheard of today, when tenure of CEOs is usually three to five years. He served from 1892 until his death in the line of duty on a trip to England to scout for pictures, in 1935. But as the title of the book suggests, we know little about him: he has been largely forgotten.

Hall’s appointment, as was typical for those long gone days in the colony of Victoria as part of the British Empire, was made in England. No Australian was deemed suitable for this august role. Reasons for his long tenure include the changing nature of the Gallery over time, the receipt of one of the largest philanthropic bequests in the history of the Gallery, which set it up as a rich gallery on the international scene, and interminable fighting among the trustees, which made relations between paid staff and volunteer trustees rickety to say the least. The trustees perceived that they were serving in a voluntary capacity and thus were amateurs in the long, noble tradition that has now been superseded by recognition of the importance of professionals, be they trustees or paid executives. Often, Hall felt sidelined and marginalized; however, he was a survivor and a political operator as well as an able administrator who understood his patch well. While Hall was no innovative painter or entrepreneur – those qualities would not have been appreciated in the conservative, colonial world in which he operated – he knew the limits of his world and operated effectively within them.

The research undertaken by Gwen Rankin is meticulous but also has resulted in a riveting story of the early days of arts leadership in Australia’s cultural world. I have read two other tales of early Australian gallery directors. One was the bitter autobiographical account of an early-20th-century director of the Art Gallery of New South Wales that told of backbiting and infighting par excellence. The other was the autobiography of a director who followed Hall at the National Gallery of Victoria, also long-serving and much loved but far better served by his trustees as leaders and change agents.

Notably, Sir Keith Murdoch, the father of the international media tycoon Rupert Murdoch, was chair of the board of trustees during the latter director’s tenure. Between them, these two men changed the Gallery for the better, setting it up as an exemplar in the southern hemisphere for decades to come. Perhaps 10 years on and a second world war made the difference in attitudes to paid staff in leadership roles at the Gallery.

But back to the story of Hall.

Hall’s decision to sail to Melbourne was made out of love for a woman, an Australian he met in London. His career in the art world was taking off in London after his training as a painter in England and Europe, notably Germany. His art work showed the influences of this background, being tonal rather than impressionistic in nature. In other words, he was little influenced in his painting style by the new wave of French painters of the time or, later, of Cubism or Futurism or any of the other isms that became fashionable. It is impossible to say, of course, what turn his painting career might have taken were he to have remained in Europe. Hall was aware of the limitations that moving to Australia had placed on his artistic development. But where there is love there is a way. Australia was to remain his home until the end. Although his first wife died young, he then married another Australian woman, cementing his relationship with the country.

In those days, the National Gallery of Victoria had an art school for those who wished to learn how to paint or sculpt as well as the Gallery, which was developing a collection from a small base. Hall was considered a director with that important mix of skills: painterly and administrative. But from the beginning the trustees beat Hall down over his salary, his terms and conditions, and his desire to develop the Gallery collection as an impressive and contemporary one. There is evidence that Hall’s own selection of pictures for the Gallery was admirable but that he had many sleepless nights worrying about precious funds wasted on second-rate pictures that the trustees approved for purchase. The convoluted and political nature of decision-making makes fascinating reading. Has anything changed in galleries today? Well, certainly there are much clearer policies and procedures with respect to who is responsible and accountable for particular functions, which was not the case in Hall’s day.

This book stands apart from run-of-the-mill histories of people in the arts and from personal diatribes or invectives that I have read. It provides wonderful insight into the world of culture and institutions in colonial and postcolonial
Australia, focusing on Melbourne, one of our largest and most sophisticated cities today, and providing a glimpse into the world of past arts leaders and how they managed the machinations and Machiavellian nature of their role. *L. Bernard Hall: The Man the Art World Forgot* brings into focus a forgotten figure who had a central role in quietly making the Gallery into a great institution. It provides many examples of leadership successes, behind-the-scenes workings and the use of spokespeople to champion causes that Hall’s own position did not allow him to take to the media. The fact that the Felton Bequest was left to the Gallery during Hall’s tenure and the nature of the will, which divided responsibility among several decision-makers, speak loudly of Hall’s contribution to cementing the future of the Gallery – and the distrust that the benefactor felt for some trustees or indeed for any one party who might use the funds for their own rather than the Gallery’s purposes.

I recommend this book to students of history, students of art history and researchers on arts leaders who want to examine the organizational life of past arts. This is the story of an arts leader who helped make the National Gallery of Victoria what it is today.

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