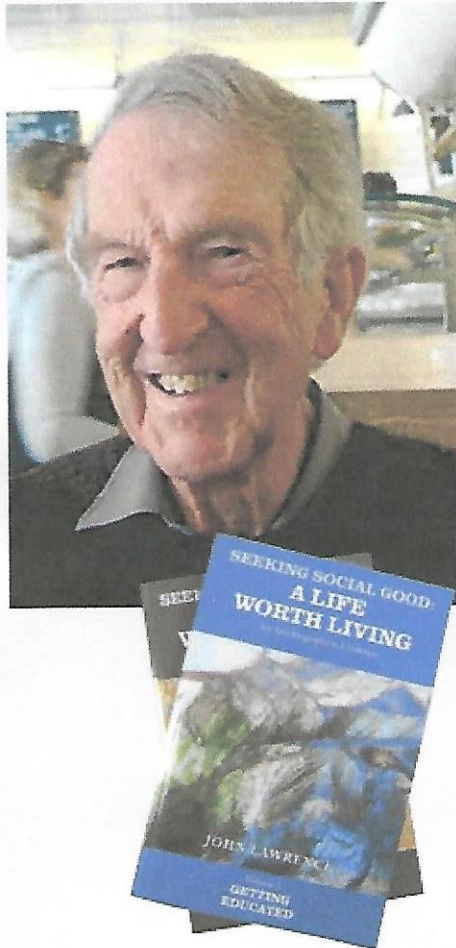


## 'AN INVALUABLE RESOURCE': THE AUTOBIOGRAPHY OF JOHN LAWRENCE

JANE MILLER



### About the author

Social work historian, **Jane Miller AM, PhD**, is the former Head of the Social Work Department at the Royal Children's Hospital, Melbourne. She is an AASW Life Member and President of the University of Melbourne Social Work Alumni Association.

John Lawrence's autobiography, *Seeking Social Good: A Life Worth Living*, is about more than a long and distinguished career, it is also partly the history of social work in Australia and partly a social history of the times. Discussing the book, social worker and historian Jane Miller explains why it is such a valuable resource for anyone interested in the back story of the profession in Australia.

The celebration of 70 years of our national association last year threw into stark focus the fact that Australian social workers know little about their profession's history in this country. Australian professional social workers have not prioritised keeping records of their history. I know from my experience undertaking historical research just how difficult it is to obtain documentary evidence about Australian social work from the past.

And we are not alone. It seems to be an international social work problem. American academic social worker and historian Robert Fisher commented in *Social Service Review* (1999) that for social workers, history has 'always been tangential, not fitting with the more present-oriented, science-based discipline of social work'. We tend to be more action-oriented than reflective about our history. Yet if we are not to repeat the mistakes of the past we do need to understand what has happened in previous years.

The good news is that we do now have some progress on this issue. John Lawrence, the author of *Professional social work in Australia*, the only history of professional social work in Australia, has recently completed a substantial autobiography. He has also donated his important personal archive comprising 84 boxes to the University of New South Wales. This archive contains a life-time collection of minutes, reports and correspondence materials, including the material gathered during his work for his doctorate on which his history is based. Much of this material is now virtually unavailable anywhere else.

The material from Lawrence's own career will prove valuable for future researchers, both in Australia and internationally, as it covers his work at Sydney University in Australia's first academic appointment to teach social policy, as well as all his work as the first Professor of Social Work in Australia. He headed the School of Social Work at UNSW for 14 years, and was extensively engaged internationally, not only on sabbatical leaves and other

overseas appointments, but working with international organisations - the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Council for Social Welfare. A former Federal President and Life Member of the AASW, he is a Member of the Order of Australia.

John Lawrence's autobiography, spanning a substantial six volumes, is a frank description of his beginnings, his life and his career, made possible by his collected archives. In it he has been able to draw on letters and documents, not merely relying on memory as so many people are obliged to do. This is not just a personal memoir; it is well-documented historical writing. A keen photographer, he has included many original photographs, including of distinguished social workers from Australia and overseas. The profession's involvement in the developments and issues of the time are traced.

Each volume is accurately indexed, with a cumulative index provided in Volume 6. A scan of the contents pages will give readers a good idea of whether a particular volume covers the issues that particularly interest them. The volumes may be purchased individually. This autobiography will prove extremely useful for future social work historians and should also be essential reading for those teaching social work today.

Bruce Lagay, former Head of Social Work at the University of Melbourne, has said, 'This is an extraordinary record of a life, a life certainly worth living, and an invaluable resource for the social work profession and for a morally grounded social policy perspective.'

Further good news on the historical front is that the Board of the AASW has commenced an archives project with stage one involving the description and assessment of the current archival holdings. When this is completed the Board will be in a position to decide on a future archival strategy.