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*Geoffrey Serle*

## Alan Geoffrey Serle (1922–1998)

Geoff Serle's laconic, unfussed attitude melded with a powerful capacity for concentrated research and a quiet, efficient dedication to public goods. He founded and edited major historical and literary journals, served on editorial committees in a helpful unbossy way, promoted and defended public archives, libraries and art galleries, launched hundreds of honours students' long essays, supervised dozens of graduate theses and monographs, edited (with Bede Nairn) volumes 7 to 10 of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* and in between produced a clutch of important books.

Alan Geoffrey Serle was born on 11 March 1922 to Dora Serle, nee Hake, an accomplished painter, and her husband Percival, accountant, scholar and devoted worker for the National Gallery of Victoria. The family lived in Hawthorn, the sedate, public-spirited heartland of upper middle class Protestant Melbourne. Geoff continued to reside in that neighbourhood till his death.

He attended Scotch College and in 1941 entered the University of Melbourne History School. In October he joined the Melbourne University Regiment and transferred into the Australian Imperial Force in September 1942. He was seriously wounded at Finschhafen, and discharged in June 1943. Serle claimed that the army gave him an acceptance of all sorts and conditions of men that his upbringing and formal education had generally excluded. Otherwise I never heard him mention his war experience. Serle resumed his University studies, joined the University Labor Club, became a founder of the Victorian Fabian Society and edited the *Melbourne University Magazine*. He took a first in History and went to University College Oxford as a Rhodes Scholar. He graduated D.Phil. in 1950 and returned to the Melbourne History School where he taught Australian History until his move to the new Monash University in 1961. Between 1955 and 1963 Serle edited *Historical Studies*. Throughout he refused offers of chairs. In 1955 he married Jessie McDonald, who became a leading historian of Australian interior design and furniture. Serle edited *The Melbourne Scene* with James Grant in 1957 and produced two histories of Victoria in its nineteenth century glory periods, *The Golden Age (1850s)* in 1963 and *The Rush to be Rich (1880s)* in 1971. Both immediately became standard works. *From Deserts The Prophets Come*, 1973, was a brave pioneering survey of Australian literature, theatre, architecture, painting and natural science. *John Monash (1987)* is a major biography which won four historical and literary prizes. Serle also wrote studies of *Sir John Medley*, the great Melbourne University Vice-Chancellor (1983) and a wide-ranging biography of Robin Boyd, the architect and critic (1995). Serle had an awesome authority over a huge sweep of Australian cultural life. He wrote 49 entries for the *Australian*

*Dictionary of Biography* and silently improved scores of others. His masterpiece was his affectionate, and self-revealing, biographical sketch of his father *Percival Serle*.

With AGL Shaw, Serle founded the Friends of the La Trobe Library and edited its journal. He also served as a Vice-President of the Council of the State Library of Victoria, while he privately did good works for the National Library of Australia, the Australian War Memorial and the National and provincial galleries of Victoria, and the National Gallery of Australia. He worked for both *Overland* and *Meanjin* and edited the latter in 1957. He was also a member of the Buildings Classification Committee of the Victorian Branch of the National Trust. Geoff's Order of Australia in 1986 was welcomed by a remarkable range of historians, military people, archivists, writers, architects, librarians, painters, and sports people. He was a champion hurdler, an excellent hockey player, a capable cricketer and Australian Rules footballer, and a shrewd but kindly tennis player.

He was elected to this Academy in 1970.

*F B Smith*