

Cadetship sailing into the past

Smart Start checks out Bruce Martin, Indigenous cadet with the University of Sydney's archives and records management. .

Bruce was studying a bachelor of arts, concentrating on politics, anthropology and sociology. Then through the Indigenous Unit at UNSW, he heard about something called an Archives Cadetship.

"It looked like something that I'd be interested in because it was dealing with the archives of a well-known anthropologist, Professor A P Elkin," says Bruce.

Elkin (1891-1979) was head of the anthropology faculty at the University of Sydney.

"The cadetship provided the opportunity to go through this guy's life work and go through all of his documents and photos and film, and everything that he accumulated while he was working with tribes around Australia."

Bruce says all the archiving is about building up an index so that researchers and other students can access it.

Who was Elkin?

Adolphus Peter Elkin was an Anglican clergyman and THE influential early Australian anthropologist. When Elkin became interested in Australian Aboriginal culture, no anthropology was taught in Australia. Sydney Uni's anthropology department grew up around him.

Until his retirement in 1956, he pretty much dominated Australian anthropology: advising governments, training administrators sent to Papua New Guinea, while also continuing his field research. He was president of the Association for the Protection of Native Races from 1933 to 1962.

After his retirement in 1966, Elkin was appointed a Companion of the Order of St Michael and St George (CMG).

Most importantly, says Bruce, it's so that the Indigenous people who were in these documents – or that these documents are about – can gain access to the information for themselves.

Bruce says that Elkin went into remote areas and did fieldwork on Aboriginal clan-groups. This included Queensland, the Kimberly, Arnhem Land, South Australia, from the early 1920s right through the 1950s.

"I thought it would be a really interesting job to go through the wealth of information he left behind when he passed away. Also the cadetship work complemented my degree in that it would give me skills that I could use when I finish my degree and that I'd be able to put to use when I'm working out in the field."