

# The man behind the prize: a life of J.F. Archibald by Paul J Greguric (1).mp3

**Interviewer:** [00:00:00] Before we begin today, I would like to acknowledge the Gadigal and Wangal people of the Eora Nation on which this podcast is produced and pay my respects to Elders past, present and emerging from across all lands this podcast reaches.

The man behind the prize lived a life that was not without tragedy and mystery... Every year thousands of Sydneysiders visit the Art Gallery of NSW to view the entrants in the Archibald Prize for Portraits, which carries the primary aim to foster portraiture, as well as to perpetuate the memory of great Australians.

This year marks the 100th anniversary of the Archibald, Australia's premiere art prize.

Our very own Marrickville Library holds an extensive historic art book collection.

Paul Greguric grew-up in Adelaide. He studied at the Education Faculty of Sydney University. After graduating, he taught English in NSW high schools for over two decades. He has published both fiction and non-fiction in numerous journals, newspapers and magazines. He currently lives in the Sydney suburb of Waterloo.

Welcome Paul

**Paul Greguric:** [00:01:12] Thanks for having me.

**Interviewer:** [00:01:14] It's our pleasure. Paul, what was it that inspired you to research the life of J.F. Archibald, the name which is synonymous to the most prestigious portrait prize in Australia?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:01:25] I was writing short stories at The State Library of New South Wales, and my routine was to go from where I was living at Museum Lodge to the library in the morning, nine o'clock. And then I'd walk over to the Matthew Talbot Hostel for Homeless Men, where there was a free lunch in the dining room. And during one of those walks, I'd just finished the short story called Petrushka, and I wanted to write something that was non-fiction. And on my walk across The Domain, I saw The Art Gallery and there was a banner hanging down the front which said, Archibald, I knew

about the Archibald Prize. And I thought not many people know about the person. And I certainly didn't. When I returned to the library after lunch, I looked for anything about Archibald and there was only one book that had been written about his life by Sylvia Lawson back in 1983 called The Archibald Paradox. So I requested it. I looked at it. I didn't sit down and read it because I already had the idea of writing my own biography and I wanted to leave Sylvia's alone. She also wrote the Archibald entry in the Australian Dictionary of Biography. So there wasn't much else. So I decided to start from scratch. I went to a catalogue card and there was a handwritten note. Transcription of Archibald's half-sister had written to the Mitchell Library and complained that they were calling him Jules Francois Archibald, when in fact his real name was John Feltham Archibald. And I thought, well, there's a bit of drama to begin. And the next morning I began my research and that's what happened.

**Interviewer:** [00:03:18] From a handwritten catalogue entry. Young Archibald in your biography comes across as extremely ambitious with a tremendous thirst for 'making it big'. Can you elaborate on some of his many career choices which eventually led him to The Bulletin?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:03:35] Yes, that's a good question. He was ambitious even when he was a little boy. A beautiful scene where it's in my book where his father, who was a Goldfield policeman, visited the Archibald's classroom to quiz him to see how well it was going at school and ask the little boy Archibald to read quite a difficult essay by someone called Lamb. And at the end of the essay, Archibald, the little boy said to his father that he was certain that he'd be able to write something just as clever. And that was the beginning of his writing ambitions. His father put him into a Goldfield Grammar School because he saw promise in the boy and young Archibald once again ambitious, left after only one year and decided to begin his journey to journalism by becoming something called a compositor. And compositors were usually teenage boys who work in the print room of a newspaper, put the letters of the type together in the printing process. When he was doing that, he soaked up conversations and local issues and read the stuff that he was setting in type and decided that he was going to go to Melbourne and not only become a journalist but become the senior editor of a newspaper called The Argus, which no longer with us but was.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:04:59] As significant as The Sydney Morning Herald today, he went to Melbourne, tried his best at becoming a journalist and attempted to write a feature article on the Melbourne Immigrant's Home. So, he wanted to do sort of social investigative journalism and someone beat him to it. A much more experienced older journalist beat him to it and killed his story effectively. And he just impulsively said, no more journalism for me. That was another quality that he had. He was a little bit of an impulsive person and he got a quite a boring job as a public servant, as a casual actually in the Victorian Education Department. But the ambition was still there because soon after I think there was a broken heart in there somewhere. He arrived in Sydney and at the age of 24, founded The Bulletin newspaper. That's pretty significant ambition happening there for 24-year-old to create an entire newspaper that was very successful.

**Interviewer:** [00:06:08] So he did make it big in the end. Didn't he.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:06:10] He did, he did. He wasn't a very good writer. He wanted to be a good writer. He wasn't he found out that he was a very good editor and very good at taking other people's writing and polishing it and honing it. And that was the secret to success.

**Interviewer:** [00:06:28] Paul, can you talk a little about how Archibald nurtured the careers of some very prominent Australian writers and artists?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:06:35] He certainly did. I have said this before to others, if there was no Archibald, there'd be no Henry Lawson, there'd be no Banjo Paterson, possibly no Miles Franklin, for example, Banjo Paterson, the first writer. He wanted to be a poet. And a writer the first thing that he sent to The Bulletin was this five page essay called Australia for the Australians, which went straight into the wastepaper basket. And he followed it up with a poem. And this is this is an interesting story here in Khartoum. In Africa, there was an Islamic uprising against the local British presence. The movie about it is called Khartoum. You might have seen it stars Charlton Heston as General Gordon. What Patterson did is he he imagined that he was someone called Al-Mahdi who was fighting the British. And the poem basically says, What are you Australians doing over here in my country? You should go home. You'd never get away with a poem like that today if you were pretending to be another nationality. And Archibald published it. And that was the beginning of Patterson's career in poetry. Waltzing Matilda, The Man from

Snowy River all appeared in The Bulletin. And just down the road, a young Henry Lawson was living, and he sent his first poem to Archibald that also ended up in the wastepaper basket. His next poem, Sons of the South, which Archibald changed to A Song of the Republic, is Lawson's first published work. So there's two great Australian poets which began on the pages of The Bulletin. Also, Archibald interesting story with Archibald and Lawson in 1892. Lawson's drinking was affecting his writing and Archibald said, look, here's a one-way ticket and five pounds.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:08:43] I want you to go to Bourke, get away from this drinking culture here in Sydney. And it was a one-way ticket. Incidentally, when Lawson came back, he created those short stories that we all know, The Drover's Wife, The Bush Undertaker, The Union Buries Its Dead. That was all because of Archibald's incentive to get Lawson creative again. Miles Franklin. She was in her late teens. She'd written My Brilliant Career. She couldn't find a publisher. Henry Lawson, who was contributing to the Bulletin, wrote a letter to a publisher in England, and My Brilliant Career was finally published. And when it was reviewed for the first time on the pages of The Bulletin, it was given a brilliant review. And that was the beginning of her career, not to mention a little-known female journalists Ina Wildman, Louise Mack. They were writing for The Bulletin from the very beginning of their careers. Louise Mack was the first female Australian war correspondent. She found herself in Belgium 1914, and she wrote a book called A Woman's Experiences in the Great War, which is out of print, but I think should be brought back to our library shelves. And finally, the artist Florence Rodway was doing portraits in Sydney and Archibald wrote to his friend, the Labour politician John Fitzgerald, and extolled her talent and they would commission Florence to do portraits of famous Sydneysiders Florence Rodway actually entered the portrait of Archibald in the 1921 Archibald Prize. And it was a Runner-Up. He certainly encouraged many, many Australian writers and artists. Indeed

**Interviewer:** [00:10:33] That's an impressive list. Very impressive. Archibald left a gift to his fellow countrymen in Hyde Park, which was specified in his will. As stunning as the fountain is, I need to ask, did his fellow countrymen want this fountain or was it a case of I want to so I'm going to build a fountain, have a fountain built after me after I die. Can you talk about the inscription that's there currently?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:11:06] Indeed, yes. His half-sister Lucy was appalled at that inscription. And she she wrote to the librarian about that as well. The inscription suggests that the fountain is there because of the alliance between France and Australia during the First World War. I can tell you that if there wasn't a First World War, there would still be an Archibald fountain in the early 19th, hundreds. There was a fad in Sydney for seeing Sydney as a kind of a mix between Ancient Rome and Modern Paris. You can see that in the drawings and articles that appeared in magazines like The Lone Hand, they had this sort of fascination with Sydney being a very, very cultural city. But if you look around Sydney today for beautiful architecture from the early 1900s, you can't see it. There's not much of it around, if any. But there's the Archibald Fountain, which is a very beautiful neoclassical monument. And that's because Archibald, towards the end of his life, was very, very interested in making Sydney a cultural capital. And that's why he he put in his will that he wanted a gorgeous fountain in Hyde Park. The inscription to me, the alliance between France and Australia, that being a good thing, it seems to me sort of an afterthought. So I conclude by saying, if there wasn't that alliance, they'd still be in Archibald Fountain. So, yeah, good question.

**Interviewer:** [00:12:46] And it's meeting place for so many people, too, I believe, when they go down to the city.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:12:51] Yeah, in fact I I've met people at the Archibald Fountain. Yes, indeed. But I hope my book brings to light the fact that behind the fountain is actually a person's story as well.

**Interviewer:** [00:13:03] Yeah, that's right. Well, you've brought this to life in your book, haven't you

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:13:08] Hopefully, yes.

**Interviewer:** [00:13:09] Paul, before we go, could you talk about how the State Library of New South Wales became your second home during the writing of this book? What are your thoughts on the importance of public libraries and how did the library inspire and support your writing process?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:13:25] Oh, yes, I wrote the entire manuscript, at the Mitchell Library, the wing of the State Library of New South Wales. I was visiting Mitchell Library every morning and writing creative fiction. It was full of HSC students and university students. Everyday. I would work from an area called the Special Collections Section. And as I mentioned earlier, I began the whole book by looking at a transcription of Lucy Archibald's complaint to the librarians of the Mitchell. There's very little information on Archibald on the Internet. So most of my research was gleaned from documents in archive boxes in that special collections area. So letters, photographs and jottings. The men and women around Archibald would write notes to themselves on documents. The library staff at the Mitchell Library are specialists in various fields, and one particular note to himself that Archibald wrote was actually written in something called Pitman Shorthand. Now, Pitman shorthand was the language used by journalists and secretaries, and if you haven't studied it, you can't decode it. And one of this is just an example of how important the librarians were with this book. One librarian took it upon herself to go away and come back, and she actually deciphered what Archibald had written.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:14:59] And he'd written something about Dame Nellie Melba. It wasn't that flattering, but at least it's actually in the book here and there was also a photograph that I discovered of Archibald as a toddler sitting on a lap of a lady of the era. And it was one of the librarians who was an expert in 19th century clothing who was able to differentiate between the family members. And so I could tell me whose lap Archibald was sitting on. So without library staff and without the archival material, this book could never have been written. Another interesting fact is that I would have read hundreds and hundreds of pages of The Bulletin online because they were digitized by the National Library in Canberra. Ironically, I never actually saw an actual copy of The Bulletin. And one day I opened up an archival box by one of a collection of documents by one of Archibald's colleagues. And then, lo and behold, was an actual Bulletin newspaper in its distinctive red paper. The entire Bulletin collection is actually hard copy in our banks, safe in the basement of the Mitchell Library. But I never I never got to see it. So, but it's all it was all there online.

**Interviewer:** [00:16:24] Do you think maybe one day you will get to see it?

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:16:27] I did. When I was writing the book, I did ask to have a look and the librarian sort of was like, well, you know, you haven't got the authority yet, but I guess I have now. So, I would make a visit. Yeah.

**Interviewer:** [00:16:40] Yeah, that'll be great.

**Paul J Greguric:** [00:16:42] Yeah. So in conclusion, the Mitchell Library and the staff were absolutely invaluable. Without them, this book would never see the light of day.

**Interviewer:** [00:16:51] Thank you, Paul, for your time and for a wonderful chat. We wish you all the best with your biography, *The Man Behind the Prize* and with all future publications. Paul's book is available both physical and electronic formats at any of our Inner West Libraries ready for you to borrow or log on to our catalogue and place a reservation at any time. If you would like to purchase Paul's book, please visit your favourite independent bookstore online or in person. By everyone. And thank you for listening and look out for upcoming digital content through the Inner West Library, What's on and social media channels.