

John Birman OBE, Cit WA, 1913 – 1989



John Birman emigrated to Australia in 1937 leaving a family in Poland none of who survived the second world war. Unable to pursue his profession as a journalist, he had a variety of manual jobs before enlisting in the AIF. He served as a member of an Australian anti-aircraft battery in New Guinea and, having taught himself English, was subsequently transferred to the army's fledgling education unit.

In 1948 John Birman was appointed deputy director of the Adult Education Board of Western Australia - a forerunner to university extension today - where his long association with the University of Western Australia and the Festival of Perth began.

The Festival of Perth found its genesis in the morale boosting entertainment programs organised by the army education unit at Western Command which spilt over into the post-war community arts activities of the University of Western Australia's Adult Education Board ("AEB"). John was closely involved with these developments at Western Command before his demobilisation and after his appointment to the AEB.

He was Acting Director in 1950 when the State Government commissioned the AEB to arrange a country arts program as part of the 1951 national jubilee celebration of the attainment of self-government.

John Birman was the director the Festival of Perth from 1955 to 1976. During that time there were many presentations of music, dance, performing arts, films, and, not least, visual art. Among the early exhibitions that spring to mind were the 1950 exhibition of British painting in Winthrop Hall organised in conjunction with the British Council; a gala exhibition of contemporary Australian paintings at the Art Gallery of Western Australia assembled by the then Director, Laurie Thomas. In 1956 the first of the open-air exhibition of local artists was set up in the Supreme Court Gardens. Finally, the splendid variety of individual showings of emergent Australian artists as the Skinner Gallery in Malcolm Street, for example Donald friend; Sydney Nolan; Robert Juniper and many others. To mark the tenth anniversary of the Festival, an enlarged visual arts program, a Perth Art Prize, was initiated in 1962. The Wardle Prize was established in 1965.

Central to the Festival philosophy was the inspiration its offerings might provide for local artists in whatever genre they work. The Festival was never envisaged as an isolated happening that did not feed back into the community it served. Rather it was seen as a stimulating event for both Western Australian and visiting practitioners, particularly young and up and coming artists. John Birman had enormous faith in young people and nothing would have given him more pleasure than to be associated with the School of Visual Arts at the Academy.

Although he is best remembered for his work as director of the Festival of Perth, John Birman held the position concurrently with his "day job" - deputy director of adult education, and subsequently director of University Extension at the University of Western Australia. In this capacity he was responsible for organising classes, courses and seminars designed to extend the university's offerings to the wider community.

One of John Birman's proudest achievements was the establishment of 6UVS-FM - Western Australia's first FM radio station, and its first community based radio station under the auspices of the University of Western Australia.

John Birman retired from the University of Western Australia in 1978. He was honoured for his contribution to the community by an appointment as an officer of the Order of the British Empire. He was also the inaugural Citizen of Western Australia for the Arts. He died in 1989 survived by his wife Wendy and 3 sons.