

## Frederick David McCarthy: an Appreciation

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**ABSTRACT.** During his long scholarly career, Frederick David McCarthy published more than 300 articles, monographs and books. Most people know McCarthy as a scholar of Aboriginal studies, but few know the man who began his career as a 14 year old boy as a library assistant, and later became one of the most influential scholars in the study of Aboriginal prehistory and anthropology.

KHAN, K., 1993. Frederick David McCarthy: an appreciation. Records of the Australian Museum, Supplement 17: 1-5.

Frederick David McCarthy was born one of identical twins on 13 August, 1906 in Crystal Street, Petersham, NSW. His father came from Liverpool, England, and through his Glasgow-born mother he traces his ancestry to the Isle of Man. The McCarthy family soon moved from Petersham to 29 North Avenue, Leichhardt, NSW, where he lived with his family until he married Elsie Bramell in 1940.

At the age of 14 the young Master F. McCarthy was told by his next door neighbour, Mr Lucas, a carpenter at the Australian Museum, that a vacancy existed in the Museum Library. McCarthy promptly applied for the position (Australian Museum Archive M15/1920). Charles Hedley, Acting Curator following the death of Robert Etheridge Jr, replied on 23 March 1920 offering him the position of Library Clerk (Australian Museum Archive M15/1920). The Museum Staff Records Book shows that F.D. McCarthy signed on to work in the Library on 23 March 1920 (Fig.1). In 1930 he transferred to the Department of Birds and Reptiles for 18 months, adding the skills of taxonomy to those of cataloguing he had learned in the Library during the previous ten years. This fundamental training in organising information has

remained with him throughout his career.

In 1932 he was offered the position of Assistant Curator of Ethnology to W.W. Thorpe, who had been appointed Ethnologist in 1906. Thorpe had little education and no formal training in Ethnology or anything else. McCarthy remembers Thorpe as being a gentle but stubborn man who refused to catalogue anything, claiming he could recognise any object on sight and knew where everything was kept. Fred tried to change this, but was not prepared to argue as Thorpe was not only an older man, but also a weight-lifter. McCarthy's period as assistant to Thorpe was limited in time and scope, as Thorpe died a few months after McCarthy's appointment. Thorpe's sudden demise left the newly-appointed McCarthy with an enormous backlog of uncatalogued objects to put into some sort of systematic order.

Fred's sporting career is probably not as well known as his academic pursuits. In 1932, as a member of the Leichhardt Rowing Club, he rowed bow in the State Lightweight Fours Rowing Championship on the old Greater Public Schools' course. Nine crews competed and as McCarthy's boat, leading by a length, swept past Cabarita wharf, a water-police launch came out from Hen