

SIR ROBERT STRACHAN WALLACE – FORMER VICE-CHANCELLOR (1928–47)

Sir Robert Strachan Wallace (1882 - 1961) was Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney from 1928 to 1947 and an ex-officio Fellow of Senate.

PROFILE

(1882 - 1961)

BA Oxf MA Aberd LLD

Vice-Chancellor and ex-officio Fellow of Senate 1928 - 1947

His background

Sir Robert Strachan Wallace, University of Sydney Vice-Chancellor, was born on 1 August 1882 at Old Deer, Aberdeenshire, Scotland.

He was educated at Gordon's College and on a scholarship at the University of Aberdeen (MA, 1904), gaining first-class honours in English language and literature. Having taught at his old school, he proceeded to Christ Church, Oxford (BA, 1907); there he was awarded the Holford exhibition in English and took first-class honours in English literature. Wallace returned as assistant-professor to Aberdeen.

Appointed to the chair of English language and literature at the University of Melbourne in 1912, Wallace was a dedicated teacher and scholar, and an able administrator - dean of arts (1914-17), vice-president (1917, 1922-24) and president (1925-27) of the professorial board, and chairman of the extension board.

Commissioned in November 1917, he was posted the following year to the AIF Education Service, Cambridge, England, and appointed director of the Australian Corps Central School at Rue, France. His AIF appointment ended on 3 November 1919.

Vice-Chancellor of the University of Sydney

In 1927, on the unanimous decision of the Senate of the University of Sydney, Wallace was appointed Vice-Chancellor. On his arrival with his family in January 1928, he was unimpressed with the dilapidated buildings, and with the unkempt grounds whose beauty he set about restoring, assisted later by Professor E G Waterhouse and relief workers during the Depression.

He was confronted with severe problems brought about by a decrease in the government grant, and had to cope with salary reductions, lack of essential equipment and financial stringency in all aspects of university life. That the university weathered the storm while developing some new courses and maintaining academic standards was largely due to his careful administration and ability to obtain co-operation and loyalty from a staff under considerable pressure. New chairs were established, including the Bosch chairs in medicine,

surgery and bacteriology. A degree course in divinity and several new diploma courses were also introduced.

Wallace benefited from his contacts within the government through his involvement as the Commonwealth's chief censor for cinematographic films (1922-27) and as a member (1932-35) of the Australian Broadcasting Commission. A major achievement was the decision of the State government in 1937 to increase the University's statutory endowment to a permanent £100,000. Wallace, however, feared that too much government assistance might endanger the university's autonomy and aimed to find further income from independent sources.

Among the major building projects undertaken in his term of office were a new medical school, biology laboratories, the departments of biochemistry and geography, and a lecture theatre which bears his name. Sancta Sophia College was incorporated into the University, the veterinary farm at Badgerys Creek was purchased with the assistance of a grant from the (John) McGarvie Smith Institute (1936) and the plant breeding station at Curlewis was established (1944). Wallace was also a founder of the New England University College at Armidale.

The careful and wise handling of students was a strong point of his vice-chancellorship. Students respected Wallace's fairness and understanding which he demonstrated in the creation of the students' representative council. He tried to satisfy the graduates (who had long sought representation on the Senate) by establishing the standing committee of convocation.

In World War II Wallace faced the task of guiding the university through the attendant problems of manpower restrictions, the urgency of wartime research and the lack of essential equipment. Responsible for successfully implementing the Commonwealth Reconstruction Training Scheme for ex-service men and women, he saw a dramatic expansion in the number of students and staff. Knighted in 1941, Wallace retired in 1947.

Information taken from the Australian Dictionary of Biography



Vice-Chancellor Sir Robert Wallace, 1933, *photo nla.pic-an23594730, courtesy National Library of Australia.*



Vice-Chancellor Sir Robert Wallace, *photo G3_224_1268, courtesy University of Sydney Archives.*



Vice-Chancellor Sir Robert Wallace (centre) and Sir Mungo MacCallum (probably while Chancellor in the 1930s) (right), *photo, courtesy University of Sydney Archives.*



Portrait of Sir Robert Strachan Wallace, c 1948, Artist Sir William Dargie (1912-2003), oil on canvas, Commissioned by the University of Sydney, (*University Art Collection, reproduced with the kind permission of Roger Dargie and the University of Sydney*).

In memoriam

When Sir Robert Strachan Wallace retired in 1947, he moved to Canberra where he died on 6 September 1961.