

The Chancellors: The seven distinguished Australians who have led the Australian Priory of the Order of St John since 1946

Ian Howie-Willis, OAM, KStJ

*Dr Howie-Willis is a professional historian. He joined St John 32 years ago, recruited by the Priory Secretary, the late Charles Campbell, AM, GCStJ to produce the centenary history **A Century for Australia: St John Ambulance in Australia 1883–1983**. Since then he has produced five other commemorative St John histories. He is the retiring Priory Librarian, relinquishing the position after three triennia. He was the foundation secretary of this Historical Society, but now serves the Society by editing this journal as well as the Society's quarterly newsletter. He was the coeditor of **Celebrating women in St John: Our past, present and future**, a history of women in St John Ambulance Australia, which is being launched by the Prior, Her Excellency the Governor-General, Quentin Bryce, in Sydney in May 2012. His latest publication is **A Medical Emergency: Major-General 'Ginger' Burston and the Army Medical Service in World War II**, a biography of the inaugural Chief Commissioner of the St John Ambulance Brigade in Australia, Major-General Sir Samuel Roy Burston (1888–1960). His next writing project is a history of the Australian Army's continuing campaign against malaria.*

Author's note, May 2020

*This article began as a seminar paper delivered to the 13th annual History Seminar of the St John Ambulance Historical Society of Australia in Hobart, Tasmania, in 2011. At that time Dr Neil Conn was still the Chancellor. Since the article was published in **St John History** Volume 11 (2011–2012), two others have held the Chancellor's position: (i) Professor Mark Compton AM GCStJ (2014–2019) and (ii) Mr Cameron Oxley KStJ (since 2019). After distinguished service as Australian Chancellors, both Dr Conn and Professor Compton went on to become Lord Priors of the Order.*

A statistical introduction

The Australian Priory of the Order of St John has had only seven Chancellors since its establishment 65 years ago in 1946. All have been distinguished native born citizens of Australia who had achieved great distinction in public life before their appointment to the position; and five of the seven had also had distinguished St John careers. In chronological order, they have been as follows:

1. Sir Hugh Poate: 1946–1961
2. Sir George Stening: 1961–1982
3. Sir John Young: 1982–1991
4. Sir Guy Green: 1991–1995
5. Mr Peter Henderson: 1996–1999
6. Professor Willis Marshall: 1999–2007
7. Dr Neil Conn: 2007–2014.

Three of the seven (Poate, Stening and Marshall) were Senior Surgeons. Two (Young and Green) were Senior Judges, Chief Justices in their home states. Two were very senior public servants: Henderson, a diplomat, was the Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs; Conn, an economist, was head of Treasury then the Administrator of the Northern Territory. All seven had a strong St John Ambulance background before their appointment as Chancellor. However, three of them (Poate, Stening and Marshall) were true St John 'insiders', having effectively grown up within St John and having served the organisation in numerous positions before their elevation to the Chancellor's position. The other four (Young, Green, Henderson and Conn) had come into St John at the highest levels of management, and although all four were also 'insiders' they had not been involved at the grassroots level.

For the statistically inclined, the Chancellors' average length of service in the position has been 9.3 years—a little more than three triennia. The longest serving was Stening, with 21 years as Chancellor; the shortest period in office was Green's four years, but his service was curtailed by his appointment as Governor of Tasmania (and therefore a Deputy Prior of the Order) during his second triennium. Their average age on being appointed was 62; but there was considerable variation around this mean because the youngest, Green, was 54 while the oldest, Conn, was 71.

Schooling might have been a factor in their rise. Only two of the seven received their secondary education at government schools—Stening (Sydney High School) and Conn (Armidale High School). The other five all attended elite private schools—Poate at Sydney Grammar, Young and Henderson at Geelong Grammar, Green at Launceston Grammar and Marshall at St Peter's in Adelaide. All have been university educated. Poate, Stening and Conn were at Sydney University, Marshall at Adelaide University, Green at the University of Tasmania and Young and Henderson at Oxford.

Putting all this together in a statistical ‘profile’, we might conclude that if you wish to be the Chancellor, it would be better for you to have attended a top ‘GPS’ grammar school before university, then to have become a leading surgeon, judge or government department head, to be a St John ‘insider’ and to be 62 years of age at the time of your appointment. Do any of you fit that profile? If so, you could be our next Chancellor.

What are the Chancellors’ duties and responsibilities?

With the adoption of a series of structural reforms of the Priory management in 1997–1998, the Chancellor became the chairman of a national Board of Directors. Previously he (no females so far) had chaired an ‘Executive Committee’ of a ‘Priory Council’. The nomenclature and corporate structure changed, but essentially the Chancellor remained what he had been previously—the most senior national officer within St John Ambulance Australia and the head of its executive.

The Chancellor’s responsibilities are set out in Section 12 of the Priory’s constitution, that is, *St John Ambulance Australia Inc: Rules of the Association incorporated under the Associations Incorporation Act of the Australian Capital Territory* (1999). This short section actually says very little other than that:

the Chancellor is the deputy of the Prior, [who] may delegate to the Chancellor such of his powers, duties and obligations as he thinks fit from time to time.

The only other information about the position in Section 12 is that: ‘the Chancellor is appointed by the Grand Prior on the recommendation of the Prior’ and that ‘the Chancellor is a Knight of the Order’.

These scant details could hardly be shorter or less specific. The brevity, however, is deceptive, for what the formulaic words of Section 12 really mean is that the Chancellor manages the Priory on behalf of the Prior, who in turn is responsible to the Grand Prior. The formal powers of the Chancellor are therefore far-reaching; but though they might appear to allow Prior and Chancellor to be supreme, in actual fact they must govern the Priory in accordance with a complex set of unwritten conventions that form an effective set of checks and balances upon their powers. Rather than dictating, the Chancellors are obliged to negotiate their way towards their goals, and instead of managing St John Ambulance Australia affairs personally, they do so by delegating their responsibilities through a series of national, State and Territory, regional and local chains of command.

Sir Hugh Raymond Guy Poate, KVO, GCStJ, Chancellor 1946–1961

Hugh Poate (1884–1961) was an eminent Sydney surgeon with a distinguished war record in World Wars I (Army) and II (Air Force). He joined the relatively new Australian Army Medical Corps as a captain in 1909. In 1914 at the outbreak of World War I he was one of the first AAMC officers to enlist in the 1st AIF. He went to Gallipoli as a major in the 1st Field Ambulance, but was then given charge of the transports ferrying the injured back to the army hospitals in Egypt. He sailed aboard these transports, spending much of his time during the voyages operating. Having learnt to fly in the interwar years, he became Consulting Surgeon to the RAAF during World War II, with the rank of group captain.

Poate had a lifetime association with St John, having come into the organisation as a Divisional Surgeon with Glebe Division of the St John Ambulance Brigade in 1913. His 15 years as St John Ambulance Brigade Commissioner in New South Wales 1926–1941 is still the record for that State.

When the forerunner of the Priory, the Commandery of the Commonwealth of Australia (Exclusive of Western Australia), formed in 1941, Poate was a logical choice as Commandery Lieutenant, that is, administrative head of the new federal St John Ambulance organisation. He had been in the Brigade for 28 years, was at the peak of his professional and military careers and had proved himself to be an outstanding Commissioner—among the four or five best of the 115 plus, that Australia has now had.

Poate had become a leading candidate for the Commandery Lieutenant’s job by the mid 1930s. In 1936 he caught the favourable attention of Sir James Sleeman, Commissioner-in-Chief of the St John Ambulance Brigade Overseas, whom the Grand Prior of the Order at St John’s Gate had sent out on a long tour of inspection of Australia and New Zealand in 1935–1936. The hidden agenda for Sleeman’s tour was probably to report on whether or not the St John organisations in ‘the dominions’ could be entrusted with self-government in the form of first Commanderies and later Priors. Poate was subsequently identified as the most appropriate leader for the national organisation in the period 1939–1941, when the Commandery was being brought into being. The Governor-General, Lord Gowrie, hand-picked him for the job. Gowrie became the Knight Commander or ceremonial head of the Commandery at its inception in 1941, and it was Gowrie who appointed Poate as his Commandery Lieutenant or administrative head. Gowrie had possibly been advised by St John’s Gate that Poate was the chap for the job.

Poate made a success of establishing the Commandery, and so when the Commandery was upgraded to fully autonomous Priory status in 1946 he was the obvious choice for appointment as inaugural Chancellor or ‘Sub-Prior’ as the position was called until 1953. Subsequently Hugh Poate’s great achievements as Chancellor were to:

- bring the Association (Training Branch) and Brigade (Operations Branch) into profitable dialogue with each other (previously they'd had a long history of mutual antagonism in some States)
- establish the system of State and Territory St John Councils that we still have today
- weld the fractious, inherently centrifugal State St John branches into a cohesive national whole
- preside over a long period of growth in all St John endeavours
- extract St John in Queensland from the clutches of the Queensland Ambulance Transport Brigade (QATB, now called the Queensland Ambulance Service)
- oversee the creation of the state wide St John Ambulance service in South Australia
- bring Western Australia into the Priory, albeit as a self-governing Commandery (the price Poate had to pay to persuade the Western Australians to come aboard)
- generally turn the Priory into an effective, unifying national forum.

In recognition of his outstanding success in establishing first, the Commandery and second, the Priory, Poate was made Australia's first Bailiff Grand Cross of the Order (GCStJ) in 1955. In the 56 years since then, only six other Australians have been made GCStJ. Poate died of lung cancer in January 1961 and was immediately succeeded by his protégé, George Stening. His portrait by Joshua Smith hangs in Priory HQ in Canberra.

Sir George Grafton Lees Stening, Kt, GCStJ, Chancellor 1961–1982

George Stening (1904–1996) was an eminent Sydney gynaecological surgeon with a distinguished war record in World War II (Army). As a lieutenant-colonel, he served with the 2/5th Australian General Hospital in the Cyrenaica campaign in 1940–1941 and then commanded the 2/11th Australian General Hospital at Alexandria. After returning to Australia with the 2nd AIF in 1942, he commanded the 113th Australian General Hospital at Concord, one of the six major Army base hospitals established in the capital cities in 1941.

Like Poate, who brought him into St John as a Divisional Surgeon, Stening had a lifetime association with St John. He had been one of Poate's students and he eventually succeeded Poate as Commissioner in New South Wales (1946–1951). He then joined the Priory Executive Council (fore-runner of the present day Board of Directors). His mentor, Poate, spent the next decade grooming him for eventual succession as Chancellor. In effect, he was handpicked and anointed by Poate, and so when Poate died there was a seamless succession into the Stening era. Stening, who had earlier served as the Director of Training, would go on to be Chancellor for 21 years, an Australian record unlikely ever to be broken. His reward was to be appointed Knight Bachelor in 1968 and then in 1970 to become the second Australian GCStJ.

George Stening's achievements as Chancellor were many and varied. Among others, he worked to:

- consolidate Poate's work in establishing the Priory
- preside over the Priory during the period when (arguably) St John reached the peak of its influence and the Brigade its maximum strength (which almost reached 15,000 in 1969)
- clean up the mess in Queensland Poate had left behind by forcing the expulsion of the QATB from St John
- oversee the disengagement of St John from its responsibility for the Tasmanian ambulance service
- steer the Priory on a steady course through a time of far-reaching social change as the 'Baby Boomer' generation grew up and came of age
- bring greater autonomy to St John in Australia, for example, by publishing the first editions of *Australian First Aid* and the Brigade's *Regulations*
- build up a national structure for St John Ambulance in Papua New Guinea, then transfer it to Papua New Guinean control at independence in 1975
- maintain the integrity of the Order during a period when political events such as protests against the Vietnam War, the sacking of the Whitlam government by the Prior (wearing his Governor-General's hat) could have damaged the Order politically
- preside over the granting of full autonomy as State and Territory branches to the St John organisations in the Australian Capital Territory and the Northern Territory, and the transfer to St John control of ambulance services in the Northern Territory
- deal decisively, honourably and effectively with the \$14 million tax avoidance scam in which the Victorian St John branch became involved in 1979–1980, a scandal that threatened the Order's good name
- commission *A Century for Australia* (1983, the centenary history by one IJ Howie-Willis), which served as a prelude to the structural reforms that took place later in the 1980s.

Sir John McIntosh Young, KCMG, GCStJ, Chancellor 1982–1991

John Young (1919– 2008) concluded a distinguished legal career in Melbourne by serving as Chief Justice and Lieutenant Governor of Victoria for the decade from 1974. He was from a very ‘Establishment’ background—after Geelong Grammar School, he had done his law degree at Oxford before being commissioned in the Scots Guards, in which he spent the six years of World War II.

Young was not a complete St John ‘outsider’ because he had spent seven years chairing the St John Council for Victoria 1975–1982 before becoming Chancellor. However, unlike Poate, Stening and later Marshall, he did not grow up in St John or work for St John in a wide range of other positions.

I am uncertain how Young first came into St John, but it was possibly through his Melbourne Establishment connections. At that time various members of the St John Council in Victoria (as well as of the Priory executive council) were from that background and were his fellow members at the Melbourne Club. Little would have been recorded to indicate how Young was appointed Chancellor—the ‘Old Boy’ network doesn’t operate that way—but my guess is that the Priory Secretary, Charles Campbell, played a pivotal role. I do know that Charles worked hard for a couple of years to persuade Young to become the Chancellor. I suspect that Charles, another Geelong Grammar Old Boy, personally identified him as a suitable appointee, and then persuaded Stening and the other members of the Priory Executive Council to appoint him.

John Young’s achievements as Chancellor were to:

- initiate and preside over the structural reforms of the late 1980s, including the name changes (Training Branch instead of Association, Operations Branch instead of Brigade, St John Ambulance Australia as the public name of the Priory in Australia of the Most Venerable Order of the Hospital of St John of Jerusalem) and the creation of Community Care Branch
- deal decisively with the running sore of industrial unrest in the St John-conducted South Australian Ambulance Service that was bringing the Order into disrepute. Aided by Charles Campbell, he did so by first, removing the State St John Council from the formula; second, removing the Operations Branch volunteers from the metropolitan service, whose presence was the root cause of the decade long season of industrial disputes afflicting the service; and, third, making an arrangement with the State government under which there was a transitional period when St John control (exercised by the Priory rather than State St John Council) would be passed over to a newly created South Australian Ambulance Service. (We St John historians continue to debate whether or not the withdrawal from the ambulance service was an ‘achievement’. Some of us believe that other action might have saved the service for St John.)
- continue what Poate and Stening had already done to give the Priory pre-eminence in St John affairs by strengthening its moral authority.

Sir John had become a KCMG in 1975, the year he became President of the Victorian St John Council. He accumulated many other honours and awards. He spent seven years (1989–1996) as the Chief Scout in Australia and was the Honorary Colonel of no fewer than three army regiments. Within St John he became the fourth GCStJ in 1991. (The third was the former Receiver-General, Sir Neville Pixley, in 1984.)

Sir Guy Stephen Montague Green, AC, KBE, KStJ, Chancellor 1991–1995

Guy Green (1937–) followed a career path in St John and the wider community remarkably similar to Sir John Young’s. He was Chief Justice of Tasmania from 1973 until his appointment as State Governor in 1995. Before becoming Chancellor he had chaired the State St John Council in Tasmania for seven years, his only previous St John position. His term as Chancellor ended midway through his second triennium because of his appointment as Governor, after which he became Deputy Prior of the Order in Tasmania.

I have never met Sir Guy and rarely discussed him with Charles Campbell, who until his death was my source of information about much St John lore, including the Chancellors. During Sir Guy’s time as Chancellor I was doing little active St John historical research and visited Priory Headquarters only infrequently. At least one of my close St John friends, John Pearn, however, remembers Sir Guy’s period of office as a ‘golden age’ in more recent St John history. John was the St John Director of Training throughout Sir Guy’s years as Chancellor. John accordingly knew him well and worked closely with him.

Guy Green’s one notable achievement as Chancellor that I’m aware of was his critical intervention to ensure that Sir William Deane accepted the position of Prior. Deane, a devout Catholic of the old school, is said to have thought that the Order was really part of a grand Protestant plot initiated by Henry VIII to split the English speaking peoples of the world from Mother Church. Deane wrongly thought that if he became Prior he would be joining an Anglican organisation and thereby furthering the Protestant Reformation. I’m told that it was Green who persuaded him to become Prior after talking with him, judge to judge, pointing out that the Order is effectively a secular, multicultural organisation, only quasi-religious (and then ecumenically Christian rather than Anglican or even Protestant) and with as many Catholics among its members as adherents of other persuasions. Green’s intervention preserved the traditional link between the Governor-General’s and Prior’s positions, which is important to the status and prestige of the Order. We must therefore be most grateful for that.

Mr Peter Graham Faithfull Henderson, AC, KStJ, Chancellor 1996–1999

Peter Henderson (1928–) was a career diplomat with ‘Establishment’ credentials almost as impressive as Young’s—Geelong Grammar then Oxford, prestigious diplomatic postings, six years as Secretary of the Department of Foreign Affairs (1979–1985) and marriage to Heather, the only daughter of Sir Robert and Dame Pattie Menzies.

Peter Henderson served a seven year ‘apprenticeship’ as Vice-Chancellor of the Priory (1988–1995). The qualities he brought to the chancellorship included the self-assurance, *savoir faire*, diplomatic and leadership skills that come from being someone of his background and experience. Such qualities would have been advantageous to the Priory in the international negotiations to establish the Order’s Grand Council in 1997–1998.

Peter Henderson’s achievements as Chancellor included leading the Priory through a period of transition and change, signal events of which were:

- the departure of Charles Campbell as Priory Secretary after 22 years in the job
- a major review of Priory governance and the subsequent streamlining and ‘corporatisation’ of management structures
- the establishment of the Order’s international Grand Council in which all Priories enjoy parity of esteem (instead of being subservient to the Priory of England).

Professor Villis Raymond Marshall, AC, GCStJ, Chancellor 1999–2007

Like his great predecessors, Hugh Poate and George Stening, Villis Marshall had grown up in St John. He entered the organisation as a 20 year old ‘Probationary Surgeon’ while still a medical student and subsequently worked his way up through the ranks from Divisional Surgeon to District Surgeon in South Australia.

In 1984 Professor Marshall was ‘headhunted’ as Director of Training by Charles Campbell and Sir John Young, who had become aware of his mounting reputation as Professor of Surgery at Flinders University. Villis Marshall remained Director of Training for six years until appointed Chief Commissioner in 1990. He held the latter position through the next three triennia until becoming Chancellor in 1999. Until Professor Paul Arbon in 2011, he was the only person to have been both Director of Training and Chief Commissioner, and after George Stening he is the Chancellor to have served the next longest period on the Executive Council/Board of Directors (8 years compared to Stening’s 21).

How did Villis Marshall become Chancellor? As with his three immediate predecessors, I suspect that he was possibly ‘tapped on the shoulder’ by Charles Campbell, who would probably have convinced Guy Green and/or Peter Henderson to have him appointed Vice-Chancellor in 1995 (while he was still Chief Commissioner), to allow him time for being groomed for the job. In any case, his record of achievement in his nine years as Chief Commissioner was such that, like Hugh Poate in 1941, he was so outstanding a candidate that no one else was probably considered. I wrote a profile of Villis Marshall and his attainments in my 2002 Brigade/Operations Branch/First Aid Services centenary history, *The Zambuks* (pp. 121–24); and this shows why he was *the* outstanding candidate.

And what were Villis Marshall’s main achievements in his two triennia as Chancellor? They included:

- keeping the Order and its Branches together and focussed in a time of accelerating changes, which have included: first, the rise of commercial competitors who have made inroads on St John’s traditional ‘markets’; second, the decline of the voluntary ethic in Australian society; and third, a consequent trend towards ‘revolving door’ St John membership
- instituting and seeing completion of a review of the National Office functions and staffing, which led to reorganisation, staff reductions and economies
- hosting the first meeting in Australia of the Order’s international Grand Council and providing high-quality representation for Australia on the council
- reassessing the accommodation needs of the National Office and taking the decision to sell the former ‘Priory Headquarters Building’ on Canberra Avenue and move into interim premises nearby in The Realm Hotel
- working effectively with the then Priory Secretary (Len Fiori) and Board of Directors to establish transparent, systematic, rational and fair processes for making senior appointments, which are in contrast to the previous means of making appointments via the ‘Old Boy’ network
- maintaining excellent relations with Government House at Yarralumla (something previous Chancellors also did), an important duty if the Order is to maintain its status and prestige
- being an excellent judge of which person is the right one for a particular job, and using that judgement to good effect in making senior appointments.

As with some of his illustrious predecessors, honours and awards tended to accumulate around Villis Marshall. He became Australia's fifth GCStJ in 1997. In 2006 this was followed by an AC (Companion of the Order of Australia), the highest grade of the Order. On his retirement as Chancellor, he became the first Australian to be appointed as one of the Great Officers of the Order of St John, taking the position of Sub-Prior; that is, the member of the international Grand Council with responsibility for developing St John Ambulance in the 40 plus countries which have St John National Associations, but are not yet Pories or Commanderies.

Dr Neil Raymond Conn, AO, KStJ, Chancellor 2007–

Neil Conn was the first Chancellor to be appointed according to the newly instituted procedures under which the general St John membership was enabled to participate in identifying potential candidates for the job. Instead of being 'tapped on the shoulder' via the 'Old Boy' network, he was selected by a panel given the job by the Board of Directors.

Dr Conn's qualifications for the position were impressive. An economist with a PhD from Duke University in Durham, North Carolina, he had lectured in Economics at Sydney University for 15 years, worked for the Commonwealth and Reserve Banks and spent two years in Paris as the principal administrator of the Organisation for Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD). Back in Australia by 1977, Dr Conn was then successively Deputy Secretary of the New South Wales Treasury, Head of the Treasury Department in the Northern Territory and Director of Corporate Finance for the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce. Returning to the Northern Territory, he chaired the Northern Territory Treasury Corporation from 1994 and then in early 1997 he became the Northern Territory's fifth Administrator since the granting of self-government in 1976. As such, Dr Conn also became the Deputy Prior of the Order of St John for the Northern Territory. He served almost four years in the position until his retirement at the end of 2000.

In retirement in Sydney, Dr Conn maintained his links with St John by joining the New South Wales State St John Council. He then served as its President (2004–2007). In that capacity he also served on the national Board of Directors. Dr Conn was therefore an outstanding candidate for the Chancellor's position when it became vacant after Villis Marshall became the Sub-Prior of the Order in 2007.

Dr Conn has a series of important innovations to his credit:

- He enthusiastically took up and developed the 'One St John' notion, which during his four years in office has become a reality rather than an ideal.
- He superintended the transfer of the Priory Headquarters/National Office from the former Canberra Avenue building to The Hotel Realm.
- He revitalised the management of the Priory's ceremonial function by instituting the Office of the Priory.
- A great friend of the Historical Society and an enthusiastic promoter of the Priory's heritage function, he oversaw the development of the Chancellor's Priory Heritage Collection at The Realm, which he officially opened in November 2010.
- His support of the present 'Women in St John History' project has been decisive.
- He is currently keenly promoting the inaugural International History Seminar of the Pories to be held in conjunction with the Grand Council meeting in Sydney in May 2012.

Conclusion

The above outline of the Priory's Chancellors suggests that the seven men who have so far filled the position were all eminent achievers and leaders in their chosen professional fields. They were also men of their times who rose to the challenge of leading the Priory as was appropriate in their day and age.

The first six of them were appointed following the proverbial 'tap on the shoulder' from someone who thought they could do the job and would enhance the status and dignity of the Order. The last two of these, Peter Henderson and Villis Marshall, then served 'apprenticeships' as Vice-Chancellors before stepping up to the top job. Most recently the seventh, Neil Conn, was identified by a committee after an exhaustive process involving the calling for nominations and expressions of interest, the short-listing of candidates and finally interviews. Whether or not the latter process, which in this era of modern management practice seems likely to prevail, will deliver us better leadership remains to be seen.

What is certain is that a close, mutually-respecting working relationship between the Chancellor and Priory Secretary (and the latter's staff) is critical. Each of the Chancellors to date has worked in close collaboration with their Priory Secretaries. We see this with Hugh Poate and his relationship with R Griffiths Bowen. We see it with George Stening and John F Martin, Stanley T Bendall and Charles AC Campbell. It is obvious in the dealings John Young, Guy Green and Peter Henderson had with Charles Campbell. It was evident in the link between Villis Marshall and Len Fiori and more recently between Neil Conn and Peter LeCornu.

Finally, *the* critical requirement for a Chancellor is to be capable of inspiring admiration, respect and loyalty while maintaining throughout the Priory, the Order's integrity, values, high ethical standards and hard won prestige.

So far the Priory in Australia has been fortunate in having Chancellors who measured up to these exacting criteria.
May it continue to be so fortunate!