

# Review: 'A History of Australian

— By Lewis Williams, PhD

PROFESSOR Emeritus Barry Cole's new book, *A History of Australian Optometry*, is only the second such history written. Published by the Australian College of Optometry, it was launched at its recent national conference in Melbourne.

There is probably no one better qualified to write such a book given the personal, professional, and academic roles Prof Cole has played in optometry over more than 65 years. Supporting that assertion is the description of him as 'the father of modern optometry in Australia' by Prof Nathan Efron, the publisher's editor, in his foreword to the book.

The first such book, written by the late Mr Charles Wright, optometrist, was published in 1988 by the national Australian Optometrical Association to mark Australia's bicentenary.

The new offering takes a broader view of the history of Australian optometry starting with the history of spectacles themselves, something that happened long before modern Australia existed.

One of the most useful parts of the book is the deceptively simple, single-page, state-by-state summary on page IX of the book's introduction, that details the chronology of all the significant advances that occurred in the profession. The summary spans 1904 (NSW optometry association formed) to 2012 (the Deakin University optometry course).

The early chapters cover the leading developments and personalities worldwide that laid the foundations for the late 19th and the 20th century's explosion in ophthalmic knowledge. Prof Cole delves into the critical developments in ophthalmic optics that occurred in England, the United States and Canada from 1880 to 1950. Despite its remoteness, Australia still benefited from them, albeit with delays as a consequence of the 'tyranny of distance' as he described it – transport options at the time being slow and slower.

The roots of optometric education, such as they were, are given as the private schools of optics or optometry that proliferated in North America in the late 1800s. Australians are known to have had involvements with at least two US optics colleges.

Regardless, the formation of the British Optical Association, in 1895 was a significant development because it led to formal courses and membership (FBOA) becoming dependent on passing the association's exams.

However, legislated control of the UK profession had to wait until 1958, much later than in Australia – 1913 (Tasmania) to 1940 (Western Australia) or North America, 1901 (Minnesota) and 1909 (Ontario and Manitoba).

By the first decades of the 20th century, optometry was a well-established, ambitious, expanding profession with significant



Barry Cole signed copies of his book at the launch

developments in education and clinical practice under way.

Prof Cole traces the first Australian advertisement for spectacles, 1803 (general item of merchandise), 1831 (an optician located near Charing Cross [now in Waverley, Sydney]), 1880 (astigmatic spectacles), and 1885 (optometry proper [I quote] when a Mr WE Toose, optician, advertised sight testing, aided by the use of an optometer).

Formal education of Australian practitioners can be traced to those from England or those going to England to study for the FBOA or the reinvigorated Worshipful Company of Spectacle Makers (FSMC), a much older (1629) group that was stung into action by the formation of the BOA. Between 1898 and 1903, 10 Australian optometrists passed through the SMC exam system.

With state optical/optometrical associations forming and Australia becoming a federation of six states in 1901, things were moving rapidly. Interestingly, a young optician's apprentice and later optometrist, Mr Leslie Hawkins, was one of five competitors with similar designs who won the competition to design the new Australian flag (our current flag).

A national optometrical association was formed in 1918 and Prof Cole notes that Australia was an early adopter of the title 'optometrist' rather than optician (inaccurate), ophthalmic optician (clumsy), or various earlier titles such as practical optician and even oculist's optician.

He then proceeds to detail the legislative endeavours controlling the practice of

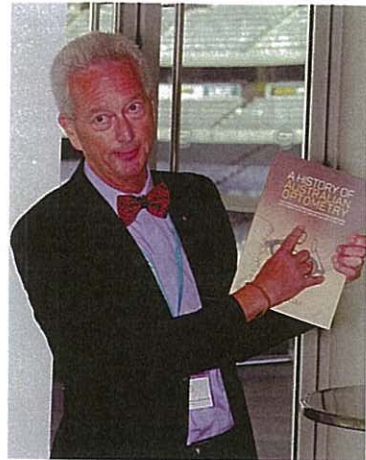
optometry and the inevitable opposition, sometimes ferocious opposition, from 'organised medicine'. The chapter concludes with national registration in 2010.

A topic dear to the heart of the author is education and Chapter 6: *Optometric Education in the 20th Century* does not disappoint. He traces education from 'learning on the job', a method that lasted well into the 20th century, all the way to the University of Melbourne's current OD degree. He also rectifies an omission from Wright's book by acknowledging the registration board-run Dip Opt (WA) course that ran in Western Australia from 1947 to 1968 with the assistance of the University of Western Australia. The ACO, as a key education initiative in optometric education is the subject of its own chapter. Much of its history even pre-dates Prof Cole.

A chapter is devoted to Australian optometric research's coming-of-age with initiatives in NSW in the mid-1950s and more formal pursuits commencing in Victoria in the mid-1960s.

Academically, Victoria (ACO/VCO, University of Melbourne) was the most influential by the simple expedient of 'exporting' its graduates to positions in other schools (metastatic academia?). At various stages, and for varying periods, Victorian graduates (all Cole 'products') have been heads of all Australian optometry schools, Auckland (NZ), Berkeley (USA), Manchester (UK), and possibly others.

Chapters 9 to 13 trace the evolution of the profession's scope of practice from 1900 to 2015 culminating in optometry becoming a therapeutic profession.



Nathan Efron launched the book

# Optometry' by Prof Barry Cole

Two chapters are devoted to the expanding pursuit of a role in public health. Starting with the difficulties, opposition (and then some), and ultimately, victory, surrounding optometry's participation in universal health insurance (Medibank Mark 1).

A further two chapters detail optometry's push into the broader public health arena (here and overseas) by various organisations aligned with optometry over the last two decades. The collaborations, including those with ophthalmology, are presented.

The appendix to the book lists the many notables who have contributed, and in many cases continue to contribute, to the profession and its evolution.

Despite Prof Cole's long-term immersion in the ACO/VCO and the University of Melbourne's Department of Optometry and Vision Sciences, there is no evidence of bias or imbalance towards either entity. An even hand is demonstrated throughout the book, as one would expect from a person of Prof Cole's

stature, experience, and professionalism.

His book is a great read, carries the reader along a logical and entertaining path while telling a story and illustrating (profusely) that story whenever possible.

Those who have lived through much of that history will discover information that was not available generally at the time. For those starting out in the profession, the book will bring them up to speed quickly.

It is a shame that many who feature in the 'story' presented so compellingly, are no longer around to smile at the entries related to them. While they would have been aware of their own role(s), they could not have been aware of the much bigger 'picture' because of the time it took to be 'painted'. In that context, Prof Barry Cole is an accomplished and erudite gallery curator.

His book is highly recommended to all and readers are guaranteed to learn things that have, until now, been hidden but which are now in the public domain for all to enjoy.



Barry Cole, Nathan Litch and Maureen O'Keefe (ACO CEO) at the launch at the ACO

*A History of Australian Optometry, by Professor Emeritus Barry L. Cole. Published by the Australian College of Optometry, Carlton VIC. Purchases: [aco@aco.org.au](mailto:aco@aco.org.au) or (03) 9349 7550 or Optometry Australia bookshop [www.optometry.org.au/shoponline.aspx](http://www.optometry.org.au/shoponline.aspx). A4 format, 320 pages, softback \$75 and de-luxe hardback \$160.*