

‘Charles Garrard (Garry) Woodard AO DLitt,
3 July 1929 - 20 July 2026

Canberra Times, 9 August 2026,

The death of diplomat, writer and activist Garry Woodard at the age of 97 marks the final passing of a remarkable generation of Australian public officials and academics.

Born to Charles and Doris (Dot) Woodard in Adelaide in 1929, Woodard spent most of his childhood in small South Australian country towns where his father was a primary school principal.

While sharing his father’s conviviality but not his conservatism, Woodard was more influenced by his mother and her taste for music and poetry. Like many a sociable but sensitive country boy, young Woodard took refuge in ‘books and the wireless’. Despatched to Adelaide for his last two years of school ‘for polish’ to Prince Alfred College, Woodard then studied law at Adelaide - ‘indifferently’ he would have said.

Woodard joined the Department of External Affairs in 1952, with his first overseas posting to Seoul in the last years of the Korean War, where his life changed direction in a second important way in 1954 after he met a young Australian nurse named Helen Cameron working at an infant welfare clinic in Pusan.

They married in Helen’s hometown of Maffra in Victoria on 21st May 1955, with two sons Alastair and Andrew born in 1958 and 1960.

The professional appointments that followed reflected his abilities: First Secretary, Australian High Commission in London (1960-63); Head of the Policy Planning Section, DEA (1963-65); Head of the Americas and South Pacific Branch, DEA (1965-67); Counsellor at the Australian Embassy, Washington (1967-70); Ambassador to Burma (1973-75); First Assistant Secretary of the North and South Asian division, (1975-76); Ambassador to China (1976-80); High Commissioner to Malaysia (1980-83); and Policy Adviser on the United States and on East Asia (1985-86).

Alastair writes of the demands and joys of that life:

‘Mum and dad were famous for their festivities, both in Canberra and all their diplomatic posts. Whilst Mum did a great job with the child rearing and family demands as a loving mother, she was also an amazing professional partner for Dad, very engaging, vivacious, astute, and smart.’

The early Korean appointment had also been the first step in the second dimension of Woodard’s professional life - the organisational and intellectual space between diplomacy and military power - beginning in Melbourne as External Affairs’ Liaison Officer with the Joint Intelligence Bureau in the Defence Department from 1957-60. In 1970-73 Garry was head of the National Assessment Staff in the Joint Intelligence Organization. The inaugural Director General

of the Office of National Assessments, Bob Furlonger, was glowing in his recognition of Garry's capacities as both analyst and planner in establishing procedures 'that survive to this day'.

After retirement in 1986, Woodard produced a distinctive and highly regarded body of research in diplomatic history, marking him as the premier diplomatic historian of his generation. Few have written with Woodard's combination of historical rigour and analytical clarity, extensive archival research, personal acquaintance with many of the major players, and commitment to judicious and clear assessment of aspects of Australian diplomatic and policy history that maintain their importance for contemporary debates of national significance.

Woodard's magisterial work *Asian Alternatives* is a subtle and sharp assessment of Garfield Barwick as one of Australia's most distinctive foreign ministers, and a complex and well-balanced account of the decision to send Australian troops to Vietnam.

His major historical studies in academic journals over three decades includes least two – 'Best Practice in Australia's Foreign Policy- "Konfrontasi"' and 'Enigmatic Variations: The Development of National Intelligence Assessment in Australia' which are simply classics.

A leaked American assessment of Garry Woodard captured him well. In October 1976, following Woodard's appointment as Australia's Ambassador to China, the US embassy in Canberra answered an urgent Washington request for 'Biographic information':

'Woodard is clearly well connected in the bureaucracy, and highly regarded professionally by politicians with considerable clout...with close ties with many Americans, official and academic, who are involved in global strategy and national security matters.'

The embassy limned out Woodard's character quite precisely and perceptively:

'Woodard is an intelligent, aggressive [sic], and gregarious personality. He and his wife are known in Canberra for their lively parties which often last until dawn. He has a keen and inquiring mind and is able to view world developments with a depth and perspective which is unusual for an Australian diplomat. He has a puckish sense of humor, but can be blunt and uncompromising on occasion. He stands out in a diplomatic service in which most senior personnel tend to be conservative and unimaginative personally and professionally.'

After Garry's retirement in the 1980s until Helen's far too early death in January 1996, Helen and Garry seemed, to their family, 'to take on a new lease of life from the mid-1980s as very adoring grandparents'.

Garry shared the last decades of his long life with Elspeth Hallows. Alastair writes that in the last decades of his life, Elspeth was

'a very loving and devoted partner and carer to Dad and a very loving second mum, grand mum and great grand mum to all the family.'

All who had the privilege of Garry's friendship in his later years knew that fusion of joy and laughter, love for family, and critical thinking testing out the possibilities of the direction of travel of Australia in Asia beyond empire.

Richard Tanter