

Letters

Every viewpoint

ALL hail to the ridicule and scorn poured by *Incite* (no5, 4 April) on the danger of decadence and moral corruption through reading Camus, Shakespeare and others.

I am looking forward to the next issue which will surely be the 'Jim-Dunn-Incite' number. Floods of letters from every corner of this freedom-loving Australian library world will drown all trivia.

Clearly, the only issue at stake is the justification of our very existence: to offer every viewpoint, every report however potentially dangerous, from 'The great hoax' to a secret assessment on Afghanistan.

Give us the documents and give us the men and women skilled in their reading – and the truth will take care of itself.

Maybe not now. Eventually.

Vera Scherer, North Melbourne

Exciting future

HAVING decided that Vanessa Bourne's letter in *Incite* no 1 needed a reply from a librarian who sees herself as a social worker, I paraphrase Ms Bourne, I was amused to read in issue no 5 that your sole piece of correspondence labelled *Incite* a 'revolutionary rag'. Obviously Australian librarians will have to be incited to put pen to paper.

However back to Vanessa Bourne's letter. As an Australian librarian working in Washington DC I am well aware of the technological innovations that are altering every facet of our lives and changing the manner in which we work.

I am also aware of the vast sums of money which government and business are prepared to spend to obtain information that is current and authoritative. Rapid information retrieval is the name of the game and we who have been trained to retrieve need not fear our future.

The fact that Australian companies have viewed libraries as book repositories and librarians as any staff member unable to be gainfully employed elsewhere, is not the fault of our profession nor should it be our concern now. I refuse to be concerned whether we are called research assistants, information scientists or librarians. Library schools will continue to flourish as will library associations. Business executives are fast learners.

However we do have another major concern. California's Proposition 13 is an attractive palliative to the economic ills that beset Australian society as well as the United States. Far from 'exposing the whole profession to the vagaries of government policy and limited funding', Ms Bourne must surely realise that this is the reality facing public and university librarians throughout the country.

We are told by government that welfare agencies, and *they* not we, include public libraries in the welfare category, must exercise financial restraint. Librarians, unlike firemen, policemen and council road repair crews, will join the social workers already lining up in the Commonwealth Employment Service offices.

When we hear complaints that our children cannot read adequately, read of migrant families torn apart when illiterate parents are abused by a welfare system they have no way of understanding, have colleagues who must fight to retain on the shelves long recognised classics suddenly deemed unfit by a zealous patron and realise that instead of more money we cannot even maintain the status quo, I suggest that this is where all librarians need to be concerned.

A network of Australian libraries linked by computer, and increasingly cheap access to commercial information retrieval systems is our future. However will libraries in Seymour and Goulburn, Burnie and Mackay have any books worth listing in a union catalogue and will anyone be bothered or able to read them?

American librarians are already stocking their libraries with books bought from their own pockets, will Australian librarians be prepared to do the same?

Librarians in special libraries have an exciting future but how much more exciting to be involved in preserving a literate, caring and concerned Australian society.

Christine Cooze, Washington, DC

Hindering research

THERE is a 'deteriorating level of service being offered by the Mitchell Library in Sydney'.

That statement comes from Elizabeth Windschuttle who is involved with the 1838 Bicentenary Project (see *AustLibJ* v28, 18 May, p114).

She wrote recently to the *Sydney Morning Herald* complaining that 'at a time when a major academic effort has been initiated to write five substantial volumes for the Bicentenary in 1988, the most important library in Australia for historians is so short of funds and staff that it has introduced measures that are severely hindering historical research.

'There are several matters worthy of serious complaint, but the one of most immediate concern is the blanket ban on the photocopying of all material (books, journals, manuscripts) which dates before 1900.

'At the University of Melbourne last month, a national conference of historians on one of the Bicentenary projects – focusing around the year 1838 – passed a resolution unanimously deploring this decision on photocopying.

'Despite the fact that a request for a policy change was made last year by the president of the Australian Historical Association, Professor Bruce Mansfield, the State Librarian has remained implacable.

'Before the ban was imposed, a qualified member of the library staff judged whether or not a book or document would stand up to the wear and tear of photocopying process.

'The State Librarian now says it is not administratively feasible to refer each volume to a librarian and that clerical staff in the photocopying section are not expert enough to make the decision.

'Although the librarian, Russell Doust, has claimed the decision was taken in the interest of preserving the collection, we are left with the situation where a pre-1900 volume, of which there may be multiple copies, cannot be photocopied, but a rare post-1900 document may be, if the photocopying staff think fit.

'Staff who are not competent to assess pre-1900 material suddenly acquire the ability to judge documents when presented with one published after 1900.

'The library does allow photographic reproduction of pre-1900 material, but these

copies are expensive, slow to process and the machinery is notorious for the breakdowns.

'This makes the work of those of us in the Bicentenary project that much harder. It also means the current generation of research students who have grown up with photocopiers as part of the tools of the trade will be increasingly reluctant to choose topics before 1900.

'The inevitable result is that there will be less research done into our nineteenth century past.

'Historians want the Premier to review urgently the operation of the Mitchell Library, particularly its level of funding.'

A REPLY from Russell Doust to that letter was published a few days later in the *SMH*.

Mr Doust says that 'the copying service is designed to do no more than provide copies for research and private study. The machines which can do this most cheaply and easily are designed for office copying and require the book to be placed face-down on the machine while the copy is made.

'This inevitably results in wear and tear and eventual irreparable damage to what is often a rare, fragile and sometimes unique item.

'In consequence, the library has to walk the fine line between making its books and documents readily available to 1980s users, and preserving them for some future use.

'The decision as to whether a book or manuscript can be safely copied by the photocopy process requires some degree of professional skill and experience.

'The "no face-down office copies" decision was not taken lightly.

'The staff who operate the copying service do not in general have this experience, nor are they employed to make decisions on either the value or the physical condition of individual items.

'Obviously there are anomalies, in practice, in the application of such a system but, in terms of present or any likely future staffing, it is impracticable to do otherwise.

'If I were to be provided with additional staff I would give other activities a high priority, such as the security of the collections, their conservation and restoration, their cataloguing and organisation for use, or expanded reference and information services and assistance for researchers.

'I must remain "implacable" in declining to allow the use of a copying process which results in unaffordable damage to the early documentary evidence of European settlement in this country.

'But all these books and manuscripts can be copied by the slower and, admittedly, more expensive method of making a photographic negative and prints from it.

'I am glad to be able to inform Mrs Windschuttle that the cameras and associated equipment which were notorious for breakdowns have now been replaced by modern equipment.'

Children's book award

IT has recently come to my notice that a list of the 1980 'Children's Book of the Year Award' winners has been circulated to schools, libraries and other institutions by Book Supplies Pty Ltd.

I would like to point out that there are discrepancies in the list. It is therefore advisable to wait for official notification from the Children's Book Council of Australia, rather than accepting this (confidential) list at face value!

Marian Calvert, NSW Judge
1980 Children's Book of the Year Awards