

Denis Richardson's contribution

ALIA Victorian Branch 29 May 1991

(Abridged text of an address by Jean Whyte at Denis's farewell function.)

I have known Denis for quite a long time. We worked together in the National Library in the Fleming days and both came to Melbourne when the Fleming days were over.

During and since his days in the National Library, he has played a leading part in planning for a national library system, he has been Librarian of a very distinguished University and Chairman of CAVAL. He has also written and presented many papers at conferences of the Library Association of Australia, and served as its Vice-President, President and Past-President. His conference papers express the opinions, hopes and worries of one who thinks more clearly than most of us.

In 1963, as Librarian of the Toowoomba Municipal Library, Denis said (Proc. 12th Conf. LAA): 'The first and most obvious objective of a library is to bring its books, and other library materials, into contact with the readers for whom they are held. ... There are people in our libraries — readers, for whose benefit we have been given care of a collection of books. As our collections become larger and more complex the reader will become more confused and overwhelmed by sheer weight of materials. He will need far more consideration than he has had in the past. No longer can we dismiss the reader from our thoughts by placing "Readers Adviser" on the desk of some junior staff member. The reader, we hope, will be ever with us. It is up to us to devote ourselves to his well-being.'

One of the most important documents in Australian library history is the *Report of the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries* (the Horton Report). The LAA's submission was written by Denis and three colleagues (extra issue of *ALJ*, 1975). In it he calls for an environment in which access to information is not only every citizen's right but also every citizen's reality. This publication is too important, (and perhaps too depressing) to summarise. I commend it to anyone looking for a starting point from which to study the recent history of public library provision in Australia.

Denis has always kept up with the literature of his profession. His conference papers reflect the state of the art. His vision was revealed in three conference papers:

The Future for Librarians in Proc. 20th Conf. LAA. Canberra, 1979.

Changing Structures, Relationships and

by Jean Whyte



Environment of Libraries in Proc. 1st NZLA/LAA Conf. Christchurch. 1981.

The New Technology and what it does in Proc. LAA/NZLA Conf. Brisbane, 1984.

Denis calls for an environment in which access to information is not only every citizen's right but also every citizen's reality.

His suggestions for our profession include: 'The future for librarians lies in being genuine information professionals serving the community either as generalists or as specialists. What do we have potentially to offer that others do not and is of value? — fundamentally an understanding of the structure of information and how most effectively to link a user's needs to the relevant information or documents? We have traditionally been concerned with the intellectual analysis and organisation of recorded knowledge. We must now turn also to the interpretation and analysis of the needs of users.'

His central proposition is that the de-institutionalisation of the profession will come through advances in communication and information technology.

In his 1981 paper, Denis says: 'We have got to stop assuming that the publishing world as we have traditionally understood it, is the major manufacturer with whom, as a retail service industry, we have to deal. Increasingly, we will have to deal with information producers — manufacturers who may be concerned to disseminate a product in the way the publishers used to, but on the other hand, may only be concerned to provide access to their product for those who see enough value in such access to be prepared to pay for it.'

The Brisbane paper of 1984 is a masterly assembling of the possibilities of the new technology and an assessment of its potential effects. It ends with a warning:

'There is ... considerable confusion and naivety in the minds of those who promote — at least in the popular media — the concept of the Information Society. I suggest that it also needs to be associated with the concept of a Knowledge Society. Many of the assumptions of an infrastructure for an Information Society are based on a narrow interpretation of the needs of society and reflect expectations for instant data at the touch of a button and little understanding of the processes of exploration and education for which the resources of libraries, ... are an essential support. Perhaps this reflects the attitudes of scientists and technologists who are driving the Information Society. Twenty years ago in the debate on the Two Cultures, C P Snow pointed to a basic difference between a science-based culture and humanities-based culture. The former is not concerned with the past state of knowledge in the field: A molecular biologist in 1984 does not first have to learn the state of molecular biology in 1954 or 1924 etc. The state of knowledge in 1984 has absorbed previous wisdom. The opposite is the case in the humanities and society needs constantly to return to its past. Libraries have a central role, but to fulfil it they have to look to the future — not live in the past... if I may end with another classic graffiti which was enshrined in our library catalogues by Simone Signoret: *nostalgia isn't what it used to be.*'

I have left out Denis's many contributions to professional journals and, of course, his unpublished reports in the records of the National Library, the University of Melbourne and the Library Association of Australia. These I leave to future historians. □