

Clifford Amandus Burmester

1910-1991

Clifford Amandus Burmester, ISO, Assistant National Librarian from 1967 until his retirement in 1971, died in Canberra on 18 August aged 81 years. Cliff Burmester as he preferred to be known will be remembered as a long-standing staff member of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library and later of the National Library of Australia. A service of thanksgiving and appreciation was held in Canberra on 21 August attended by a large gathering of friends, many of them colleagues from the profession which Cliff served with dedication and distinction for over 50 years. Sympathy in their loss is extended to Cliff's widow Ruth and to his sons Henry, Norman and Bill, and their families.

Cliff Burmester was born on 16 June 1910 in the Western Australian goldfields town of Boulder City. He received his secondary education at Perth Modern School and later graduated from the University of Western Australia with the degree of Bachelor of Arts (Hons). In 1935 Cliff was appointed to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library in Canberra, where he took up the position of Legislative Reference Clerk.

The library Cliff came to in 1935 was small — a staff of only 15 including the Librarian Kenneth Binns and his deputy H L White. Other colleagues included L Courtney Key, L F Fitzhardinge and Norman Lynravn. Cliff showed a ready aptitude for library work and from the outset demonstrated an interest in acquisition and collection-building. Arguably his greatest contribution to librarianship was the key role he played in developing and extending the library and research collections which came to serve as the basis of the present-day national collection. He brought an educated and discerning eye to collection-building and constantly kept in mind the importance of developing and extending collections which would provide, in the national interest, the means to support scholarly research.

Following wartime service in the AIF, Cliff resumed his library career, securing appointment as Chief Reference Officer in



1947. In the same year he was posted to London where he served until 1951 as Library Liaison Officer at Australia House. A number of achievements stand out in this period: he developed extensive contacts with the English booktrade; he carried forward negotiations with Rex Nan Kivell which eventually secured for the Commonwealth of Australia one of the great documentary research collections of historical paintings, prints and drawings; he successfully promoted the acquisition of the Kashnor Collection — over 12 000 books, pamphlets and manuscripts concerned with the political economy of Great Britain and Ireland in the period 1650-1870; and he negotiated the inaugural filming program in Britain of the Australian Joint Copying Project.

In Canberra throughout the 1950s, in a library invigorated by the strong leadership of H L White, Cliff Burmester continued his work in a number of positions. He chose to transfer to the National Library of Australia after its formal creation in 1960 and was appointed Assistant National Librarian in 1967, a position he occupied until his retirement in January 1971.

Cliff Burmester's interest in library resources extended well beyond the confines of the National Library, though he believed it was important for the nation's library to provide through the strength of its own collection the basis for scholarship and research. Building on the findings and recommendations of its 1961 Tauber Report, AACOBS appointed in 1963 a National Book Resources Development Committee under the

chairmanship of Cliff Burmester to prepare an acquisition plan on a national basis.

This committee produced what came to be called the Burmester Report, a document which argued the view, now central to today's concept of the Distributed National Collection, that the national book resource should be recognised as being the total of the individual library collections wherever they might be in Australia. The essential underpinning of the Burmester Committee's concept of a national network was that shared resources depend on overall

collection strength based on the depth, quality and breadth of library holdings.

Cliff's retirement in 1971 provided him with the opportunity to further his work for the National Library and for Australian scholarship. As part of the National Library's contribution to the celebration of the American bicentenary in 1976 he compiled *America on Record: a guide to books and other materials relating to the United States of America in the National Library of Australia*. This publication '... written in 50 days as a result of 50 years reading' was launched by the then Prime Minister, the Rt. Honourable Malcolm Fraser. More importantly, Cliff compiled his four-volume *Guide to the Collections*, an impressive and detailed descriptive summary of the National Library's holdings over a wide range of research areas. Much of the strength of the library's collections as described in this enduring reference tool derived from Cliff Burmester's own outstanding professional contribution over many years.

His life and work should serve to remind a later generation of librarians that the real purpose of libraries is about books and related documentary collections and that the corollary of strong collections developed and shaped according to educated principles, is the provision of access and of service to users. In the National Library itself and through his authorship of what is called the Burmester Guide, Cliff created his own memorial. His profession and his country owe him a great debt.

John Thompson