

Front Line



John Levett
President

'Autres gens, autres moeurs'

I had the pleasure of attending the recent conference of the New Zealand Library Association, held in Auckland from 22-26 September. It was an excellent conference, congenial in all respects; in between going to the usual round of conference sessions, I also attended a meeting of the 1994 conference planning committee of which I am currently a member, and had the honour of sitting-in on a meeting of the NZLA Council. Although I had been to conferences in New Zealand previously, I had not represented ALIA in any official capacity; this responsibility sharpened my perceptions

to an extraordinary degree, for it is plain that there exists a very special relationship between our two associations.

The particular nature of the professional connection, which is close, fraternal and sharing a common heritage and language, not to mention a similar history and concerns, is underlined by the fact that our relations with colleagues across the Tasman do not seem to be part of the brief of our International Relations Committee. In short, we do not regard New Zealand as a foreign country.

...there exists a very special relationship between our two associations. (ALIA and NZLA)

On the face of it, this seems natural and easy, but it may lead us (Australians) into areas of considerable sensitivity, the dimensions and fragility of which we may not intuitively be aware. For, despite the similarities which may result in facile, and perhaps to the New Zealanders odiously familiar (although they would be far too polite to tell you so) assumptions about the relationship, it is in fact,

an independent, sovereign, *foreign* country. No-one assumes that Canada is a subset of the USA, and no-one should assume that New Zealand was the putative eighth state of Australia: especially if they happen to be on the eastern shore of the Tasman at the time.

And as for the country, so for the profession; we may indeed have much to offer our colleagues in New Zealand, as we do to colleagues in China, Malaysia or the United States; but the relationship across the Tasman, it must be clearly understood, is that of coevals, not of elder to younger, senior to junior. Even to stress this may be (to a New Zealander) offensive, in that it merely reiterates what to them is blindingly obvious; but it seems to me that on this side of the narrow sea which separates us, it is still necessary to restate it. We have a great deal to receive from as well as contribute to, an enhanced trans-Tasman relationship.

All of this is by way of introduction to the emergence of a personal sense of delight which pervaded a week spent in close, harmonious and for me, exploratory discussions with New Zealand colleagues. My previous experiences in that country had been those of a tourist, albeit a bibliographic one; we mingled at conference sessions and on social occasions, but I have to confess that very little real learning took place on my part, except perhaps at a party in 1981 where a very large and not totally sober All-Black confided to me that 'the Japanese had invented a new camera,

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with a shutter speed so fast that it could catch an Australian with his mouth shut... I closed mine quickly.

On this more recent occasion, a very sharply-inclined learning curve. Let me illustrate. I had of course, been aware that New Zealand, in common with most OECD countries, was suffering from near-catastrophic fluctuations in funding policies for library services of all kinds, and I had assumed that we would have circumstances, reactions, tactics, policies to cope with this which would be very similar.

But I had forgotten, if I had ever known it, that there is no New Zealand parallel to our state governments; this single difference so totally changes the dimensions of the issue as to require from me, and perhaps other Australians, a total rethink of the entire agenda. The strategies, the attitudes of New Zealanders are so informatively different in kind and degree, as to make exposure to them a very productive experience.

Or take another example, the kind of overall planning and shaping of national agendas exemplified in the Australian Libraries Summit in 1988; it would have been fatal for our colleagues to have been seduced by the ease which a simple imitation of the concept and process

would have allowed. But they, quite properly, would have none of this. They have opted for (and in Auckland, unveiled) an approach which plans to address, *mutatis mutandis*, similar problems in New Zealand, and is fraught with the same kinds of risks and challenges which confronted us here. But it is so different, so boldly and refreshingly different, as to reflect in essence a totally new approach, and one from which we, in our turn, can (and will) learn much.

*I would like to see
the relationship
enhanced...*

There are very many other manifestations of apparent similarity overlying very real, and thus informative differences, such that by the end of the week, I had learned to be even more cautious in matters of policy and protocol than I had been in China, where one could always blame the shortcomings of the interpreter for the occasional diplomatic gaffe, should she not have saved you from it by a subtle re-rendering in the first place.

I am not by any means arguing that we should seal the relationship in a diplomatist's cocoon of protocols, but it is potentially one so fruitful for us that I would not wish to see it prejudiced or inhibited by misperception. Hitherto, it has been a friendship which has quietly flourished, nourished by dozens of interpersonal, even inter-institutional relationships.

Don't misunderstand me here; I most emphatically do not want to inhibit this by the installation of formalities which in the long run (as do so many of the procedures and precedents by which insecure *homo officialis* lives) would destroy the very thing intended to be protected. Far from it, but in the event that there may be others of my colleagues in Australia whose perceptions have not been sharpened by personal contact, I would like to see the relationship enhanced by a greater flow of interchanges and information than has occurred hitherto.

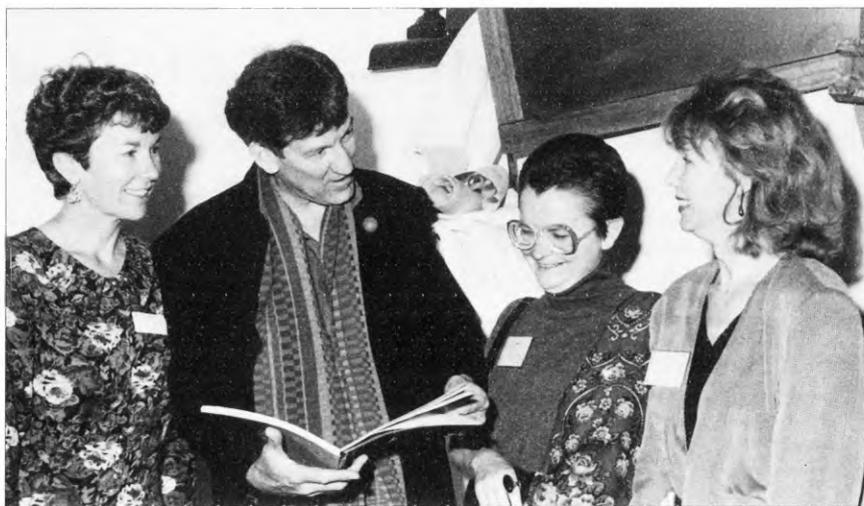
I am not acting as an agent for the tourist bureaux here, but I do urge you to put the projected 1994 Joint Conference in Wellington high on your agendas; as I would the intervening NZLA conferences. The very sharp and piquant contrast arising from apparent similarities with New Zealand which overlie the real and instructive differences will provide a unique learning experience. □

ARLIS/ANZ National Conference Canberra, September 1991

The Art Libraries Society/Australia and New Zealand (ARLIS/ANZ) is part of an international network of ARLIS organisations which encourages the exchange and publication of information about art libraries, the development of contacts between art librarians, and the general promotion of art libraries and their services. ARLIS/ANZ publishes the serial, *ARLIS/ANZ News* with articles, reviews, sources and current information on the visual arts.

The National Conference of ARLIS/ANZ 1991 opened in Canberra on 4 September with a launch at the Canberra Institute of the Arts of its latest publication, *Indexing the Visual Arts in Australia: a Survey* compiled by Jill More. This is a reference source on artists' biographical and subject files, pictorial indexes, slide collections, art exhibition catalogue indexes, image and art databases and a variety of other files created in-house in Australian libraries.

The program for the 1991 National Conference in Canberra included a workshop on 'Audiovisual in Transition' at the Canberra School of Art which explored the developments in the use of audiovisual media and computers in the organisation and retrieval of image-based collections. Formal papers on the digitisation of images and the



From left to right: Launch by David Williams: Jill More, College Librarian, College of Fine Art, UNSW; David Williams, Director, Canberra School of Art; Margaret Shaw, Conference Convener, Chief Librarian of the Australian National Gallery Research Library; and Joye Volker, Chair, ARLIS/ANZ, Institute Librarian, CITA.

production of video discs were followed by a panel discussion.

A seminar held at the Australian National Gallery addressed the issues of 'Stretching the budget' to cover new management approaches to declining budgets, the use of exchange to increase resources, and sources of external

funding. It also covered access to visual arts information both in Australia and internationally.

An exhibition of 'Artists' Books' was held in the Canberra Institute of the Arts Library.

Joye Volker
Chair, ARLIS/ANZ □