

Developing a profession of librarianship

John Levett reviews John Metcalfe's travel diaries

The recent death of Miss Jean Arnot has severed perhaps the last remaining personal link with the man who speaks through these diaries, my generation (the class of 1933) was the last to experience him as a colleague, albeit (for this writer) as a lofty and distant one.

Lofty and distant, that is, in the administrative sense. Face-to-face, there was nothing in the least hierarchical about him. Indeed, my first contact with him was distinctly otherwise. As a young cadet at the Newcastle Public library, I was on duty during the opening of its new premises in the Civic Centre. We had been told to keep a discreet eye on the milling public to make sure nobody stole any of the reference library's books.

Maintaining a suitable detached mien, à la Sun Hill, I was approached by a man in a mackintosh who raised an umbrella, twirled it, prodded me sharply in the ribs, and pronounced me alive. It was, of course, John Metcalfe, who then engaged me in a searching interrogation about the library, what I thought I was doing in it and where I thought I was going. Having at that time failed the Preliminary Examination twice (something of a record, I understand) I was somewhat evasive in my answers.

He was a plain-spoken man; intolerant of fools, extraordinarily percipient and with an unshakeable fixed commitment to the centrality of his profession, and of his place in it. One of the recurrent themes in the diaries is of Metcalfe testing the quality of the work of his overseas colleagues in their approach to subject cataloguing and classification. Here he is, a self-confessed 'catalogue snoop' sending himself up: 'I think the young moustached assistant in charge was a little puzzled by the older moustached anonymous who seemed to be working backwards, taking books from the shelves and going to the catalogue.'

In the diaries he is lucid, direct, sometimes intemperate on his topic; in his textbooks, his style acquires an astonishing opacity and complexity, as many who sweated through his syllabus in the 'cat and class' papers of the old Registration will attest. In the writings in hand, however, there is little of the polemicist. Metcalfe is not writing to harangue, convince or attest here; often he is a man reflecting aloud

to an absent wife, or to himself. The diaries are totally unselfconscious, and there is not the least inflection of the memorial tone, or the concern to reflect one's self as central, infallible and indispensable to the tide of events which has marked some autobiographical writing. And yet, as his editor notes 'Metcalfe became the most important Australian librarian of his generation...', and Metcalfe never shrank from opportunity or challenge. But he was also generous in his acknowledgments of those laymen, especially Remington, whose contribution to 'the library movement' has not yet been properly examined or acknowledged.

Even to a non-librarian, this would be a lively set of journals of a time past and a set of mores now regrettably extinct. To any librarian, this book is a splendid and instructive excursion into the foundations of the profession, and an illuminating perspective on many of the fundamental issues which govern professional practise; it is, as the weekend reviewers say, 'a good read'.

Professor Rayward's editing is superb: a fitting Boswell to this peripatetic bibliographic Johnson. Listen to his Metcalfe again — this time in London, in the winter of 1963-4: '... and now at 11:00pm to bed, the basin full of hot water to warm the room, no shilling in the meter, cunning, like a rat.'

In addition to his subtle, discreet and utterly sympathetic editor's hand, Rayward glosses like an angel; his intercalations, footnotes and explanations make translucent a text occasionally clouded by time, distance, idiosyncrasy and plain ignorance on the readers part; he is a model companion through the text, as subtle as Jeeves and as ubiquitous. And sometimes, if you listen carefully, you can hear his editorial whiskers twitch, as in his explanation of 'Big Berth' on p323.

This is a wonderful book: a marvellous gift for any colleague, and a must on the reading list of any professional syllabus. It could be given to the interested layman with confidence. Much has changed since Metcalfe's time, very often for the better, but in the process, we have perhaps become too coolly professional, too correct, too diplomatic. It was not always like that; Rayward has given us a glimpse of more robust climes, when a spade was a spade, and a librarian could be frank, critical and una-

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shamed of the biases which Metcalfe so gleefully reveals.

One final point: Metcalfe often referred to cataloguing as 'the central mystery' of the profession. He would have found one or two little bibliographic puzzles to engage him here — but I am not going to reveal them, do your-

self a favour, buy the book then look for them for yourself.

W Boyd Rayward (ed) *Developing a profession of librarianship in Australia: travel diaries and other papers of John Wallace Metcalfe*. Canberra, ALIA Press 1996. ■

In the Dixson Room at the State Library of NSW: Sir Laurence and Lady Olivier (Vivien Leigh) with state librarian John Metcalfe. 1940

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