



John Shipp

ALIA president

Our valued international contribution

Have you ever thought that if you could just block out the world, everything would be perfect? While it might be effective for a time, ultimately we all benefit from the interactions we have with others.

I recently watched the movie *As good as it gets* and was struck by the extent to which the character played by Jack Nicholson reminded me of many libraries and librarians. Here was someone who was talented and with so much to contribute to others. Yet, his obsession with himself made him reclusive and obnoxious.

Wanting to be alone is not restricted to people. During the course of history, many nations have sought to prevent the contamination of their cultures by outside influences. In time, they discovered that isolation was claustrophobic, stifled innovation and weakened what they wanted to protect.

To a large extent, Australia sought to overcome its physical isolation by a ready adoption of the exotic. This led to a cultural cringe which decreed that anything worth seeing, doing or having would not be found locally. Only travel would give the experiences and knowledge necessary to be 'cultured' and only imported goods and ideas were of value. For decades, local innovation, like hand-knitted sweaters, was so *outré* that it was spurned and derided.

In 1986, I went to the United States for the first time. According to library literature, American libraries were at the cutting edge of information innovation. I discovered much of interest but also found that Australian libraries were ahead of their American counterparts in some areas. Yet, there was little awareness of this innovation in either country.

In the intervening years, things have changed. Australian librarians have been making their mark internationally and our libraries are often leaders in areas such as the adaptation of information technology. Regrettably, there is still a reticence to proclaim this success.

Internationally, there is a growing regard for Australian libraries as centres of excellence and innovation. To a large degree, this reputation has been developed by those who have foregone home comforts to travel abroad or who have contributed to library literature. It has been due also to a relatively small group of people who have contributed over many years to organisations like CONSAL in South-East Asia, the American Society of Information Science and to IFLA.

Establishing an international reputation and profile takes time, effort and dedication. Some organisations have a reputation for cronyism while in others the complications of national politics make it difficult for outsiders. Once these barriers are breached, the Australian contribution is frequently not just recognised but valued and sought after.

ACLIS has made a major contribution to the outcome of international agreements on copyright and intellectual property. Various university librarians, through CAUL, are active in the campaign to effect changes in scholarly communication. Parliamentary librarians have contributed to the establishment and development of legislative libraries throughout the Pacific. In Asia and elsewhere, library educators and conservators have developed links which are mutually beneficial.

International relations are an increasingly important part of the function of many libraries and librarians. Alliances with counterparts overseas are regarded as a strategic means of extending access to information and for benchmarking activities.

ALIA has a significant role to play in fostering international relations between libraries and librarians. The Association has developed and maintained extensive links with other library associations. There has been a long-established link with the New Zealand Library and Information Association and with other library associations in the Pacific region.

In recent years, the Association has taken a more active interest in the IFLA. This interest has been fostered by Warren Horton who recognised the benefit which involvement in IFLA could bring to Australian libraries. At the 1999 IFLA conference in Bangkok, ALIA will be part of a group which will host a workshop for library associations in developing countries.

As John Donne would have said if he had been a librarian as well as a poet — 'no library is an island, entire of itself; every library association is a piece of the world, a part of the main'. While it is important to provide the best possible services to our users, the achievement of that aim is often dependent on the extent to which we can draw on the resources of others.

Australian libraries have developed excellent regional and national networks. We now need to develop our international relations in order to benefit from developments elsewhere and to make our contribution to the development of library services throughout the world. ■

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