

# Remembering Jean Whyte

Brian McMullin's definitive obituary appeared in the *Age* recently and it cannot be improved upon. What follows therefore is merely a personal recollection.

My first encounter with her was not promising: I was running a small branch public library at the time, and as part of our connection with the local school, the children in grades 5 and 6 had put together what I thought was a pretty good exhibition for Children's Book Week, consisting of hand-made papyrus from reeds in the local swamp, clay tablets, complete with cuneiform script, rag paper, wood blocks and woodblock prints. I wrote to the august professional journal offering an article, complete with photographs and samples: I got back from the even more august editor a letter which I can only describe as sniffy. It was, of course, Jean, than whom nobody could invest a sniff with a deeper or richer range of meaning. The *Australian Library Journal*, it appeared, was only interested in scholarly material, an impression which persists to this day, so lasting are the qualities with which Jean marked any professional context which she had graced with her powerful intellect and formidable disposition. That was in, oh, 1959.

I next encountered her a year or two later, at a time when the officials of her Majesty's Customs and Excise Department had apparently been appointed arbiters in the matter of what reading material might be imported into this country for ordinary citizens [as distinct from academics, whose intellects were somehow thought to be stronger, more discerning, or less corruptible than those of other mortals, including public librarians and their clients] to read. We had brought in a non-descript novel from the United States, completely unremarkable except that on its first page it had the not wholly unexpected 'four-letter-word' which has now resumed the commonplace status with which it was originally imbued, but which at that time could induce conniptions in any passing MP's susceptible teenage daughter. Or a local government councillor, as happened in this case. As a result of his moral grandstanding [some things don't change], HM Customs descended on us to impound the

offending book, and almost instantly, censorship rows erupted all over the place, not least in the University of Sydney where Jean was working in the Fisher Library. Frederick May, who held the chair in Italian Studies took the field on behalf, as I recall, of Boccaccio, aided and abetted by — Jean. Her consequent piece in *ALJ* on censorship is still worth reading even at this 32-year remove.

In 1979 I went to Monash where Jean had been invited four years earlier to establish a Graduate Department of Librarianship, firmly emplaced in the Faculty of Arts. I had enquired, not without trepidation, about the possibility of enrolling for the M Lib. The interview took about an hour, and was witnessed by two Schnauzers snoozing in a basket under Jean's desk: I do not know what their views on my candidacy were, but in due course I received a letter of acceptance, and there ensued ten months of un-distracted academic work, in the process of which Jean showed me that I could actually write. I have hardly stopped since, including the four years it took me to complete my thesis. In 1981 I followed Jean [at, as always, a respectful distance] into the *ALJ* editor's chair, to I might say, her apparent disgust: she feared for the impact on my thesis. Jean was my exacting supervisor, and in the process became a good friend.

Time passed, and in 1992 I had the opportunity to follow Jean once more, this time into the Schnauzer's former lair in her old office at Monash. What happened there is quite another story, but Jean and I renewed and refreshed our friendship which was enriched by the successor to the Schnauzers, a terrier called 'Quingle', so named by Jean's long-time friend and companion, the wickedly humorous, sometime professor of philosophy, sometime librarian, Hector Monro, whom I also came to love and admire. We dined, all three, often all four, once a fortnight, and Quingle showed me what he knew of the parks and walks of Mount Waverley. They were genial and convivial hosts: Jean was a good cook, and they kept an excellent cellar, an education in itself. Much South Australian wine of course, all of it excellent, but with good representation from the other states, including my

own Tasmania. We matched quotations, we talked politics, and it was in their company that I watched the 'unlosable' Federal election of 1993 lost: by half-past eight, the trend was clear and incontrovertible. We were of course, of one mind, politically, and the red wine, like our congenial discourse, flowed in abundance.

And now she is gone from me, from us all. That marvelous mind, razor-sharp, comprehensive, humane yet intolerant of any pretensions unwisely offered it, preceded her into oblivion. Hector died during her illness, and Quingle found a new owner. Her collections of wine, artworks and books, were broken up and dispersed, and all I hold by way of reminder [and it is enough] is her small collection of poetry on librarianship, *The poems of Callimachus*, hand-printed at the Ancora Press, one of her legacies to Monash University, in 2000. Jean wrote the introduction:

*...The poems ... were designed to emphasise the history of the profession and to express its achievements using light verse written in rhythms and language appropriate to the specific historical time under discussion...*

She was catholic in her range: Langland, Paterson, Skelton, Shakespeare, Cowper, Tennyson and Longfellow all served as sounding boards on which she played word-games. The concluding poem is called 'Last message from Callimachus, 1996', and a short quotation must serve as example of the philosophy by which she lived her life:

...  
*Ah yes! I know that knowledge walks with power  
And without wisdom is a dangerous gift.  
Soon you must turn your eyes from the machines:  
The problems of your world will not be solved  
By asking How? But asking Why? What for?*

...  
What for, indeed.

John Levett