

Phillipena (Ena) Noël, AOM, 1910–2003

Maurice Saxby

There would be few individuals to have done more to promote internationally the quality and riches of Australian children's literature than Ena Noël. It has been said of her that, 'It is given to very few to become a legend in their own time. Ena Noël is one of the few.' A diminutive but commanding figure, Ena on several occasions swept onto the dais of the University of Sydney's Great Hall in step with the then Chancellor, Sir Hermann Black. Her carefully selected gown and copious flowing cloak complemented the Chancellor's equally resplendent academic attire. As she stepped forward to the microphone Ena captured the fixed attention of the vast audience packed into that seat of learning.

It was Ena's passionate commitment to life, her vitality, her ability to motivate and enthuse a great body of friends and followers that made her such a dynamic and unforgettable force in Australia's cultural life. Her interests were vast; but her major passions in life were first to her family — her distinguished son, Dr Michael Noël, her grandchildren and great-grandchildren — then to dance and, as a teacher and librarian, to the promotion of literacy and the love of reading among the youth of the world, believing as she did that true literature is a potent force in promoting international understanding and good will. Michael says of her, 'She was never still, either physically or mentally. She tried almost any physical activity. In recent years she tried sail-boarding, drove an open four wheel drive jeep, and continued to drive a car through the centre of Sydney — one of the few people over ninety years of age still holding a full drivers licence'. Until the week of her death Ena would drive from Darling Point to Penrith to be a true grandmother; reading to her brood and cooking the family's favourite meals. Also a community-minded woman she was a member of the National Council of Jewish Women and other 'friends' of most artistic organisations in Sydney.

Ena was born in Sydney on 30 July 1910. Both parents were Russian immigrants and she inherited an enquiring mind, an artistic nature, and possibly that adventurous spirit that frequently took her travelling across the globe, often to conferences but also to enthuse over the great monuments and sights around the world. In 1998, for example, she organised a small party to travel via Russia to an international congress in Munich at which she was a delegate, then to travel by bus across Europe to Istanbul. There she joined an RSL tour to attend the dawn service at Anzac Cove.

From childhood Ena developed an interest in all forms of art and literature, especially music, theatre and dance. Inspired by the first Bodenwieser Ballet performed in Sydney in 1939, she trained in ballet under Gertrud Bodenwieser, winning the modern creative dance, solo and duo section in the eisteddfod. After dancing with the Bodenwieser Group for some years, Ena conducted a dance studio at Rose Bay for some twenty years. In 1952–53 she toured Britain and Europe with a solo lecture-dance program entitled *The life cycle of an Australian Aboriginal woman*, dancing to John Antill's music for *Corroboree*. She performed, representing Australia, in the festivities for the Royal coronation in 1953. Her interest in flamenco dancing led her to study that form in Barcelona, Spain.

In 1940 Ena had married Arthur Charles Noël, a British sea captain engaged in conveying merchant navy ships. Because of this position the couple were often parted, but were able to spend precious time together during Ena's time in England in 1952–53. After her husband's death in 1966, Ena, although remaining passionate about dance, pursued an academic career. From the University of Sydney she obtained a Bachelor of Arts and Diploma of Education. At first she taught in her chosen speciality of English and History at various high schools. While teaching at Dover Heights Girls High School she became convinced that her highest goal was to turn young people into enthusiastic and discriminating readers by working in school libraries. It was at a time that the crucial importance of such an educational tool was just being given due recognition. So Ena enrolled in two consecutive NSW Department of Education Library Services vacation courses in 1956–57. Later she was chosen to attend a special summer course at Alexander Mackie College organised by the Commonwealth with money made available for such special training following the Karmel Report on School libraries. In 1958 Ena had been appointed librarian at South Sydney Boys High, the only woman on an all male staff. As it always was with Ena Noël she quickly established herself as a major force in that group. Whether in a teaching situation or when, later, she was to organise a series of extremely successful conferences and seminars, Ena had the gift of co-opting a team of willing helpers and co-workers. In an unobtrusively quiet way she had the knack of obtaining whatever objective she had in mind while appearing to be utterly democratic. Few people in her field had such managerial skills.

Ena herself then went on to co-or-

dinate and lecture at short summer courses in secondary school librarianship at the University of Sydney in the 1960s. From 1956 to 1974 she was renowned for her skill as a teacher-librarian — especially at Fort St Girls High — where as well as inspiring her own students she supervised and became, as senior administrative mistress, mentor to Diploma of Education students undertaking practice teaching.

These professional activities brought her into active membership of the Library Association of Australia. Ena was a founding and continuing committee member of the School and Children's Libraries Section in NSW of the Library Council of the LAA. She was also an early and diligent member of the NSW branch of the Children's Book Council of Australia. It became understood that no children's book event in Australia would be complete without the presence of Ena Noël. As convenor of a sub-committee of the NSW division of the School and Children's Libraries Section she was partly responsible for the publication of *The new classics: a selection of award-winning children's books* — an invaluable guide to quality in children's literature world-wide. Ena also contributed to the planning of the visit to Australia of Professor Sara Fenwick, an American Fulbright lecturer, whose report on children's libraries in 1966 did much to stimulate the provision of quality children's library services throughout Australia. Such were Ena's many contributions to the development of school and children's libraries that in 1984 the General Council of the LAA created a special tribute, the Ellinor Archer Award. Along with the citation on that occasion the small sculpture with which she was presented took pride of place in the recipient's gracious apartment at Darling Point — along with her harp, sketches of herself as a dancer, paintings by Australian artists whom she had befriended and the many posters from countries around the world celebrating International Children's Day and a multitude of children's books as well as figurines representing characters from children's books from the many countries which Ena had visited.

These visits often had to do with Ena's activities connected to IBBY: the Interna-



tional Board on Books for Young People. IBBY is responsible for International Children's Book Day, observed on 2 April, the birthday of Hans Christian Andersen, sponsored each year by a different country. It is also responsible for awarding biennially the Hans Christian Andersen Medals for writing and illustration, regarded as the Little Nobel Prize for children's literature. After her husband's death Ena became absorbed in the work of IBBY — and was affectionately known in Australia as 'Mrs IBBY'. In 1966 she became the president of the Australian section of that organisation and from 1982 to 1986 she served on the international executive committee. It is largely through IBBY that Ena Noël's name became an international symbol of enthusiasm, meticulous planning and hard-working dedication. Her activities became legion.

Each year on 2 April Ena would organise a sumptuous Hans Andersen dinner which became a glittering affair for the children's book world. Ena herself, always wonderfully gowned, would rise above the crowd on a pedestal to open the proceedings, which always included a guest speaker: sometimes a local celebrity, but often an overseas writer or illustrator of renown, such as the British writer Alan Garner, author of the ground-breaking novel, *Red Shift*. The annual *IBBY Newsletter* edited by Ena contained items about children's literature events around the world. Ena was frequently invited to speak at conferences and seminars both at home and abroad: Poland (Poznan), Paris, Munich and Moscow. In Moscow she was a special guest of the Soviet Union in the International Year of the Child. She attended twice yearly IBBY executive meetings at her own expense and attended the annual children's book fair at Bologna, Italy. Her ability to speak French, Italian and Spanish facilitated communication with other members of IBBY and she had a

wide circle of friends across the globe.

Perhaps the acme of her achievements with IBBY came in 1986 when at a conference in Tokyo Patricia Wrightson was awarded the Hans Christian Andersen Medal for the body of her writing for children and Robert Ingpen received the Medal for his illustration of children's books. Ena had nominated both winners and had helped compile dossiers on both. It was the first time that the award had gone to Australia and the first time both awards had ever gone to the same country. At a celebratory dinner in Bologna to announce the award winners Ena was visibly overcome — almost to the point of fainting — claiming the occasion to be 'perhaps the proudest moment of my life'.

A regular delegate at each IBBY conference, held biennially in various cities around the world, Ena organised and led the largest ever Australian contingents to attend an overseas conference on children's literature: that in Cambridge, England in 1982, and in Tokyo in 1996. She was a respected critic of children's literature and contributed articles to international journals such as *Bookbird*. In 1971 she organised Australia's only entry for the Biennial of Illustrations in Bratislava; and in 1992 she was the Australian judge for the American Ezra Jack Keats Award in children's literature.

As president of IBBY, and as an authority on children's books, Ena was called upon to speak at conferences and seminars too numerous to list. Small though she was, her presence was always commanding. Yet she never consciously drew attention to herself. Her dignity was innate; almost regal. She was always in perfect control without drawing attention to the fact. This was most especially evident at the opening ceremony for each of the huge IBBY conferences which she, with her band of loyal and devoted fellows, organised so meticulously. The 1978

conference *Through folklore to literature* with its cast of international speakers is still spoken about with reverence. It was perhaps the first truly international conference of its kind to be held in this country. It was followed in 1979 by *Storytelling for children and young people*; in 1981 by *Able to enjoy: books and the young disabled*; and in 1983 by *Changing faces: story and children in an electronic age*.

In 1994 Ena founded her own biennial prize — the Ena Noël Award — to encourage young emerging writers and illustrators. The first to receive that award was Raymond Arone Meeks, author and illustrator of such books as *Pheasant and kingfisher* (1987) and *Enora and the black crane* (1991).

For her services to children's literature Ena Noël received the Children's Book Council's Lady Cutler Award in 1983, and in 1986 she was presented with the Medal of the Order of Australia. On the occasion of the Lady Cutler Award it was said: 'In the world of children's literature Ena Noël's name is a password nationally and internationally. It is a password amongst those who believe that literature of quality and integrity is a powerful potential in the growth of children's imagination, insight and understanding — understanding of themselves, their society and their world; that books can be bridges linking person to person, culture to culture, nation to nation.'

At a time when Australia's focus is on children's literacy and their ability to process literature and when the need for international understanding and the acceptance of 'others' has never been greater, the contribution of Ena Noël will provide inspiration to all who believe in the universal republic of childhood.

Maurice Saxby was nominated by Ena Noël, and then elected to the jury of the Hans Andersen awards in 1984 and 1986. He was to join Ena on some of her many travels, including that to Gallipoli.

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