

Vale, Wilma Radford

Miss Wilma Radford, a Foundation member of the Australian Institute of Librarians, (the AIL, a forerunner of ALIA) and an outstanding library practitioner and educator, died on 27 August 2005 after a short illness. She was 93.

Born on 31 July 1912 in Warragul, Victoria, she received her secondary education at Sydney Girls' High School and in 1931 attended Sydney Teachers' College. She had considered a career in librarianship when still at school and in 1932 obtained her first position at the Public Library of New South Wales (now the State Library), where she would remain for most of the next thirty years. She was interviewed by W H Ifould, the principal librarian at the time, a shrewd selector. In those Depression years there was no shortage of young women seeking employment at the Library and he could afford to be choosy. He looked for candidates who were in the top twelve of the Leaving Certificate list and who were 'suitable in address, physique and health, as well as in scholarship'. He was also seeking keen and energetic people and wanted to know about their outside interests. At her interview Wilma declared her fondness for gardening, to which Ifould, a renowned gardener, retorted: 'Well you can't garden at night'. He may have thought her reply sycophantic, but he recognised her sterling qualities and the Public Library had found one of its star performers.

As was then the norm, Wilma's progress through the ranks was slow but varied. The Public Library at that time also staffed libraries in New South Wales government departments, technical colleges and the Sydney Teachers' College. She worked in some of these outposts, as well as in the General Reference Department (now the State Reference Library) and the Cataloguing Department. In 1937 she was at Sydney Technical College when the Australian Institute of Librarians was founded in Canberra, and she was among its Foundation members. She was then still a library assistant on probation, only becoming a senior library assistant in 1944. By then she had begun one of the most stimulating phases of her career as a lecturer in the Library School, which had been established at the Public Library in 1939. In this role she worked closely with John Metcalfe, who had succeeded Ifould as principal librarian in 1942. Their collaboration, particularly in education for librarianship and the professional association, would continue for many decades. Her sustained respect for Metcalfe was understandable — he was a larger than life figure with an intellect to match and a tremendous capacity for work. But he was not infallible and her admiration was not slavish. On more than one occasion Radford's reason may have tempered Metcalfe's impetuosity in the business of the association and in the workplace.

Whilst lecturing at the Library School she was also studying part-time for her Bachelor of Arts at the University of Sydney and graduated in 1947. In that year she was recommended for Carnegie Corporation assistance to undertake library studies in the United States. She was granted leave to attend the Columbia University School of Library Service, graduating Bachelor of Science in 1948. Returning home via Europe, she attended the UNESCO/IFLA International Summer School for Librarians in London, subsequently sharing her observations on libraries and library education in the UK and USA with her colleagues. Not long after her return she was appointed technical officer of the Library Board of New South Wales, and from 1949 to 1954 she played a leading part in the rapid development of public library services established under the Library Act.

During this time she remained active and interested in library education, continuing to lecture at the Library School and to be an active member of the Library Association of Australia (LAA) Board of Examination, Certification and Registration of Librarians. At the 1951 LAA Conference she and Elizabeth Hall

of the National Library presented a paper on library staffing and education which Metcalfe described as 'the best professional paper so far read to this Association'. He was well qualified to judge, having heard and read all of the papers since 1937.

In 1954 she was appointed reference librarian, in charge of the General Reference Department. This was a time when resources were stretched to the limit: university students, their own libraries not yet able to cope with post-war student numbers, flooded into the Public Library. There were often too few seats to go around and students sat on the stairs of the galleries or on the floor. Telephone enquiries grew exponentially, as did detailed research enquiries from business and industry. To survive, let alone flourish, the reference staff needed to be well organised, well trained and committed to their work. In Wilma Radford they had a perfect role model, tutor and guide.

In 1962 it was announced that she was to leave the Public Library to join the School of Librarianship at the University of New South Wales. The Trustees of the Library presented her with an address under seal — an honour usually reserved for very distinguished staff members upon retirement. Her loss was keenly felt, but the Trustees were 'reconciled to the loss of her services to them by the knowledge that her ability and experience will now be devoted to the professional training of librarians for the benefit of library services as a whole, as well as for their own institution'.

As senior lecturer at the School of Librarianship she was working once again with John Metcalfe, its foundation director. In what spare time she had she was also researching and writing her thesis on Charles Badham and his role in New South Wales education, and in 1969 was awarded the Master of Education degree by the University of Sydney.

In 1968, after the vacancy had been widely advertised in Australia and overseas, she succeeded Metcalfe as head of school and was appointed Professor of Librarianship — this was the first chair of librarianship in Australia. Her appointment was widely welcomed. Russell Cope wrote of her 'sense of commitment to her profession, her concern for standards of excellence and a lively interest in people, particularly young people entering librarianship', qualities which in her were 'blended in a pleasing harmony'. Cope also referred to her great fund of common sense and indeed she valued this quality in others. Good old-fashioned nous — a favourite word — entered into more than one discussion of librarianship qualities. She lived up to everyone's expectations, holding her new position with distinction and retiring in 1974. In the words of a later citation, she had 'consolidated the position of the school in the University and the community and opened new horizons for both staff and students'.

Her contribution to the wider profession was also being recognised. She had been appointed a Foundation Fellow of the LAA in 1963 and in 1976 she became the second recipient of the HCL Anderson Award, the Association's highest award to a library professional — Metcalfe had been so honoured in 1973.



The Association recognised her long and distinguished service — she had been active in one role or another in her professional association almost continuously since 1937, as a council member, committee member, Board of Examiners secretary, member, deputy chairman and in due course chairman, general secretary and vice-president.

In retirement she remained an active and committed member, contributing chapters to professional publications, papers to conferences, particularly on Australian library history, and occasional letters to the editor of the *Australian Library Journal*. She was present at Association celebrations — such as the 50th anniversary in 1987 — and when critical issues were being discussed. In 1999 she attended the meeting at which formal approval was given for the Association to move to an incorporated body. The then president was somewhat astonished to be talking with someone who by then had been a member for 62 years.

She always managed to find time for those who wished to draw upon her memories of librarians, libraries and library work since the 1930s. About two years ago the author sounded her out about the draft of a history of the ALI which Jean Whyte had begun and which he was completing. Would Wilma be able to read it and offer her comments? By all means. In the office or closer to her home? Oh, she was still coming into town from time to time. Mind you, she didn't know how much help she could be. It was such a long time ago. It was an unnecessary caveat. She worked with him through the 223-page draft which she had carefully read and annotated during the previous week. She suggested a subtle change of emphasis here, an additional name there. A correction of dates or the sequence of events. An alternative view of certain occurrences. A spelling mistake, despite endless spell checking. A grammatical solecism. In an absorbing three and a half hours she informed, guided, inspired and entertained as she had done many thousands of times before, with students, senior and junior colleagues, family and friends. It was an astonishing exhibition by a gifted teacher who had lost none of her magic. Far from exhausted by this editorial marathon, Wilma made her own way to the kerb, hailed a cab and headed for her apartment in Chatswood.

This is but a brief insight into a truly extraordinary life which others will celebrate more fully and reflectively in coming months and years. Many will view her principal legacy to the profession as the generations of librarians who were taught by her at the Public Library of New South Wales and at the University of New South Wales, or who benefited from her work on the Board of Examiners, and who absorbed some of her passion and philosophy. Some will explore how she succeeded as a female professor of a fledgling profession in a decidedly male bastion. Others will examine her practical contribution to professional education. Former colleagues may recall what it was like to work with her at the Public Library and the University of New South Wales. They will certainly write of her generosity to institutions and causes, including the John Metcalfe Memorial Fund at the University of New South Wales.

Family, friends and colleagues will relate how they benefited from those most valued commodities — her time and her interest in their work or welfare. Others, like the author, will trace the origins of their own growing commitment to librarianship to an inspiring Radford lecture or tutorial. We all join in mourning the passing of this great Australian and celebrating her contribution to our profession and to our own lives.

David J Jones

Wilma Radford memorial

The State Library of New South Wales will hold a memorial service for Wilma Radford on 18 October 2005. Please check <http://www.sl.nsw.gov.au> for further details. ■



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