

JOHN METCALFE DIES

Founder of LAA

JOHN WALLACE METCALFE was born on 16 May 1901 and died 7 February 1982.

Great men are not easy to know. The aims they set themselves, the forces which move them and their very nature tends to separate them from us.

John Metcalfe was a great man. He was the moving force who laid down the present basis of our profession in Australia by establishing the Australian Institute of Librarians as a qualifying association and working to create the examination system which most of us knew as the Registration.

He gave his counsel, support and time to those non-librarians who saw the need to create our public library system. His goal was the creation of a graduate profession and the transfer of the education of librarians to tertiary education bodies. In all his activities he had the support of his wife Thelma, also a significant figure in the community.

The contribution of the various parties to these developments has yet to be documented but it is clear that until his retirement in the sixties his was the dominating influence in Australia. He served as President of the Association, he chaired its Board of Examination and Certification, and he travelled extensively within Australia and spoke in the cause of libraries.

He was the author of many documents which do not bear his name and of professional works which broke new ground in subject classification. He was internationally significant.

The Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services exists as a result of his initiative, as does the New South Wales State Archives. Governments and institutions sought his advice – and sometimes received it unsolicited.

John Metcalfe was Principal Librarian of the then Public Library of New South Wales, the first full-time Librarian of the fledgling University of New South Wales Library and founding Director of its School of Librarianship, which he was influential in creating.

He was honoured by the Association as the first recipient of the H.C.L. Anderson Award. He was honoured by the Australian Library Promotion Council, who awarded him the first Alfred McMicken Medal for library promotion. To my certain knowledge he refused national honours as a matter of principle.

But what of the man himself? He was an exceedingly complex individual. I have the impression that he would not have fitted easily into the world of work in his early career. Unconventional and questioning in his ways, he was clearly no candidate for bureaucratic preferment. He had the intellect and the



John Metcalfe
BA, FLA, FLAA

A remarkable man to whom Australian librarianship owes a great debt

ability, but not the motivation nor the conservatism.

The motivation probably came from his analysis of Australian libraries, which was of such assistance to Ralph Munn who reported on Australian libraries in the thirties. His views were developed by his work with Remington and Brain, citizens who worked with him in the Free Library Movement, and nourished under the direction of Drummond, then Minister for Education in New South Wales, who recognized Metcalfe's talents.

He was also a man of great contrasts. Apparently devious but extremely moral and high principled; outwardly thoughtless of others' needs, yet at times caring and generous; scornful of the 'cultured halls' of academe yet a committed intellectual.

Finally, it is worth noting that while the influence of John Metcalfe on the corporate and institutional environment in which we

work is evident, many will not realize how influential he was with respect to the encouragement and help he gave to many librarians in their professional development. This is his real contribution.

Every man is a debtor to his profession. John Metcalfe paid his debt and has left us a legacy which we undoubtedly will find of full value in the years to come.

Allan Horton,
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REMEMBERING A PIONEER...

Today I was told that John Metcalfe had died.

My first thought was that for him death must have been a merciful release from the shadows that he has lived among for almost a decade.

And then I realized that now the Library Association of Australia is indeed alone.

Perhaps the librarians of my generation are the last of those who owe much of their professional commitment and their visions of service to John Metcalfe, and, for them, let me record here that he was indeed the founder of modern librarianship in this country.

Others will write fuller tributes, another will one day write his biography. The record is there to be read and analysed and interpreted. In all his writings his sense of history is clear.

Today I remember him standing beside a trout hatchery in Tasmania in 1946, delivering his presidential addresses in 1947 and in 1959. I recall many, many arguments ranging from 'letter by letter' versus 'word by word' to information indexing, to who should be the next national librarian, to whether Toynebee was really as bad as Ranganathan.

I remember an eager dark-eyed man who stood taller than his actual height, who dominated Australian librarianship for more than three decades. I remember a very important librarian who always had time to speak to and encourage his young colleagues.

It is indeed a privilege to have worked on Association business, and to have spent much time talking and corresponding with John Wallace Metcalfe.

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