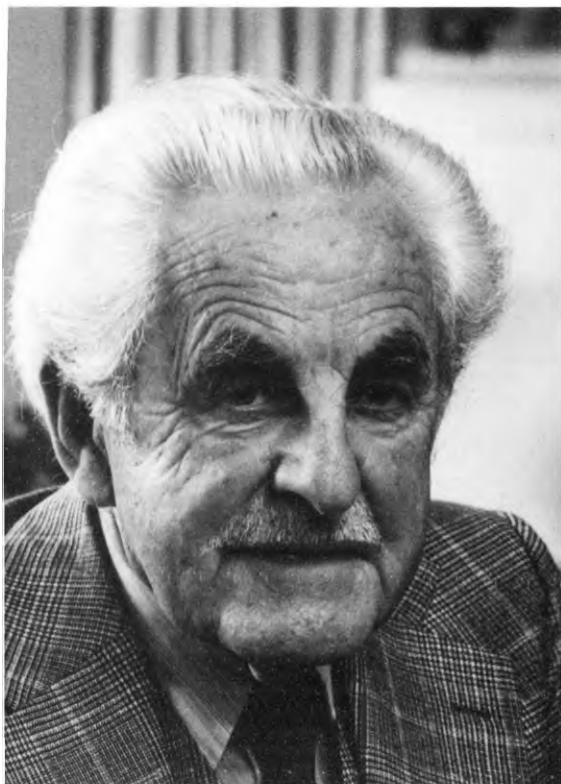


Sir Harold Leslie White CBE, FLAA, FAHA, FASSA 1905-1992

Harrison Bryan pays tribute to a great Australian and a great librarian

SIR HAROLD WHITE, who died on 31 August 1992, played a key role in the establishment and development of the National Library of Australia and was a major force in



the world of Australian libraries and librarianship for more than forty years. Born in Numurkah, Victoria, in 1905, he was educated at Wesley College, Melbourne. On the recommendation of the then headmaster of that school, he was recruited as a cadet by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library in 1923, to begin an association with that library and its successors that was to last for nearly half a century.

The terms of his cadetship enabled him to undertake full-time study at the University of Melbourne, whence he graduated MA with first class honours in French Literature in 1926. In 1928, in only his twenty-fourth year, he was appointed Deputy Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian. In 1947 he succeeded Kenneth Binns to become the third Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian.

In 1960 the Government adopted the Report of a Committee chaired by Sir George Paton which created the

National Library of Australia. Sir Harold became Australia's first National Librarian, though he also remained Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian until the process of separation of the two institutions was complete. He retired in 1970.

The National Library brought together those activities not directly related to the needs of Parliament which the Parliamentary Library had been undertaking in increasing measure under the direction of Sir Harold and his predecessor. These included, in addition to a major preoccupation with developing research collections, the provision of public library services to the people of Canberra, the establishment of a film archive and the setting up of a film lending service. A further activity developed by Sir Harold, an embryo National Archives, became independent of either library on the recommendation of the Paton Committee.

Sir Harold's twenty-three years as head of the National Library and its predecessor were characterised by a remarkable growth in both the resources and the activities of the institution. At the time of his retirement the staff had increased from 25 to more than 600 and the book collections from rather inadequate proportions to a size and quality noted internationally as well as nationally as of major importance.

Indicative both of the increased government recognition secured by Sir Harold for the Library and of his signal success in promoting its interests with a series of Prime Ministers was the erection of its enduringly handsome building on a plum site in the Parliamentary triangle by Lake Burley Griffin.

Sir Harold played an important part in the development of libraries generally in Australia and in the emergence of a recognised profession of librarianship. He was active in securing the support of the Carnegie Corporation for the development of public libraries following the Munn-Pitt Report of 1937 and he played a key role in the establishment both of the Australian Institute of Librarians in 1937 and of its successor, the

Library Association of Australia twelve years later.

The Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS), established in 1956 by the Conference of Commonwealth and State Library Authorities, allegedly to contain the ambitions of the National Library, was developed by Sir Harold as a genuine public expression of library cooperation and proved, ironically, to be of great support to him in the extension of the Library's services to the nation.

Sir Harold was one of the first Australian librarians to secure recognition on the international stage. He established important working relationships between the National Library of Australia and the Library of Congress and a significant liaison with the National Diet Library in Tokyo. He was retained by the then Government of Malaya to advise on the development of national library services in that country.

He was a Foundation Fellow of the Library Association of Australia and the recipient of its highest professional honour, the H C L Anderson Award. He was also a Foundation Fellow of both the Academy of the Humanities and the Academy of the Social Sciences. At various times he served as a member of the UNESCO International Committee on Bibliography, was Chairman of the Standing Committee of the Australian Advisory Committee on Bibliographic Services, a member of the National Film Board and the Commonwealth Archives Committee and Chairman of the UNESCO Committee on Drama, Theatre and Literature. To celebrate his eightieth birthday in 1985 the National Library Council renamed its recently established Fellowships the H L White Fellowships.

One of the earliest residents of Canberra, having followed the Library there soon after its transfer from Melbourne in 1927, Sir Harold was prominent in local society, being especially well-known in diplomatic circles. In this he was greatly supported by his charming wife, Elizabeth, who was made MBE in 1962 for her work with the aged. In 1962 Sir Harold was appointed CBE and in 1970 he was knighted, the only Australian librarian to have been so honoured. ■