

George Chandler 1915-1992

Peter Judge has brought together this appreciation of a distinguished former member of the Australian library community

George Chandler, whom we knew as Australia's third National Librarian (the first to be called Director General of the National Library of Australia), died on 9 October 1992, aged 77. He was a public



George and Dorothy Chandler at their farewell function in 1980. (Photo: Hank Brusse, NLA)

librarian all his life and a man of wide-ranging interests—for instance, besides his academic and professional achievements he took a particular pride in his Bronze Medal for ballroom dancing!

George was educated in Birmingham. He entered library service there at the age of 16 and immediately set out to improve his qualifications, in due course gaining first a BA, then an MA and a PhD from London University by external study. After a time in Leeds he was appointed Borough Librarian of Dudley, acquiring the additional titles of Archivist and Information Officer and showing his lifelong interest in local history by editing a history of the town.

His career took a major step upwards with a move to Liverpool, where he was appointed Deputy Librarian in 1949 and City Librarian in 1952. Liver-

pool's libraries had been allowed to run down during the Great Depression, and most of the Central Library had been gutted and thousands of volumes destroyed in wartime bombing. With the support of a strong Libraries Committee, George transformed the out-dated reference library into a series of subject departments staffed by librarians who were subject specialists, an idea that he was to pursue later in Australia as well.

George saw the Central Library rebuilt in 1960 with greatly enhanced accommodation. As part of this activity, he put on a series of exhibitions on Liverpool and its international links that highlighted the library's resources, and he produced several books on the history of Liverpool. His apparently boundless energy overflowed the City's confines. He became Chairman of the Executive Committee of the Library Association and its President in 1971. He was a member of the organising committee of the British Library and later a member of its Board, giving him increasing opportunities to influence the UK national library scene.

In 1974 he came to Australia, as Director General of the National Library, bringing with him a considerable international reputation as a well-known author and editor on professional topics, and an IFLA medal winner.

His period at the NLA was notable for the emphasis given to resource sharing and public promotion of the concept of national planning. The Life Sciences Network was built on the basis of the Australian MEDLARS service, the Australian database host was established and the foundations were laid for the future ABN. His vision of a nationwide Australian Library-based Information Service (ALBIS), developed from proposals prepared by his predecessor Allan Fleming, was the hapless victim of economic recession. He pushed though the purchase of the first

major computer installation at the NLA. Internally, the NLA was reorganised into a series of subject-based 'libraries' as in Liverpool: the Australian National Science and Technology Library (ANSTEL) and its equivalents in the social sciences and humanities, ANSOL and ANHUL. This reorganisation was dismantled after his retirement in 1980.

In his farewell address to the staff of the NLA, on 5 May 1980, George said, 'The past six years have dominated my life. It seems like 66 years.' Twelve years on, we recognise that it will be many more years before history makes its final judgment on George Chandler's period as Director General of the NLA. Harrison Bryan, his successor as Director General, gave this summing up in 1988 in *ALIAS*: 'Chandler appeared not to find it easy to understand completely the Australian scene, far less to adjust to it. Despite the considerable progress he achieved, sadly, neither the NLA nor its perception by the library community seemed to benefit as much as had been hoped from the appointment of such an international figure.'

In retirement, George continued to travel, lecture and write on library topics. He edited *The International Library Review* with the able assistance of his wife Dorothy who survives him and who, apart from helping him in his researches for many years, was also a fine silversmith with her own hallmark. Perhaps the most fitting last word comes from his obituary in *The Times*: 'George Chandler was a man of energy and creativity who seized the opportunity to lead and influence library services.'

(These notes draw largely from the obituary that appeared in the *London Times* of 11 November 1992 and the article on George Chandler written by Harrison Bryan in *Australia's library, information and archives services—an encyclopaedia of practice and practitioners, ALIAS*.)