

Esther Elizabeth Austin Leslie

1917–1997

Esther Elizabeth Austin Leslie was born at Neutral Bay on 9 November 1917 and lived in the Willoughby area all her life.

She began her library career at the Public Library of New South Wales in 1935, and studied part-time at the University of Sydney to gain a Bachelor of Economics degree.

She worked at Newcastle Technical College (1942–1944); Sydney Technical College (1945–1962), and at Sydney Teachers' College (1962–1964) as librarian-in-charge.

From 1964 until her retirement in 1977 she worked as the chief librarian at the New South Wales Department of Technical and Further Education. The position was an onerous one, carrying responsibility for the provision of centralised acquisitions and cataloguing services for all TAFE colleges throughout the state (except Newcastle) and for the standard of services to students and staff state-wide.

Esther's time as chief librarian was a period of growth and development, albeit much slower than she would have liked because of inadequate funding and the complexities associated with servicing another institution. The availability of Commonwealth funding for new building projects (effectively from 1975 onwards) brought an improvement in the accommodation for new libraries. In all college libraries, steps were taken to broaden the basically print collections to include audio-visual materials and multimedia kits. The overriding goal was to provide a true learning resource centre with adequate materials, staff and accommodation — including special purpose facilities.

Esther did substantial groundwork towards developments and advances that came to fruition only after her retirement. Two notable examples are the new Sydney Technical College Library (now the University of Technology, Sydney), and the provision of library services to country colleges.

Esther always fought tenaciously for funds for library resource materials, accommodation and staff — perhaps only those who were closely associated with her could imagine how tenaciously!

Esther always had a keen interest in history — particularly local history —

and her retirement gave her a greater opportunity to pursue it. She was both a long-standing member of the Willoughby District Historical Society and its archivist. This led to her involvement in the Willoughby Bicentennial Community Committee.

As convenor of the community history projects sub-committee she was involved in the research for and organisation of a series of local histories. Several sub-committees were set up and, in 1984, work began on eight 'locality booklets' which were compiled by voluntary effort to commemorate Australia's Bicentenary. Esther co-authored three of the publications which appeared in 1988 and provided a historical mosaic of Artarmon, Castle Cove, Middle Cove, Castlecrag, East Chatswood, West Chatswood, Northbridge and Willoughby. The bibliographies exemplify Esther's meticulous and painstaking approach which was reflected in all her work.

In 1989, Esther was named Willoughby Citizen of the Year 'for outstanding service to the Willoughby Community'. The award was a richly deserved acknowledgment of her major role as convenor of the Community History Project. A further tribute to her untiring work in local history came recently when the Willoughby District Historical Society named its museum reading room in her honour.

Esther was close to her family and cared for her mother and sister when needed. She had much pleasure from the friendship and love of her nieces and nephews and their children — particularly during the last five years when she was a resident of the Chatswood Community Nursing Home in Sydney.

Esther had a major stroke in 1992 affecting her speech and movement, but not her memory. Her many visitors were amused and amazed by her comments. Her interest in her ex-staff, in TAFE and in the library world never flagged.

Following another severe stroke, Esther died peacefully at Chatswood on 19 October 1997.

Esther's death takes from librarianship another of the quiet but remarkably determined women who, with their sharp minds and high standards, had a significant influence on a developing profession. ■



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