

# Colin Stanley Watson: librarian, promoter and innovator

18 October 1927 – 6 August 1999

Daniel Ferguson, Friends of Libraries Australia

It was said of Colin Watson that he was 'A man with his head in the air and his feet placed firmly on the ground'.

For more than forty years Colin Watson maintained an abiding commitment to expanding the role of the public library in the community as a professional librarian, library promoter and innovator.

He began his professional career when not all public libraries were publicly funded and coverage was limited — these were the days of the card catalogue. When he retired, he was well-satisfied with the universal coverage of public libraries throughout Australia, funded by state and local government and using the latest computer technology.

Colin Stanley Watson was born in Nyah West, northwest Victoria, on 18 October 1927, the son of wheat farmers and Clydesdale horse breeders. He attended Yarraby State School No 3398 and later matriculated from Swan Hill High School in 1943. In 1951 he graduated with a Bachelor of Commerce degree from the University of Melbourne and went to work for Colonial Mutual Life Assurance Society, which he regarded as a temporary career. In 1957 he completed a Preliminary Certificate in Librarianship — his diploma paper was on the application of computer technology, at that time in the very earliest stages of development. He joined the Association in 1957 and became an Associate in 1967.

One of his many outstanding achievements was as a leader in library technology. He was the first librarian in Australia to use barcode technology and in 1972 introduced an automated book lending system on a mobile library at Dandenong Valley, the first in the world.

The career of Colin Watson is the more remarkable in that he only held two library positions, both as chief librarian.

In 1957 he was appointed city librarian for the City of Brighton, an affluent Melbourne bayside suburb with an under-developed library system. For the next fourteen years he filled the position with innovation, leadership and enthusiasm, raising the level of public usage of the library to the highest in Melbourne.

It was in his second position, as foundation regional librarian of the Dandenong Valley Regional Library from 1971 until retirement in 1992, that his achievements were remarkable. He was literally given the opportunity and scope to implement his vision of a public library service of world class. With meagre resources, no buildings or staff and a population of 150 000 from five municipalities, he set about creating a public library at the forefront of innovation. By the time he retired, the service served a population of 320 000, through seven branch libraries and three mobile libraries, in one of the country's most rapid growth corridors.

Services were implemented in areas of: multicultural services, English as a second language, adult literacy, computer technology, non-book materials, community development programs, local area networks, school and public library development and more. One of the most significant was his interest in and development of library promotion, publicity and public relations. Watson travelled to the United States in the 1970s, gaining many ideas for library promotion, which he became the first to implement in Australia.

Colin Watson was passionately committed professionally to develop the status and professionalism of library promotion in libraries. He became a leading figure in the Library Promotion Committee of Victoria and his visionary commitment led to the establishment in 1966 of the Australian Library Promotion Council. During the next twenty years, he served that body as a vice-president, editor

of *Australian Library News* for fifteen years and chairman of the judging panel for the Public Relations Awards.

In 1983, in recognition of his outstanding contribution to the promotion of libraries in Australia over twenty-five years, Colin had conferred on him the Alfred McMicken Award (McMicken, a public librarian, was founder of the Victorian Promotion body, the first such library body in the world).

In retirement, he maintained a professional involvement in many organisations, and was vice-president of Friends of Libraries Australia, a body he helped establish in 1994 — having been involved in Friends of Library activities since establishing in 1972 the first public library group in Australia.

Colin Watson could be regarded as the 'agent provocateur' of library promotion, always the crusader, campaigner, columnist, writer and critic. In a paper published in 1970 on 'Public library development', he wrote 'I must stress first that as a general principle I am very suspicious of the concepts of standardisation and centralisation... because of the evils of rigidity and bureaucracy they can create. I prefer muddling humanity.'

This was Colin Watson, a professional librarian concerned with his staff, his community and the public good. A librarian with a strong social conscience, the librarian often pushing against mainstream, often controversial but always with a very persuasive line, and highly respected.

Colin Watson, the boy from Nyah West made a marked contribution to the development of public libraries throughout Australia. His mentoring of many staff and those who came in contact with him, remains one of his most abiding legacies of a man who never sought accolades, but who tirelessly worked for the improvement of the community. ■