

VALE Laurie Brown

June 1923 – 17 September 2007

Laurie Brown towered in his generation of public librarians in Australia. He was a member of that cohort of librarians who made their way to this country from the UK in the 1950s, and one of the elite group who shaped the profession during its period of maximum expansion. Like his coevals, Sharr, Richardson and Wray, he was a north-country man – a Yorkshireman, in fact – and brought with him all the virtues and some of the vices of that contrarian and obstinate race.

He served in the Royal Navy during the war – on the lower decks, he was wont to assert – and bore the marks of that particular democracy all his life. After demobilisation, he was elected to the rolls of the Library Association. He first appeared on the Australian radar in 1953 as Chief Librarian of the Sutherland Shire Public Library, at that time serving one of the most diverse and scattered municipal populations in NSW, and five years later was running the Fairfield Municipal Library in urban Sydney, and ten years after that he was Chief of the Essendon – Broadmeadows Regional Library Service in Victoria. Between times, he had been [for the good of his soul, he said] an associate of the legendary bookseller James [Jim] Bennett, and further honed Jim's conviction that there was a decent commercial future in library supply.

For a brief and sometimes uncomfortable period he would look over my shoulder as I made selections from Bennett's stock for purchase by the Lake Macquarie Shire Library. I think I had a slightly more idealistic picture of the Australian public library reader than Laurie, and this divergence was often signalled by heavy breathing and a barely noticeable grinding of the teeth on his part if I was making an outrageously optimistic selection. To have been a bookseller might have been good for him, but better for his dentist. He was gregarious and a

powerful conversationalist and the metaphorical boiler suit that he sported was congenial to the Labor members of Australian shire and municipal councils, although it may not have worked so well with more conservative council or library board members. He was also, like Ali Sharr and Bernard Wray, a gifted raconteur and a very dry wit. During one of LAA's recurrent infatuations with the higher reaches of management theory, he was heard to remark that 'management by objectives might have slowed down the occasional butterfly, but it never stopped a bloody elephant...'

He was a bold pioneer in Australian public library automation, and under his direction, Essendon-Broadmeadows was a trend-setter in this regard. Despite his not infrequent criticisms of it, LAA made him a Fellow in 1970, recognising and honouring his gift for plain speaking and force of his arguments. Nowadays he would have been judged and found guilty by the political correctionists, but his bluntness in those days was as refreshing as it was effective. He called a spade a spade, and a fool a f***wit long before it was permissible to do so in polite society. He edited the *Australian Library Journal* from 1970, and made of the editor's role a platform from which to launch a series of critiques which were mordant in their time and can still bite today. He became Tasmanian State Librarian in 1973, and made his mark in that office: the Archives Act of 1979 and the landmark Libraries Act of 1984 bear evidence of his forensic mind. He was President of the LAA 1975-1976 and was a formative member of the ill-fated Committee of Enquiry into Public Libraries to which the Whitlam Government gave birth in its dying days, and which was buried by the first Fraser Government. He received the Order of Australia on January 26 1987 'in recognition of his public service, particularly to librarianship'.

He is survived by his partner, Cecily, herself a complete match and ideal companion for one of our most vigorous movers and shakers.

Professor John Levett



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