

Celebrating

Gillian Currie's three decades at the NGA Research Library

After working at the National Gallery of Australia's Research Library for well over three decades, Gillian Currie (Acquisitions Librarian) retired on 11 March 2015 to enjoy some much-deserved relaxation (and some library volunteering!) as J. MARGARET SHAW, Chief Librarian (1978–2004), reflects.

In February 1979, a young, newly qualified Gillian Currie joined a small team located in a warehouse at Fyshwick. As Gillian says, we were '... in the round spaceship building in Fyshwick that had as its neighbours various sex shops and other salubrious businesses. For a 22-year-old straight out of library school it was quite an experience.'

Their task was to create a research library for the National Gallery of Australia (then the Australian National Gallery). Gillian's appointment was officially as a cataloguer/reference librarian, but in those early days no-one was limited to their defined duties. They could be called upon to do anything from filing ephemera, re-shelving, or moving the entire library to helping to mount works for an exhibition. It was not unheard of for the Chief Librarian to find her entire staff missing when an emergency arose.

With the move to the new building in Parkes things became more formal but those with memories of Fyshwick felt very privileged. Gillian went on to hold virtually all senior positions in the Research Library at some time. Her contribution to collection development, particularly rare books, greatly enriched the holdings of the Research Library.

As a result of her role as National Secretary of Australian Young Labor, Gillian had considerable political experience and knowledge of workplace relations. This was a great benefit to both staff and management as her emphasis on negotiation rather than confrontation worked to everyone's advantage. The sight of Gillian and colleagues demonstrating outside the building did awaken the awareness of some managers.

For me, these skills had particular appeal as, again in her words: '[T]he then union delegate of the Professional Officers' Association (which covered librarians, curators and conservators in the Public Service), dumped the role of union delegate on me. As she was my boss, I could hardly say no ...'.



Gillian Currie

Gillian was immediately drawn into the initial moves by the Librarians' Group of the POA to improve wages and conditions for government librarians. A full-scale and successful Librarians Work Value case, the first of a number of moves during the 1980s, saw Gillian at the helm as President of the Canberra Branch of the POA and later CEO and Federal President, overseeing the amalgamation of the POA with the CPSU to form the PSU.

Her personal qualities made her a pleasure to work with, most noticeably her loyalty – to her colleagues and to the Gallery – sympathy for her fellow staff members and willingness to take time to assist those with problems.

Her colleagues will miss her sense of humour that could help make a tough day better. This helped her to deal with some of the more outrageous queries an art reference librarian sometimes faces, or the demands of a new building with a few teething problems. She even crawled under a bench in the reading room to remove mushrooms!

Gillian leaves behind many friends, not just among her colleagues. She will be sorely missed by those external users of the Research Library who admired her in-depth familiarity with the Research Library's collections. The National Gallery's loss is the National Portrait Gallery's gain; she has joined the voluntary team of librarians, of which I am a member, and has already started to expand my cataloguing skills by passing on her experience!

J. MARGARET SHAW
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