

Jean Fleming Arnot

MBE FLAA 1903–1995

Jean Fleming Arnot, who died in Sydney on 27 September, was one of that select group of Australian librarians remembered and honoured as much for their service to society as for their professional endeavours. In very few cases has the contribution to both been so distinguished, so lengthy and so sustained.

Born in Pymble on 23 April 1903, Jean attended Chapel Street School in Marrickville and then Fort Street Girls' High. Matriculating, but unable to undertake a university course because of her family's circumstances, Jean applied for a position at the Public (now State) Library of New South Wales. She was subjected to W H Ifould's customarily stringent interview process, at which her general knowledge, address, physical and psychological soundness were assessed. She impressed 'The chief', and started work as a temporary junior library assistant in March 1921. Like other recruits, Jean spent over a year as a temporary, to see if she lived up to her initial promise. She did, handsomely, passed the library's entrance examination and was permanently appointed in 1922. These were the golden years of the public library, with statutory and private endowments, together with donations and international exchanges bringing rapid growth in collections. Attendances at the library were increasing each year. Innovative services — such as the research department — were responding to post-war demand for information and resources. There was growing respect for the library's work and for the quality of its staff.

Jean was placed in the reference library, where she began to make a mark with her capacity for hard work, lively intelligence, intellectual curiosity and interest in people — as well as a goodly measure of self-confidence and nous. Then began a lengthy and thorough apprenticeship, with on the job training and a formal course of private study, culminating in the demanding 'higher grade' examinations which marked arrival as a professional and the opportunity for promotion. She was fulfilled by her work, and, like her chief, regarded it as a privilege to serve the community as part of a great library. She made steady progress through the ranks, completing the higher grades examinations in 1931, and being appointed senior library assistant in 1933.

But happy though she was, and loyal to the library, she could not ignore some of the less satisfactory aspects of the workforce for which the public library was a microcosm. She could observe the dominance of the senior positions by men, not all of whom were as competent or as respected as Ifould. She witnessed the manoeuvres to secure a male line of succession to the principal librarianship in an environment where a female permanent head would not be countenanced (even at the time of her retirement this was the prevailing view in upper levels of

the bureaucracy). She also experienced the disparity between male and female wages which at the time of her appointment gave a male cleaner considerably more than a female graduate library assistant.

She also experienced the inflexibility of a roster system (and a management) which made it virtually impossible for reading room staff to undertake part-time university studies — even someone as determined as Jean could only manage two terms of economics at the University of Sydney before the inexorable clash of timetable and roster terminated that opportunity.

For others the inherent unfairness of the system and their seemingly powerlessness might have led to outer resignation and inner bitterness. For Jean, the strategy was as crystal-clear as the injustice and she became part of the movement for equal pay in the 1930s, as well as active in her own trade union, and, when it was established, her professional association. In 1937 she joined both the New South Wales Council of Action for Equal Pay and, as a foundation member, the Australian Institute of Librarians (later the Library Association of Australia and still later the Australian Library and Information Association). In both organisations her capacity to grasp issues and to articulate views would prove immensely valuable. She would also play what would turn out to be a leading role in other organisations which were devoted to improving the situation of Australian women in business, the professions and in society generally. These included the National Council of Women, the Business and Professional Women's Club of Sydney, the Australian Federation of Business and Professional Women's Clubs, the League of Women Voters, and the Pan Pacific and South East Asia Women's Association.

Jean and her associates were interested not just in equal pay, but also in the position of women generally, in equal employment opportunity, in motherhood endowment, in child care, in the concept of a household wage, or putting a value on the work performed predominantly by women in the home. Jean was active in committees and behind the scenes. She spoke at public forums and on the wireless, putting the case in her self-assured and measured way, never strident, always well-mannered but firm. The equal pay debate would require stamina, which Jean had aplenty, for it would only be resolved just a few years before her retirement.

Jean was also playing an active part in the professional association. She was a councillor of the Australian Institute of Librarians in 1940–41, President of the New South Wales branch in 1941–42, general secretary in 1941–43, and councillor again between 1944 and 1948. Her work for her union, the Public Service As-

sociation of New South Wales, led to the award of its gold medal in 1944.

Meanwhile at the library, Jean had moved from reference work into cataloguing. She was appointed Cataloguer Grade 2 in 1938. She became Cataloguer Grade 1 in 1942, the year in which Ifould retired from the library and the reference library moved from the old Bent Street building to its new premises across Shakespeare Place. Here the cataloguing department occupied a light and airy room on the ground floor where a large gathering of colleagues and friends recently paid tribute to Jean's memory.

She became assistant senior cataloguer in 1943, and was lecturing at the library school. A generation of new librarians were exposed to her knowledge of library theory and practice, and many were infected by her enthusiasm and sense of purpose.

In 1944 came the publication of her major professional work, her bibliography of newspapers held in the Mitchell Library and general reference library, a key reference work until the publication of a union list of newspapers by the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBs) fifteen years later. 'Arnot' as Jean's work became known, was the result of years of painstaking checking and collating, in which she was assisted by Doris Mitchell — assistance which Jean was careful to acknowledge. Jean always gave credit where credit was due.

Also in 1944 Jean became officer in charge of the country circulation department, a position which was renamed extension librarian in 1946. By then the position involved playing a support role for the free public libraries which were springing up throughout New South Wales after the war. It was whilst extension librarian that Jean was invited by the British Council to undertake a study tour of library services in the United Kingdom in 1948, and by the Carnegie Corporation of New York to spend some time visiting libraries in the United States and Canada. She paid particular attention to county library development in the UK, the Los Angeles regional library system and the Fraser Valley scheme in British Columbia, for from the earliest days a regional structure had been seen as desirable for public library development in rural New South Wales.

In 1950 Jean was promoted to the position of head cataloguer for which she was well qualified by experience and aptitude. It was a position which she would hold, except for a busy interlude as acting Mitchell Librarian during Phyllis Mander Jones' absence in 1956–58, until her retirement. During her long stint as head cataloguer Jean was able to apply her organisational and managerial skills to a task which was becoming very more demanding with every reverberation of the 'information explosion'. Cataloguers' desks were redesigned. Practices were

streamlined. There were moves towards a uniformity of practice within the library to enhance productivity, just as internationally there were moves to facilitate shared cataloguing. The whole institution benefited from Jean's years as a reference librarian and catalogue user, as well as a catalogue creator. If ever there was a time for someone to reshape cataloguing practice at the public library this was it. Not since the introduction of the Dewey Classification into the library by H C L Anderson in 1900 had the latest edition been used throughout the institution. By the 1950s there were four different editions or adaptations in use. In 1960 the library was able to announce publicly, though prematurely as it turned out, that henceforth a single edition of Dewey would be used. Behind that simple statement were years of patient planning and negotiation.

By this time, in Gordon Richardson's words, Jean 'may fairly well be looked upon as the senior cataloguer in this country.' So in 1961 the Library Association of Australia nominated her a delegate to the international conference on cataloguing principles in Paris, together with Andrew Oxborn and Leonard Jolley (though Jolley was unable to attend due to illness). At this conference Jean took part in the discussions which led to the 'Paris principles' on authorship of works, including a key agreement on the questions of corporate authorship.

1961 was a satisfactory year in more ways than one: from 1 January that year Jean and her female colleagues at the library obtained equal pay for work of equal value. The 1960s were more fulfilling for Jean, perhaps, than any other decade since she began her career. She received the distinction of Fellow of the Library Association of Australia in 1963, and wider recognition still in 1965 with her appointment as Member of the Order of the British Empire for services to the community.

On 19 April 1968, after 47 years, 1 month and 18 days, she retired from the library, receiving an address under seal from the Trustees which was more than their usual encomium. It was a very active retirement. She was honorary librarian of the Royal Australian Historical Society from 1969 to 1980. She busied

herself even more with the organisations to which she belonged. She kept house for herself and looked after her garden with great vigour. She maintained contact with her former colleagues at the library. 'You know I will continue to regard myself as part of the library, although not an active member of the staff,' she told Gordon Richardson. She was thus a regular and welcome guest at functions and an occasional library user when undertaking research for the biographical entries on Ifould and Nita Kibble which she contributed to the *Australian dictionary of biography*. She also welcomed

researchers and oral historians who sought to tap her excellent memory. Sitting in her comfortable lounge room at Suttie Road, Double Bay, she would recall events and personalities from the 1920s onwards, using photographs to prompt her memory or referring to her notebooks and files to verify a date or a name. Listening to her frank and objective commentary, one shared her amusement, was enthused by her animation, and glimpsed in the fire in her eyes the resoluteness which sustained her. One could readily understand the respect and affection which she inspired, not least in the generations of librarians who worked with her or were trained by her.

One was vividly aware of the links with the past; with the Ifould era, with Anderson (who as a Trustee during Jean's early years at the library), with Gifford (who had worked at the library since 1861), with Leeson, Pentelow, Bertles,



Jean Arnot, shown here in 1987 attending LAA 50 conference in Canberra

Parsons, Wright, Kibble, Windeyer, Flower, the Jopling sisters, Simms, Fitzhardinge, Metcalfe, McGreal, Lane and Mander-Jones. But one was also conscious that Jean was very much of the present, as a kind of continuum: around thirty years ago, when she was still head cataloguer, young Hans Groenewegen and Dick Rothwell were embarking on the momentous serials automation project which gave the institution a distinct taste of things to come. Jean was as much part of the OPAC generation as the most recent recruit.

Jean seemed always to be there, gracious, broad-minded, good-humoured, articulate, observant, caring and eternally curious. She changed with the times, and she changed the times. The library world and Australian society are the richer and the fairer for Jean Arnot's contribution.

David J Jones,
State Library of New South Wales

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