

International library affairs



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Executive director

A blast from the past

We left Sydney by ANA [Australian National Airlines] Skymaster at 8.15 pm Sydney time, Sunday October 26 [1947]. After something like an overnight journey in a railway carriage, but more comfortable and less tiring, we arrived at Nandi Airport, Fiji, at 6 am Fiji time on Monday morning... En route to Mexico City we stopped at Los Angeles airport, El Paso and Monterey in Mexico. From Los Angeles we had a super duper plane with a lounge in the tail and a more or less dazzling blonde who turned out to be a film actress... If she was a good sample, it's difficult to tell a film star from a well-turned-out librarian.
John Wallace Metcalfe (pp 58 to 60)

When John Wallace Metcalfe, who has perhaps the greatest claim to the title of 'father of librarianship' in Australia, set off on his overseas study tours in the 1930s, 40s and 50s, his modes of transport were much more demanding and (probably more exciting) than that of the jet-set we belong to today. In 1947 Metcalfe departed for a UNESCO meeting in Mexico City — by aeroplane. The adventure lasted several days.

Metcalfe's diaries offer a splendid insight into the culture of travel across four decades. But, importantly, they offer us an appreciation of the value of observing and exploring developments in librarianship in more remote landscapes. This is especially the case in view of the isolation of Australian librarians in the days before instant telecommunications and high-speed travel. Of his journey to the US and the UK in 1934–35 — around the time that the fledgling Australian Library Association was floundering — Metcalfe wrote:

In view of the situation which has developed in the Australian Library Association, I was especially interested in the (British) Library Association and the American Library Association, and was able to discuss them and our own problem with their presidents and secretaries and with many librarians who have been prominent in them.
John Wallace Metcalfe (p33)

Mr Binns of Canberra, Mr Purnell of Adelaide and myself, whilst in England during the past twelve months, have all explored the possibility of a local professional association, partly autonomous and partly in subordination to the (British) Library Association. But I think I may say that we are all agreed now that we would be better advised in Australia to go immediately upon our own hands, and when our achievement warrants it to seek recognition from the (British) Library Association. (p36)

Metcalfe went on to establish the Australian Institute of Librarians in 1937 — the first incarnation of our current organisation. There were many initiatives that Metcalfe brought home from that early journey. One such was the development of microfilming which, at a time when information was mostly transcribed by hand in order to produce a copy, was to prove a revolutionary aid in sharing and preserving information.

The approach of the 21st century provides a good opportunity to reflect on our goals in the international arena. Have developments in communications technologies rendered the need for international travel redundant? Can international relations activities be conducted from our desk-

tops as access to information and correspondence is increasingly activated online?

This year ALIA has been involved in a variety of international activities some of which involved international travel. Our participation in the American Library Association's conference in Washington in June was part-sponsored by the Australian Embassy and has been documented in *inCite* earlier this year. There was a strong Australian presence at the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) meeting in Amsterdam in August with many of us actively involved in various committee activities. As with John Metcalfe's travels of over sixty years ago there is much we can learn from our meetings with representatives of other national associations. While there is some value in learning that we share many of the same difficulties and strengths, meetings which allow us to evaluate how we approach shared interests and problems can assist with the development of appropriate solutions or the introduction of worthwhile initiatives. The personal interaction that occurs while attending international meetings is not capable of emulation in online communications. New information technologies which are timely, productive and informative, supplemented by the physical exploration of other cultures, other libraries, and other associations, together produce valuable outcomes.

In July last year ALIA General Council adopted a policy statement, developed by the International Relations Committee, on ALIA and international relations (<http://www.alia.org.au/policies/relations.html>). It has two themes. The first relates to our responsibilities to other organisations, peoples and societies; the second emphasises the value which evolves from international activities for the Australian library profession and the library and information community more generally. The statement also notes the importance of influencing key international consultative bodies. This is of critical importance especially in those areas where international diplomacy often sets the policy agenda.

While the global community is strengthened by new communications technologies these also create a greater demand for international standards. Examples include standards for professional education (which are the subject of a brief report by ALIA deputy executive director, Jennefer Nicholson, p12), interlibrary loans, copyright, censorship, classification rules and metadata. While

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such matters as the freedom to access information involve, in part, matters of standards and their applicability, there are more fundamental matters of human rights which require consideration. These matters are eloquently addressed in Alex Byrne's article on page 8.

Our involvement in international affairs continues to be an important element of our activities. While the pace has changed since Metcalfe's adventures the benefits and obligations are similar.

All quotations from: Rayward, W. Boyd, Developing a profession of librarianship in Australia: Travel diaries and other papers of John Wallace Metcalfe, ALIA Press, Canberra, Australia, 1996.

Association management — the international scene

The Executive Committee of the IFLA Round Table for the Management of Library Associations (RTMLA) held its 36th meeting in Amsterdam on 15 August. For those of us involved in association management these meetings provide valuable insight into the operation of related organisations and offer the opportunity to utilise our combined resources to assist emerging organisations — many of which are members of the RTMLA.

One important project endorsed at the Amsterdam meeting concerns the organisation of a workshop on the management of library associations to be conducted for associations

in the Asia-Oceanic region at the IFLA Conference in Bangkok next August (see article p13). This is a co-operative effort which involves ALIA's International Relations Committee, the RTMLA, IFLA's Regional Standing Committee on Asia and Oceania and ALIA's Asia Pacific Special Interest Group.

IFLA secretary-general departs

Leo Voogt has accepted the position of executive director of the Netherlands Royal Association for the Book Trade (KVB). Leo has been an indefatigable worker on behalf of the international library community and we have enjoyed his visits to Australia and to the ALIA National Office in Canberra on a number of occasions.

IFLA's executive committee has taken the necessary first steps to assure that we seek the most qualified candidates in our search for Leo's successor. They are looking for strong international awareness and professional skills in possible candidates. People with such skills will already be in demanding positions and may not be considering change. They would therefore be particularly grateful for nominations of possible candidates which the executive committee can then pursue. IFLA is your organisation and we therefore seek your advice in making a good appointment. Nominations can be forwarded to the IFLA treasurer, Derek Law (phone: +44 (0) 141 548 4619, fax: +44 (0) 141 552 3304, e-mail: d.law@strath.ac.uk). ■

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