

Vale Barbara Buick 1924–2007

Janet Buick



Barbara was born in Adelaide in 1924, the youngest child of Arthur Laughton and Margery Norton. They had been part of the wealthy Adelaide establishment but the Depression changed all that, and the early death of her father meant Barbara was unable to finish school—something she bitterly regretted. She got a job at the State Library of South Australia in the new children's books department, eventually gaining her professional library registration. It was at the State Library that she met her lifelong friends Cynthia Paltridge and Jean Whyte and it was there that she met George Buick.

In 1949, as many other young Australians have done subsequently, she embarked on a year-long trip hitchhiking around Britain and Europe with her friends Cynthia and Nan Paltridge. She worked in a number of public libraries in London and maintained her literary links with Australia, advising and advocating for the publication of that seminal Australian novel *Come in Spinner* by Dymphna Cusack and Florence James.

On her return to Australia she became the librarian at the Queensland Teachers College, moving to Brisbane. The college was one of the pioneers of distance tertiary education and, in a typical response to a problem, Barbara decided to take the books to the students across outback Queensland. She created a library in a railway carriage.

In 1957 George received a scholarship to do his Masters in Librarianship at the University of Chicago and they went to America for a year.

During the period after their return to Adelaide, Barbara helped establish the Australian Children's Book Council and the National Children's Book Awards. After moving to Canberra in 1965, she put her shyness to one side and determinedly (and successfully) lobbied federal politicians to create libraries in every Australian school. Barbara started working for Cheshire Publishing as their inaugural children's book editor, publishing a series of picture books for children by famous Australian writers and painters. She continued this work when the family moved to Papua New Guinea in 1967. She worked as a researcher for anthropologists at the

ANU's Papua New Guinea Research Unit and later established their library and published an annotated bibliography on squatter settlements. She helped establish a children's public library in one of the poorest areas of Port Moresby in an effort to promote children's literacy. Barbara also got involved in the PNG independence movement: she edited the Pangu Parti's newsletter for a couple of years.

1972 was a year of travel for the family, through Asia and the Middle East to Britain, and then round Europe and North America before moving to Perth. This was when she got actively re-involved with the Women's Electoral Lobby—one of the great passions of her life. She helped set up WIRE, the Women's Information Referral Exchange, and the Equal Opportunities Resource Centre. From there she lobbied state politicians to pass Equal Opportunity legislation, and Western Australia was one of the first states in Australia to do so. Barbara was a member of the Equal Opportunities Tribunal for many years—a duty she put her heart and soul into. Somehow she managed to find time to be on the board of the Fremantle Arts Centre Press from its inauguration. She loved the Press, was the chair of the board for a time, and was particularly supportive of Indigenous Australian writing, children's literature and innovative new writers.

She maintained her interest in children's literature. She and Maxine Walker wrote the chapter 'Books for Children' for the sesquicentenary volume on Western Australian literature edited by Bruce Bennett and published as part of the WAY79 series by the University of Western Australia Press. In 1986 Barbara donated to the Research Collection of Children's Literature at the State Library of Western Australia her correspondence with Australian writers from the period when she was children's book editor for F W Cheshire.

After George died in 1990, Barbara moved to her little house in Mosman Park. She remained very active in the pro-choice movement and Women's Electoral Lobby. She was thrilled to front a pro-choice rally as a respectable, white-haired radical campaigner. In 1996 Barbara was awarded a Member of the Order of Australia.

This obituary is an edited version of the eulogy given at Barbara's funeral by her daughter, Janet Buick, Resource Centre Co-ordinator at Oxfam, Australia.



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