

READERS' BOOKS AND THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA

Brian McMullin's absence overseas allows me the privilege of re-ascending the editorial pulpit I relinquished to him in 1976. I cannot see how the opportunity could be better grasped than by raising a matter that has caused great personal inconvenience to members of the society.

In most civilized cities, a collector acquiring an unusual locally printed book will go straight to the major public library in order to compare it with the deposit copy. A substantial part of our knowledge of bibliographical differences has flowed from this commendable practice. In Melbourne, however, the State Library of Victoria and the La Trobe library refuse to let readers bring books with them into the building. It is true that this rule is less stringently enforced now than a few years ago when the ban was in fact absolute; but it still requires a period of negotiation with a not always sympathetic attendant and the summoning of a senior librarian before a scholar, let alone a member of the general public, is permitted to take a book into the library. The notices at the entrance of the reading rooms continue to imply a blanket prohibition.

In conversations over the years with members of the staffs of the two libraries (for many of whom I have great personal respect and admiration) I have been unable to extract any remotely rational reason for the existence of this rule. It is simply a piece of petty authoritarianism which has acquired a spurious sanctity through the passage of time and the meek acquiescence of readers. One can understand that the library is worried by the possibility of loss; but this is caused by taking books out not in and can be met by the simple requirement that material removed be inspected at an exit race, as is the practice at countless other libraries. Such a race already exists in the main reading room and could be supplied for very little expense at the La Trobe Street entrance which in its present gaping state is a standing invitation to the book thief anyway.

If our art or science is based on anything it is on the close comparison of the physical make-up of books. John Locke defined judgement as the faculty of 'separating carefully one from another, ideas, wherein can be found the least difference, thereby to avoid being misled by similitude and by affinity to take one thing for another.' Substitute 'books' for 'ideas' and there can be no better description of the task of the descriptive bibliographer. Anything that encourages the free bringing together of volumes, supposedly of the same edition, state or issue for the purpose of determining whether there exist any as yet unrecognised editions, states or issues will advance this kind of bibliography; anything that hinders this will retard it. The regulation in force at the State Library of Victoria would seem designed to bring it to a dead halt. How antiquarian booksellers deal with the situation I have no idea; but it can hardly be an encouragement to exact cataloguing. There is an additional irony in the fact that the La Trobe library,

which spares no pains in trying to attract bequests of rare Australiana, is not prepared to permit free entry to those same volumes while their owners are still alive.

1980 will see the centenary of the death of the State Library's liberal and far-sighted founder, Sir Redmond Barry. Barry was an energetic, imperious man whose methods of obtaining his way were about as different as they could be from those of Arthur Brown; and yet the two had many things in common — Irish descent, a generous sociability, a passionate love of books, a connoisseur's fondness for snuff, and respect for the manners of an older, less hurried age. Sir Redmond's vision was one of a library to which any member of the community might come to seek knowledge; but he would be equally delighted to think that the collection he helped found would someday be used by scholars of Arthur's calibre. What this proud, acid-tongued man would have said had he been told that neither the member of the public nor the scholar would have been permitted to bring their own books into his — and their — library hardly bears thinking. The Barry centenary will no doubt be celebrated by a reception or an exhibition, but to my mind there could be no better tribute to the spirit of the man, or to that of the civilised, humane scholar whom we have just lost, than the abolition of this foolish rule.

Harold Love

The title page and table of contents for Volume 1, announced as sent with the last issue, was accidentally omitted and is enclosed with this one.

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