

REVIEWS

G.H. Ballantyne. *The Signet Library, Edinburgh and its Librarians 1722-1972* (Scottish Library Studies 6). Glasgow, Scottish Library Association, 1979. pp.xv, 194. £11.50.

This is in many ways a timely, if somewhat sad, history of the Signet Library which has been written by its present Librarian. The Signet Library still exists, but the series of sales up to the present day have eroded much of its former size and intellectual glory. This is not to say that the Library as it now exists, with its strength lying in Scottish and legal history, may not be seen in popular library terminology as a 'lean, fit library' rather than 'bloated and overweight'. The book dealers, particularly those from the Continent of Europe, who swarmed to the Signet sales in Edinburgh in 1978 would then be seen in varying lights, depending on the viewpoint adopted above.

The history of the Signet Library really commences in the eighteenth century with a small law collection developed as a library for the "Writers to the Signet", but it was not until the mid- to late-nineteenth century that it fully blossomed into the finest private collection in Scotland.

The volume itself is divided into six sections, which is useful for isolating a particular subject within an historical context, but this does lead to an unavoidable degree of repetition between the sections. The first section traces the historical development of Edinburgh libraries, particularly from the eighteenth century onwards and the Signet's role within that development. The second section is a strict chronological narrative of the growth of the Signet collections, which benefited immeasurably by judicious purchasing, to reach 100,000 volumes by the end of the nineteenth century and early twentieth century. It was then at its height as a 'quasi-public' or 'national' library facility.

The third section deals with the superb physical and architectural setting of the Library, while the fourth ably depicts the varied personalities who occupied the Signet Librarianship between 1804 and 1968. Some marvellously eccentric characters indeed graced the Signet Librarianship, such as David Laing, whose devotion to literary endeavours drew forth the comment in 1856 by the Library Committee that it "cannot help the impression that in his superintendence and arrangements generally, Mr. Laing seems to be somewhat indifferent to the pecuniary needs of the Society and likewise that in some departments a good deal of lethargy pervades" those arrangements. Nevertheless, in 1873, at the age of eighty, he was still attempting a full day's work, and at his death in 1878, it was clear the collections had benefited from his bibliographic skill, even if administration was not his forte.

Section five examines the various printed catalogues and indexes issued between 1792 and 1818, and ends with a summary of the Signet sales of 1959-64,

which reduced stock from 150,000 to 116,000 volumes. A postscript places the events since 1972 within the inflationary setting in which private libraries such as the Signet currently have to operate. It is sobering to reflect that the money that was obtained by sales up to 1964, and which was deemed to be sufficient to keep the Library afloat, was hopelessly inadequate by the 1970s. The April 1978 sale raised enormous publicity (some of it adverse) and a sum of £562,980 which, with further sales, should hopefully help to relieve monetary pressures until the end of the century. If not, the fine collection of 63,000 volumes that remains of legal and Scottish material may not be sacrosanct.

It may perhaps be appropriate to end this review on a more optimistic viewpoint with the last words of part two of the book: "The Signet Library is unique. Its treasures have been much diminished, it is true, but its bibliographical resources are still considerable while its visual appeal will continue to command admiration and indeed veneration."

Colin Steele,
The Australian National University Library.

Lurline Stuart. *Nineteenth Century Australian Periodicals. An Annotated Bibliography*. Sydney, Hale & Iremonger, 1979. pp.viii, 200. \$28.

The small and predominately migrant population of Australia during the nineteenth century inevitably meant a limited market for local writers and publishers. Books and periodicals could be fairly rapidly and cheaply imported with no loss in quality from the voyage but rather an enhancement from distance and the desire to keep up with overseas standards. Hence only a handful of nineteenth-century Australian periodicals were able to find enough subscribers to survive for more than a few years. But, as the length of Mrs Stuart's bibliography indicates, our pioneer editors and publishers were not daunted by their slim prospects of success.

Four hundred and forty-nine periodicals commenced before 1900 have been described by Mrs Stuart, and this is by no means all that were published. Periodicals and newspapers with no or only a token literary content (defined as "essays, articles, fiction, poetry and minor literary items") as well as annuals have been excluded. Some of the included items are known only from advertisements, reviews or passing references in other periodicals, and a few of these may never have actually appeared. Even so, given that the earliest, the *Australian Magazine*, did not appear until 1821, the surprisingly large number published during eighty years is a tribute to nineteenth-century cultural endeavour.

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