

**THE BIBLIOGRAPHICAL SOCIETY OF AUSTRALIA
AND NEW ZEALAND**

BULLETIN

Volume Five

Fourth Quarter, 1981

WALTER STONE 1910 -1981

IF ONE WERE TO LOOK at the official written evidence on which historians of learned bodies are too often forced to rely, one would assume that Walter Stone played a minor part in the affairs of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand. Although he became a member early and on one occasion at least attended an annual meeting away from his home city, he was never called to office or elected to the Council. The Society's files — scattered in ways it is now important and urgent to correct — are somewhat more informative than the terse records contained in minutes of conferences held once a year. Letters to successive editors of this *Bulletin* discuss projects for notes or articles that in the event did not get written. The inaugural meeting on 17 February 1969 in Melbourne drew a message of support. Yet none of this reveals why Walter Stone's backing was of great significance to our infant Society and how central and uniquely effective a figure he was in the Australian book world for four decades.

Graceful and perceptive tributes by Maurice Isaacs on ABC radio and by Jean Whyte in *InCite* have stressed the range and the fundamental unity and consistency of Walter's diverse interests and commitments. His achievement in many fields was considerable and widely recognized in literary and publishing circles, as a National Book Council award in 1975 demonstrated. What, in a letter written three weeks before his death, he characteristically called "the OAM business — a bit ironical for a confirmed, convinced, dedicated and active republican like myself" was a welcome sign in hard-hearted monetarist times that generosity of spirit and practical devotion to the common intellectual good do not go entirely unnoticed by governments. However, his enduring monument will be the mass of the work he wrote, edited, published, printed and encouraged and his contribution — often invisible to all but his closest collaborators — to the furthering of the cause of books in the widest possible sense. Bibliophiles, authors, librarians, printers, booksellers, publishers and bibliographers collectively and individually all have many reasons to be grateful for a life that bore witness to the simple idea — sadly neglected since the Redmond Barrys and other creators of our cultural institutions in the second half of the nineteenth century — that independence and

excellence are possible, desirable and entirely appropriate ambitions for Australians aware of their European heritage but determined to participate equally and fully in the world of scholarship, ideas and letters.

A substantial memoir or series of memoirs would be required to catalogue every facet of Walter Stone's manifold activities. Indeed his friends and associates owe us and posterity the effort to produce just such a comprehensive account of the work done and the initiatives taken. Our own part in the enterprise could be to compile an exhaustive bibliography of Walter's writings and publications. In the case of *Biblionews*, which he edited for the Book Collectors' Society of Australia from its first number in 1947 till the 251st issue in 1981, his personal input was enormous, as one might expect of a "small magazine" that, together with *The Australian Library Journal*, was for long the only vehicle in this country for bibliographical notes and articles. In the impressive monograph series "Studies in Australian Bibliography" Walter Stone and his fellow workers established a continuing model for the enumerative catalogues and calendars of documents that must provide the basis for textual analysis. In this and in other ways he was a notable precursor of our Society and a true representative of a tradition — peculiarly strong in Australia — that has seen bibliography advanced and illustrated essentially by people for whom it was not a professional academic pursuit.

It is one of the virtues of bibliographical scholarship that it stimulates sharing, cooperation and the free interchange of discoveries and insights in an atmosphere far removed from the corrosive rivalry and priority queue-jumping now not unknown among scientists. Walter Stone was supremely well suited to our way of doing things. In letters, in conversations — in his office at 48 Cooper Street, in his library at 64 Young Street or at the Saturday afternoon gatherings of book collectors in the old cafeteria of the State Library of New South Wales — he was a constant source of hints, advice and obscure facts drawn from his unrivalled knowledge of the Sydney book world and, as one often discovered with some surprise, of that of other Australian cities as well. More than one precious volume was lent or given outright to the researcher Walter judged capable of using it to good purpose. He was the perfect intermediary, trusted and respected in circles well beyond those of his well-known and strong political affiliations. Even better Walter could be described as what the French call an *animateur*, a promoter of collective endeavour in the service of creating societies, launching journals and enriching cultural life and experience. Certainly no-one embarking on a similar venture neglected to consult the editor of *Biblionews* and to take advantage of his innumerable contacts and his sound practical sense. The burden of counselling the idealistic and the foolhardy among us who want to innovate was no doubt a heavy one, but he accepted it — even at times of indifferent health — with his customary cheerfulness and vitality. Clearly, too, the support and active help of his family counted for a good deal in the success of his efforts on behalf of Australia's bookmen and authors.

Those of us who accept that literature has a social context — and the very notion is perhaps implicit in physical bibliography — can still recognize the aptness of the classical conceit of a Republic of Letters. When its Australian province comes to be studied, Walter Stone, the friend and confidant of men like Brennan whose best work was done in the nineteenth century and of others whose most fruitful activity lies ahead of us in the twenty-first, will be rightly seen as one of its most influential senators and as a figure whose replacement quite literally cannot be imagined.

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