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LETTER

Wallace Kirsop, in his article 'Robert Shackleton 1919-1986' (*BSANZ Bulletin*, v.10 no.4, Fourth Quarter, 1986), which I have recently received, comments on the National Library's negotiations to purchase Shackleton's collection in 1977-78. Kirsop played a significant role in assisting the Library in those negotiations, and it is with some reluctance therefore that I write to say that I think the account is somewhat of an injustice to the then Director-General, Dr. George Chandler, and his senior colleagues. Since little information about our interest in the collection is yet in the public domain, I am writing to clarify some of his comments.

Kirsop is incorrect in stating that the National Library declined to purchase Shackleton's collection (apart from the Montesquieu material bequeathed to the Bodleian Library). It became aware of Shackleton's interest in disposing of the collection, and his view that it might ideally come to Canberra to complement the Nichol Smith Collection, in September 1977. By February 1978, notwithstanding the difficulties caused by the lack of a list of the collection and the fact that Shackleton had not been able to indicate any price he might have in mind for its purchase, Dr. Chandler had stated the Library's very firm interest in its purchase and suggested ways to complete the negotiations. Shackleton's understanding of this is obvious from his reply of 13 March 1978 to Chandler, in which he says 'I am delighted to know that you are definitely interested in the possibility of acquiring my library,' and that 'I should like to say how much I appreciate the seriousness with which you are dealing with this question. I should be most happy to think that my books found a final home in Canberra.' Chandler on 18 April 1978 wrote saying that Shackleton's letter had only just been received owing to a postal strike, and commented that 'I judge from your letter that you are in no urgency about finalising your negotiations. We would very much like to acquire your collection and are rather held up until you put a value on it . . .' Kirsop's visit to Oxford to inspect the collection on 9 February on behalf of the Library, and his subsequent report, was of great value in discussions in the next few months in Canberra about how it might be acquired, and Shackleton in late April indicated the sort of price for the collection that he had in mind. Chandler was to meet Shackleton in Oxford in August 1978 for further discussions about the purchase. It was known by all parties that Manchester University was also discussing the possible purchase of the collection, but understood by the National Library that Shackleton had no

intention of moving on the matter prior to these discussions.

However, Shackleton by letter of 24 July 1978 informed Chandler that he had sold the collection to Manchester University, saying that while he felt rather guilty about having involved the Library in so much correspondence the offer from Manchester was firm and urgent because it was necessary for them to conclude the purchase before the end of July. He said that he would have been happy for it to go to the National Library, but negotiations across the globe were difficult and he thought also that the Capital Gains Tax situation would have been very difficult for him in any sale to Australia.

Kirsop, in his sentence 'Must bureaucratic rigidity and lack of imagination lose us every opportunity?', obviously refers to the sticking point in the negotiations between the National Library and Shackleton, which was his firm intention to sell the collection on the condition that he retained possession of it until his death. The Library's legal advice was that it could not enter such an arrangement with public moneys, and Shackleton did not respond to its counter offer in February 1978 for the purchase of the collection over a 10-year period. Quite apart from the constraints of the legal opinion, I strongly disagree with Kirsop's view that the Library displayed bureaucratic rigidity and lack of imagination in taking this position. It is a somewhat extraordinary proposition to suggest that it would be proper for the National Library to make a major purchase, no matter how worthwhile the collection, on the premise that the material remain in private possession 12,000 miles away and inaccessible to the public until the death of the previous owner. Shackleton was 58 years of age at the time. Kirsop, presumably on the authority of conversations with Shackleton when he inspected the collection in February 1978, writes that Shackleton did not then see his death 'as very far distant'. This is certainly not the impression he gave the National Library, especially in remarks in his letter of 13 March 1978 about his hope to do a lot of academic work in retirement. But the Library could in any case hardly have purchased the collection on his terms and then hoped for his early death!

Yours sincerely

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