

AUSTRALIANA BOOKSELLERS' CATALOGUES: AFTERTHOUGHTS

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SOME EXPANSION OF THE NOTES in my recently published book¹ is probably desirable in view of the limited circulation and scant recognition of Andrew and Margaret Osborn's significant contribution to the historical record in their book *The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, 1901-27 and the Origins of the National Library of Australia* (Canberra, The Department of the Parliamentary Library in association with the National Library of Australia, 1989, xxxvi, 299 pp., ISBN 0 642 14697 7).

This modestly presented limp-covered book was published without fanfare and without wide media recognition. With the arms of the Commonwealth on the front cover, it could have been dismissed by potential reviewers as yet another boring government report, unworthy of consideration at a time when the bicentenary was the occasion for the issue of so many well publicised books of significance for bibliophiles, as well as others of coffee table status and more public appeal. It certainly lacks the multi-coloured cover of many other official publications. Page references hereafter are to this book, which has received more comprehensive reviews² than my limited interests allow.

Extensive references to official files and records, incoming letters and outgoing letter books enabled the authors to substantiate an illuminating record of the early history of the National Library. Andrew Osborn was the Parliamentary Library's first cadet cataloguer in 1920 and a member of the Library staff until 1927, when he went to the United States and became a distinguished academic librarian. He returned to Australia in 1958 and subsequently was Sydney University Librarian until 1962. His wife Margaret was also a professional librarian.

The casual attitude of at least one modern custodian of an Australian public library towards booksellers' catalogues has its roots in the past: in 1907, the destruction of ephemera received by the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library was officially ordered by the Library Committee, who were all members of parliament. In that year, Arthur Wadsworth (Parliamentary Librarian 1901-1927) told the Library Committee that 'under the Copyright Act, a large amount of worthless matter was received into the library'. He was then instructed 'to destroy race cards and purely advertising matter' (p.101).³ The latter category certainly included booksellers' catalogues, which were then merely sales lists with items inadequately described and rarely annotated.

'Many copyright items [received by the Parliamentary Library] were also given [by Wadsworth] to Parr [a Melbourne bookseller] to sell' (p.100, 105). The questionable propriety of Wadsworth's dealings with Parr is elaborated by the Osborns (p.108-9, 135-7, 226).

In 1913, the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library's acquisition procedure, as

reported by the Osborns (p.133), was as follows: the Librarian and his principal assistant prepared, from newspapers devoted to literature and from leading London booksellers' catalogues of second-hand books, a list of recommended purchases to be amended by rejection and addition by a book-selection sub-committee appointed by the Library Committee.

Kenneth Binns succeeded Wadsworth as Parliamentary Librarian in 1927 and 'Before and after Binns there were people who did not believe in preserving ephemera' (p.100).

The committee process would have encouraged the library staff to destroy catalogues when their immediate practical value ceased. The precedent would have been a natural one for Binns to follow in the 1920's, when the Library Committee was relying completely on the Librarian's selection of acquisitions (p.135).

The movement of the library from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927 may have resulted in the rejection of any catalogues not already destroyed in accordance with the Committee's directive of 1907.

These notes provide a partial explanation for the enormous gaps in the records of booksellers' catalogues in the *Australian National Bibliography*, published in 1988.

The Osborns' book is still available for \$10 from the Parliamentary Library, Canberra, 2600, but not from the more accessible public bookshop of the National Library of Australia, the co-publisher.

NOTES

1. D.A. Spalding, *Australiana Booksellers' Catalogues: Desiderata & Background*, Mawson, A.C.T.; D.A. Spalding, 1994.
2. R.L. Cope, *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, Volume 22, number 1, March 1991, pp.55-60. David Jones, *The Australian Library Journal*, Volume 39, number 2, May 1990, p.173-4. Harrison Bryan, *ibid*, p.174-6.
3. These words were inaccurately quoted by Stuart Macintyre, 'People's treasures, people's history: using and interpreting the national collection', in John Thompson (ed.), *The People's Treasures: Collections in the National Library of Australia*, Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1993, pp.6-13 (p.11). Therein the phrase has been changed by Thompson to read: to destroy 'race-track programmes and other such worthless matter'. The Library Committee was not satisfied with the word 'worthless' and specified 'purely advertising matter'. Booksellers' catalogues were purely advertising matter then and for many years afterwards. I have no idea whether racetrack cards of that time provided details of a horse's lineage and past performances as appear in racetrack programmes of today. But, as the Osborns point out (p.100), 'a bibliographer or historian of horse racing would have benefited from complete files in the N.L.A.'

Stretton, says Welch is now "one of 10" choreographers the company has its eye on, and that either he or artistic director Kevin McKenzie will fly to Melbourne shortly after the opening date of February 24 to see *Butterfly* for themselves.

It's by no means just because there's an Australian connection. McKenzie, an American, went to Washington late last year to see Welch's one-act ballet *Divergence* when it was presented as part of a celebration of Australian culture, and was impressed. There's a worldwide shortage of good young choreographers.

The subject matter for *Madame Butterfly* falls into "why didn't anyone do this before?" territory. Following a route from a 19th-century novella (by John Luther Long), a play (by David Belasco), an opera (by Giacomo Puccini), a musical (Schoenberg and Boublil's *Miss Saigon*) and another play (David Henry Hwang's *M. Butterfly*), to name the most famous, the tragedy of young Cio-Cio-San and her faithless lover Pinkerton is to be a full-length ballet.

The weight of its success doesn't rest totally on Welch. He's using the music of Puccini, which is being arranged by the veteran composer and conductor John Lanchbery (whose work with the music of Lehar underpins a tremendous AB success, *The Merry Widow*). Designs are by Peter Farmer, respected the world over for his work in ballet. But those collaborations bring their own pressures. Lanchbery, 71, and Farmer, 53, are used to working with the cream of the field. More pertinently, Lanchbery has been thinking about a ballet *Butterfly* for 20 years, and even discussed it with another Australian dancer and choreographer - Garth Welch, Stanton's father.

You can also bet that Gielgud wouldn't mind a thumping great hit at this stage of her career. At the end of last year, the board of the Australian Ballet Foundation told Gielgud, after a spate of dancer resignations, that her services wouldn't be required after the end of 1996, when she will have been there 14 years. A hit for Welch created under her aegis would also be a hit for her, and something in the nature of two fingers raised.

As for the financial risk, The Australian Ballet won't reveal the full cost of *Butterfly*. Administrator Ian McRae says \$300,000 has been budgeted for sets and costumes. Taken with fees to all the creative people, maybe we're talking half a million dollars.

"There's no point in commissioning a choreographer and not giving them the support to produce a really good work," says McRae, although he gave Graeme Murphy a bigger budget for his radical reinterpretation of *Nutcracker* (a huge success). "One needs a sense of proportion," he says tactfully.

"It's a gamble with anybody, even with a tried and true and famous choreographer," Gielgud says. "The MacMillans and Balanchines of this world made plenty of mis-

takes." True, but presumably this is of little comfort to Welch at this time. One of ballet's little oddities is that all the money was committed before the AB had seen one step of the *Butterfly* choreography.

Lanchbery delivered the piano score about a year ago and the full orchestration around the middle of last year. Farmer's designs were being made up in the second half of 1994. Plenty of time for reflection and alteration there. Welch, on the other hand, has his main block of time with the dancers right now, in the four weeks before opening. No time to put everything aside and have a good long think; no time for serious revision.

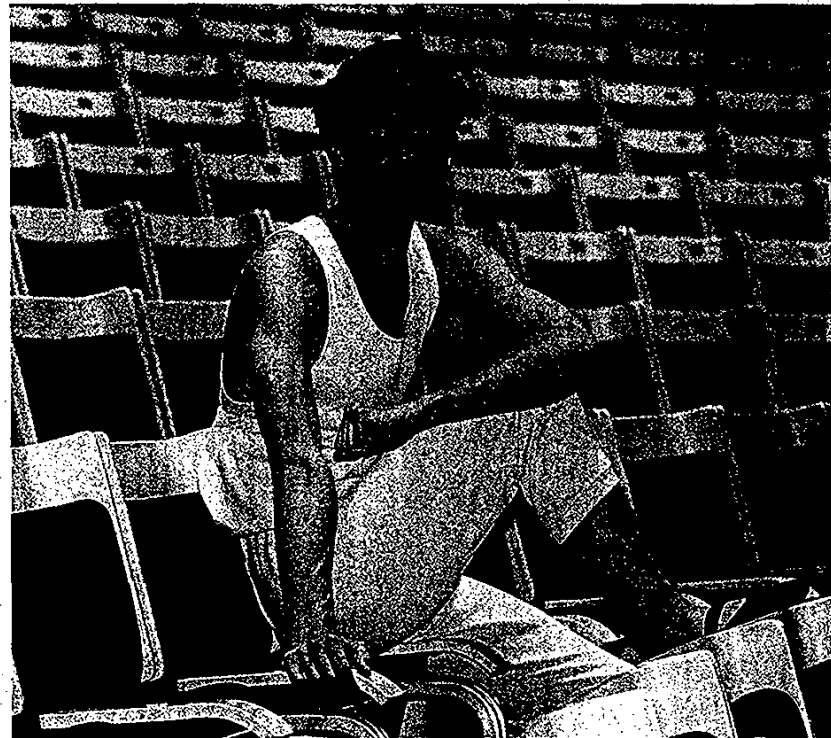
"You're thinking, am I going to finish in time? Four weeks. It's just not enough." He would, ideally, have liked to start at the

include touring, so the first priority is always getting tonight's ballet on stage.

Welch is still a dancer, as well as a choreographer, so the workload is gargantuan. Says Garth Welch: "On a typical day recently, Stanton had to rehearse other ballets (which are coming up in the season), rehearse his own ballet, then in the evening perform, and that's every day."

in McRae likens the choreographic process to exploring for oil. "Money is put up for what might be a great big hole in the ground. You have a certain feeling that it's going to be good. While it's not a sure thing, you're not going ahead without some confidence." Gielgud's confi-

All the money for the ballet, maybe \$500,000, was committed before the AB saw one step of choreography.



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beginning and work right through until the end, but this just wasn't possible. Progress relied on who was available at what time, and whether there was any time available to him in the first place. "It's incredibly competitive getting rehearsal time in a company this size."

From a management point of view, Ross Stretton agrees that it's difficult for a company to hand over most of its dancers for an extended period. Money is short and schedules are tight, particularly when they

dence is such that she's prepared to put Welch potentially in the same class as British choreographers MacMillan and John Cranko in the ability to engage an audience.

The object of all this attention is a shy-looking young man with dark brown eyes, a soft voice and slightly wary air. Street clothes don't really suit him because they make him look even younger, thinner and more vulnerable. He's better suited to the stage or rehearsal studio, where he looks like any of the other dancers; perhaps a bit more