

## ENVOI

### Don McKenzie: Books, Libraries and Scholarship

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Scholars, by their very calling, that of increasing the stock of our understanding of the world; and especially scholars in the humanities who study the texts of human creativity, feed on books gathered together in libraries, and they, in their turn, balance their account by nourishing libraries with the books they create.

Don McKenzie was nourished by libraries, and enriched them with his scholarship. But he was not content to remain confined to the cloister, but went, with a will, to do battle in the committee rooms of power and in the arid wastes of position papers and strategic plans, because he knew, only too well, that the libraries that were indispensable to him and other scholars were creatures of their societies, vulnerable to economic and political decisions made by politicians, accountants and managers.

'Blind mouths! That scarce themselves know how to hold a sheepphook' – let alone a book.

Scholarship was not, in Don's book, incompatible with principled advocacy in the political arena. Scholarship, and its handmaiden the library, are subversive of established beliefs, and distrusted both by the demos and the tyrants. Their friends must be eternally vigilant and ready to intervene to promote the wider, and longer, view of the public good.

Aware that the health of scholarship was tied to the health of libraries as institutions, he invested his time, his analytical skills, his powers of advocacy, his wit, his wisdom, and his passion, in two hemispheres in advocacy for, and the governance of, research libraries.

First, as a member of the committee of the Friends of the Turnbull Library from 1968 to 1974, including four years as president, then from 1974 to 1986 as a member of the Trustees Special Committee for the Turnbull and the Endowment Trust, from 1975 to 1985 as a Trustee of the National Library, and latterly as the British Academy's representative on the Advisory Committee for the British Library.

We worked very closely from 1973, when I was appointed Chief Librarian of the Turnbull. He was my teacher, advisor, confidant, and friend. Ever the voice of conscience, reminding me of the value of books as physical objects. A perfect committee member, ever sensitive to the differences between his role and mine, persuasive in his advocacy for principles in committee debates, and generous with his advice in private when asked.

He was willing, on public occasions, to slip quickly into political gear when he judged the times demanded it. I recall well a speech at the Library in 1981. His subjects were, ostensibly, John Milton, Alexander Turnbull, and Kathleen

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Coleridge's bibliography of the Milton collection. Nevertheless, in fifteen minutes he managed deft thrusts at the Prime Minister, the government's general parsimony, the recent announcement not to proceed with the new National Library building, and the growing infatuation of librarians with 'information' and electronic 'access':

Pre-selected, institutionally controlled, commercially directed, and ephemeral 'information' is no more accessible to the individual than authority, short-term storage and sophisticated technology will permit. The portability and thoughtful privacy of the physical book ... make it a surer defence against institutional secrecy and its attendant, political tyranny.

Don McKenzie argued, in two hemispheres, the need for national libraries, in times of trouble when the financial tide was set against them, to hold their principles, and not seek ways of abandoning them. 'Politicians,' he once wrote in a paper for the British Library, 'happily ... decay even faster than books,' and he argued for sustained commitment to principles in the long term while short-term strategies were found to enable an orderly, but temporary, retreat from perfection.

He was profoundly troubled by the British Library's attempts to retreat from its obligations to scholarship, and though he said nothing publicly he was obviously disturbed by recent developments in the National Library of New Zealand. If he had been pressed for a public comment I suspect he would have taken an indirect route to express his concerns at the accelerating threats to the book as a physical object. Someone else's words, a quotation, but one deliberately chosen from that great age of polemic, the seventeenth century, and from one of its outstanding polemicists:

We should be wary therefore, what persecution we raise against the labours of public men, how we spill that season'd life of man preserv'd and stor'd up in Books; since we see a kind of homicide may then be committed, sometimes a martyrdom, and if it extend to the whole impression, a kind of massacre, whereof the execution ends not in the slaying of an elemental life, but strikes at that ethereal and fift essence, the breath of reason it selfe, slaies an immortality rather than a life.

