



Sir Harold White

HAROLD LESLIE WHITE

1905-1992

Harold White, who died on 31 August 1992, was born in the Victorian town of Numurkah, son of a family which worked on the land. He never forgot, and often mentioned, this landed connection; but his own career was wholly a librarian's, although he later owned three acres and the occasional cow in Canberra. As National Librarian of Australia he made a significant contribution to the profession of librarian and to research and scholarship.

At Wesley College, Melbourne, he played Victorian Rules football with some distinction and achieved an academic record which led his headmaster, L.A. Adamson, to recommend him as a cadet to the first Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian, Arthur Wadsworth, in 1922. While the library was preparing to move with the federal parliament to Canberra, his cadetship enabled Harold to take a degree at the University of Melbourne and then to complete a Master's degree with First Class honours in French, meanwhile learning his librarianship on the job, for neither professional training nor certificate were then offered. In 1926 he moved with the library to Canberra, then not much more than a village, but which, as it grew, he came to regard as a perfect combination of the bush and the city. Two years later he was appointed Deputy Librarian of the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library.

That library was then chiefly concerned with servicing the federal parliament, and incidentally providing library services for the Australian Capital Territory, but in those inter-war years Harold White began to conceive the vision of a national library. In 1939, with a Carnegie Corporation of New York award, he went overseas and studied the great libraries of Congress and the British Museum, and when, in 1947, he succeeded to the Australian parliamentary librarianship, he had a vision of what a national library might be, a vision fortified by his tenure of a Smith Mundt Leadership award in 1950. As Parliamentary Librarian he was also the head of a public service department, and well placed both to influence ministers and their senior advisers as a persistent and at times lengthy advocate. When Robert Menzies retired as Prime Minister in 1966, he was quoted as saying that he had had to create the National Library to shut Harold White up.

The National Library Act was passed in 1960. Under it, Harold White became National Librarian, remaining also Parliamentary Librarian until 1968. By assiduous collecting, he had ensured that the National Library had a fine collection of research materials, both Australian, with the Ferguson collection of Australiana, the papers of politicians such as Billy Hughes, Hugh Mahon and Staniforth Smith, and of public servants such as Atlee Hunt; and, with broader vision, non-Australian ones relevant to the period of European settlement in Australia, such as the Nichol Smith collection of 18th century literature, French revolutionary pamphlets, and some of Captain James Cook's journals. The pursuit of such materials resulted in National Library collections of international as well as national significance. That was Harold White's achievement.

Under the 1960 Act, a body corporate was established with its own Council, though as its chief executive officer, Harold White remained a public service department head, not a member of the Council. The change was not altogether welcome, though the appointment of the first chairman of the Council, Sir Archibald Grenfell Price, a Foundation Fellow of the Academy, was fortunate. Archie was a former member of federal parliament to whom Menzies recognised a political debt. His political skills and influence were important in securing for the National Library a lakeside site. When the neo-classical library building, with its travertine marble stairs, modern French tapestries and Leonard French stained glass, was seeking its motto, a distinguished and witty classical scholar suggested *Alba sed non sine Pretio*: White, but not without Price.

Within the National Library Harold White was a remote but not unfriendly figure. He was not a 'hands-on' manager, but one whose contacts with politicians, public servants, diplomats and academics, both in working hours and through what were known as Sunday morning levées at the White house in Mugga Way, worked to the Library's benefit. The running of the Library was left to senior officers, of Harold's choice, who were able and efficient: Cliff Burmester and Pauline Fanning to name but two. Amongst his many stories of Menzies, there was one Harold did not tell. On the occasion of a presentation of books to the library, Harold had his staff assembled to meet the Prime Minister. When Menzies entered he came straight over to the National Librarian. 'White', he said, 'I'm delighted to see you. I thought I might be all alone among the

intellectuals.' In fact Harold made a point of mixing with the intellectuals, as a member of Council of the Canberra University College, as an Academy Foundation Honorary Fellow, and as a regular attendee at Academy meetings; and he provided space, for some years, for the offices of both this Academy and that of Social Sciences within the National Library.

Harold White's achievement in bringing the National Library together, after many years of dispersion across Canberra, and of establishing its reputation within the profession and with scholars, was recognised by a CBE in 1962; and the honour of Knight Bachelor in 1970, the year of his retirement, the first and last knighthood for an Australian librarian. The earlier honour was remarkable because, at the same investiture, his wife Elizabeth, who was a major force in his life, received an MBE for her services to the aged.

In retirement he remained regular in his attendance at Academy meetings, having been a member of the preceding Humanities Research Council from its foundation; and very active in the social life of Canberra. He was engaged as a consultant on Malaysian library services but found great difficulty in writing his report. It was much easier for him, with a tape recorder, to contribute his memories of sixty years or so of Canberra personalities and events, to the Oral History project. His memories, despite a certain improvement as they were re-told over the years, historians must be grateful for.

With his passing, that voice from the past is now silent. He should be remembered with gratitude by academicians and scholars for his permanent memorial in the National Library and its collections, including those which, like the National Archives, now separate, began under his aegis. It could never be said of Harold White, as it has been of other (including university) librarians, that he could have established a great library if only people did not want to read books and pursue research. He appreciated what a National Library was for, and his vision and persistence contributed greatly to establishing one in Australia.

Francis West