

FOLA President's Report 2011

Friends of Libraries Australia was launched, as only the second such national association in the world, by its patron the Hon Justice Michael Kirby AC CMG at the State Library of Victoria on 9 December 1994. At the beginning of my sixth report as FOLA President, and consequent on his decision in 2011 to withdraw as the FOLA's foundation patron, I acknowledge the distinction, encouragement and support which Michael Kirby has lent it for so many years. It has been a contribution which has played no small part in FOLA's recognition and growth as a volunteer organisation with a vision of better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia.

The year past saw FOLA continue its focus, at the local and national level, on advocacy towards that vision. Indicative of this was the commencement of Australia's first award for library advocacy, and one of the very few worldwide. The FOLA Colin Watson Award for Library Advocacy – named for the late Colin Watson, an outstanding progenitor of FOLA – went to the Friends of Ballina Library NSW for their tenacious and ultimately successful advocacy for a new library for their community.

In this library advocacy context, I also note with regret the passing in South Australia on 9 April 2011 of Arthur Mortimer, a true and effective friend of libraries. Over many years from the early 1970s he fought hard and well for local public libraries for the western suburbs of Adelaide, and also played a direct part in persuading Prime Minister Gough Whitlam to establish in 1975 the Horton inquiry into Australia's very underdeveloped public library system. The findings of that inquiry informed action by all States and Territories, so that now nearly everyone in Australia has access to a free public library. In that sense everyone in Australia is indebted to a relatively few tenacious advocates such as Colin Watson and Arthur Mortimer for what many may now take for granted – a local public library freely available to all regardless of their age and circumstances.

The recent experience in a USA and UK beset by national and local financial woes indicates that however much libraries are used and valued by the community; however high their now demonstrable return on investment; and however much they are fundamental to community connection; that they are still too often seen as a soft target when funding gets tight. The UK, in particular, has seen increasing resistance to library closures and severe funding cuts by friends of libraries groups, but which lack national connection and support because the equivalent of FOLA does not yet exist there. FOLA lent what moral and information support it could to some of these UK groups during the year, and its executive director continues to provide advice to the UK. Within Australia, of the fact that there is a need for an organisation to foster and support Friends of Libraries and with them advocate for better, more accessible, libraries for all in Australia, the year again saw evidence, including

- numerous enquiries for advice about the development and organisation of FOL groups.
- a growth in the number of requests directly from members of the public for information and assistance with their public library interactions.
- requests for the president and executive director to speak at workshops and public meetings. Of particular note was a forum for FOL groups in NSW held at the State Library of NSW, the first state forum to be held outside of South Australia.
- requests from FOL groups for information and advice on how to respond to local library issues, funding and council decisions made against the interest and wishes of the community. FOLA is increasingly involved in raising such matters with councils and state governments. As a voice of library users it is the only national body which is able to do so directly, without fear or favor.

Other features of the year included

- a revision of the FOLA website and its removal, for technical reasons, from the server of the Australian Library and Information Association which had generously hosted it for many years.
- in addition to the award (certificate and \$1000) of the first Colin Watson Award for Library Advocacy to Ballina Library in NSW, the awarding to the Murray Bridge Library in South Australia of the Eric Flynn Award for Services to Older Adults. Unfortunately, there were no suitable entries for the Peter McInnes Award for Library Services for Children and Young Adults.

- the release in May 2011 of the Commonwealth Parliamentary inquiry report *School libraries and teacher librarians in 21st century Australia*. www.aph.gov.au/house/committee/ee/schoollibraries/report.htm. FOLA's submission to this inquiry, and its presentation to the inquiry committee, emphasised the importance of school libraries and teacher librarians, and the need for greater collaboration between school and public libraries in the literacy development, education and socialization of young people. The report's text and recommendations reflect well FOLA's concerns. In complimenting the Prime Minister on the initiation and utility of the inquiry, FOLA suggested a similar inquiry into Australia's public library system and responsibilities for its funding is long overdue.
- the announcement by the Commonwealth Government of \$1.3million to support the 2012 National Year of Reading, a concept proposed in FOLA's 2008 Report to the Nation *A nation reading for life: the challenge for public libraries* www.fola.org.au.

Two aims for the year listed in my 2010 annual report were the development of national awards for excellence in library buildings, and a paper for FOL groups to promote their awareness of garnering the retiring baby boomer generation in their succession planning for office bearers in particular, and to develop stronger volunteer and political support for their libraries. The first aim has been deferred due to lack of support for it beyond FOLA. The second is in progress at the time of writing.

It was again heartening throughout the year to hear from Friends of Libraries about their continuing vitality, innovations and successes. Particularly noteworthy – in probably a first for an Australian legislature and indeed worldwide – was recognition in the NSW parliament on 30 May 2011 by MLA Leslie Williams of the outstanding work of the Friends of Port Macquarie-Hastings Library, a longstanding member of FOLA and which on its website states its belief that it comprises 'People who know that a community with a first-rate library is a better place to live'. Those Friends, as do all FOL groups, represent a strength of Australia, its many volunteers giving of themselves for the public good.

As much is true of FOLA's national committee. I therefore again express my appreciation of the work of its members and of their collegiality during the year. Of special note was the contribution of FOLA's Vice President Kristina Barnett who combined the role with that of FOLA treasurer, as well as being elected during the year as a councillor of the City of Prospect in South Australia. I also note here with gratitude the special contribution and expertise over several years of Murray Drinnan, FOLA's webmaster who has contributed very much more than the small stipend which FOLA is able to provide him. Finally, Daniel Ferguson, the inspiration behind the establishment of FOLA and its honorary executive director, is thanked for his invaluable contribution during the year.

Appreciation is also expressed to the Friends of the Library in Launceston, Tasmania, for hosting FOLA's 2010 AGM in fine style. The event, and its complementary workshop on library advocacy, was a tangible reminder that Launceston benefits greatly from a public library supported by active Friends concerned for the future of their community's greatest single and most used asset.

The beginning of this report expressed regret at the standing down of FOLA's long serving foundation patron, the Hon Michael Kirby. Its conclusion expresses pleasure that another great Australian, author and historian Tom Keneally AO, has kindly accepted FOLA's invitation to be his successor.

With Australia's National Year of Reading (NYR) in 2012, this should lend encouragement to Friends of Libraries everywhere, and their libraries, to contribute to a nation reading for life.

***Dr Alan Bundy AM
President***