



(Article author: Fyfe Bygrave)

## Colin Steele. Librarian and Bibliophile.

The ANU Emeritus Faculty has been conducting interviews with retired members of the Australian National University for a number of years. The purpose of these has been to gather and maintain a history of the University as far as possible from individual members who contributed to its community and development over decades. The following arises from an interview Colin Steele had with Fyfe Bygrave in March 2017.

Colin was born in Hartlepool, County Durham, England in 1944. He was educated at Hartlepool Grammar School, leaving in 1962 with the Chairman of the Governor's Award for Academic Achievement. He then studied for a History degree at Liverpool University, specialising in Latin American and North American history, graduating with a 2:1 Honours degree in 1965. He was awarded a UK SCONUL (Standing Conference of National and University Libraries) traineeship at Liverpool University Library for 1965-66, which allowed him to remain in Liverpool while his future wife, Anna, completed her history degree. Anna and Colin were married in 1967 in Douglas, Isle of Man.

From 1966-67 Colin studied for a postgraduate degree in Library and Information Studies at University College London, specialising in Latin American bibliography. Colin was appointed as an Assistant Librarian in Oxford University's Bodleian Library's Foreign Accessions Department, taking up his appointment in August 1967. Colin subsequently became a Junior and then Senior Associate Member of St Antony's College which included the University's Latin American Centre, and benefitted from the support of its first Head and subsequent Warden, Raymond Carr.

In addition to professional library activities, Bodleian staff were expected to be scholar-librarians. Colin's work in the Bodleian led to the publication of several books, including *Independent Mexico* with Professor Michael Costeloe, based on their discovery of a hitherto unknown and uncatalogued collection of Mexican independence pamphlets in the Bodleian stacks.

Colin was awarded a British Academy American Fellowship in 1974 which he took up at the Newberry Library in Chicago. This enabled him to complete the manuscript of his book *English Interpreters of the Iberian New World*, published in 1975. Another major publication was *Major Libraries of the World* in 1976.

Colin, looking for career advancement, applied for two senior Australian positions, advertised in mid-1975, one at the University of Melbourne and the other at the ANU. Colin ultimately accepted the position of Deputy University Librarian at the ANU in November 1975. Colin and Anna and their two young sons arrived in August 1976.

Problems in the ANU Library, and thus the University, which had been accumulating since the appointment of Milton Simms as ANU Librarian in early 1974, continued which ultimately led to Colin becoming Acting University Librarian in September 1977.

Milton Simms took early retirement in 1980, and after a global search, Colin was appointed University Librarian in September 1980. Colin has noted the support of the academic community was crucial in this part of the Library's history. He singles out Ralph Elliott, Dick Johnson, Ian Ross, Sandy Youngson, Colin Plowman and Denis Carr, with senior Library staff such as Enid Bishop and Edith Heinrich also playing a steadying role.

In *The Making of the Australian National University, 1946 -1996*, Stephen Foster and Mary Varghese argue that the decision not to build a single central University Library in the 1960s was a mistake of considerable long-term import. The Menzies Library had opened in 1963, essentially servicing the Coombs Building Research Schools while the Chifley Library opened in 1967 servicing the School of General Studies. Collections in many subject areas in the humanities and social sciences therefore were split in location.

In 1982, a major Library Review took place chaired by Deputy Vice Chancellor Ian Ross. It recommended as one of its main priorities, the rationalisation of library collections. Ultimately, hundreds of thousands of books were moved between buildings. The Menzies Library became the focus for Asian and Pacific studies and rare books; Chifley Library humanities and social sciences; and the then named Crawford Building (now the Hancock Library), life sciences and general science. Tensions played out between users of the Chifley and Menzies buildings were replicated in the science branch libraries on each side of campus, for example, between Earth Sciences and Geology libraries and, more particularly, between the Life Sciences Library and the JCSMR Library.

The Library collection was then print-based, so there was fierce competition, for example, between academic staff for the location of print journals and for the placement of new subscriptions. SCILAC (the Science Library Advisory Committee) was the scene of many heated debates. Given decades of disagreement on the location of journals, desktop electronic access to journals eventually led the Science Research Schools to close down their branch libraries.

In the early 1990s the ANU Library became a leader in Australia in library automation and web access, thanks to the work of key Library staff, and especially Deputy Librarian Tony Barry. In 1994 the Library was awarded the national VALA Award for innovation in computing and networking.

Colin was co-convenor with Professor John Mulvaney of the inaugural National Scholarly Communications Forum in 1993, which was the catalyst for the Australian Government allocating funds for the first national access to journal datasets. Colin has been involved with the NSCF, since 1993, and has been Convenor of the National Forums since 2005, succeeding Professor Malcolm Gillies.

Colin has always believed in building up ANU'S research collections. During Colin's time, the ANU collection reached one and then two million books, both occasions being marked by a ceremony with the respective Governors General, Sir Zelman Cowen and Sir William Deane.

The continuing weakness of the Australian dollar in the 1990s, impacted severely on overseas book and periodical purchases – 90% of the ANU Library acquisitions were overseas sourced. This placed considerable strains on Library operations, leading to another Review in 1995. A Library subject and area studies subject structure ensued, while at the same time, a push towards merging Library and IT services occurred under Vice-Chancellor Deane Terrell. These changes were increasingly reflected in the portfolio activities of Pro Vice-Chancellor Robin Stanton, which led to a gradual incorporation of Library staffing and funding into a Division of Information Services.

With only rare meetings of the Library Committee and faced with another staffing Review in 2002, Colin, having been University Librarian for 22 years, decided to retire. He took up the position of Director of Scholarly Information Strategies for 18 months, a period in which the new University Librarian, Vic Elliott was recruited. Colin was named Emeritus Fellow by the ANU Council in 2004.

Prior to his retirement, Colin, with Professors James Fox and Malcolm Gillies, and with the financial support of Vice Chancellor Ian Chubb, re-established in 2002 the long defunct ANU Press with an open access electronic access framework. The ANU Press has gone on to great success with over 550 books published by 2017. The ANU Library Open Access Repository achieved much initial success but, not being located in an academic framework, like the Press, received less support from within the Division of Information. Again, with the passage of time, priorities changed. The Division of Information no longer exists, thus returning the Library to its own setting within the University.

Colin has always pursued cross-campus activities beyond the Library. Colin was the first Chair of the Australian National Word Festival from 1983 to 1987, which were held at University House. Colin subsequently established the extremely successful ANU Meet the Author series, which still continues. Colin has won several ANU media and outreach awards for this activity in recent years, while the podcasts of the Meet the Author events are amongst the most downloaded from the University.

Colin became Secretary of the ACT Oxford University Alumni Association in 1977, a position he still holds. He was also the Secretary of the Magellan Society, which was established on campus in 1980, by Vice Chancellor, Anthony Low, to promote the cultural activities of Spain, Portugal and Latin America in Canberra. Many successful events were held until 1997, when its activities gradually morphed into ANCLAS, the Australian National Centre for Latin American studies at the ANU.

Colin was awarded the Knight Cross of Queen Isabella la Catolica in 1984 for his work establishing the Magellan Society and for his critically acclaimed books on Spain and Latin America.

Colin is an Honorary Fellow of University House and of the Australian Academy of Humanities. In 2002, he was awarded the Australian Centennial Medal for his work on scholarly communication. Colin regrets that, despite all the national and international initiatives for scholarly communication change, the dominance of the major international STM publishers has increased, with their profits having risen phenomenally in the last two decades. Colin will continue working, however, with other global open access advocates, particularly the NSCF, to ensure that publicly funded knowledge will be increasingly freely and publicly available.

Colin considers that, despite the best intentions of all concerned, collegiality and the opportunities for cross-campus social contacts seem to be diminishing as demands on the University community, especially the younger scholars, have increased.

Colin and Anna still live in the Hawker house they purchased in 1976. They have two adult sons, Christopher and Jonathan, both of whom gained their degrees at ANU.