

Jean Primrose Whyte: A Professional Biography. By Coralie Elsenore Janis Jenkin. Victoria, Australia: Monash University Custom Publishing, 2010. 164 pp. AUD 34.95 (paper). ISBN 978-0-9805108-3-3. AUD 15.00 (electronic). eISBN 978-0-9805108-5-0.

This curious and slender volume is ostensibly a professional biography of Jean Primrose Whyte, one of the dominant figures in modern Australian librarianship, and yet it is far more than that. It is, in fact, an undeniable labour of love by its author, who spent five years painstakingly researching her former mentor. It is also a veritable history of Australian libraries and librarianship in the second half of the twentieth century. Like its subject, the book is wonderfully eclectic, and is comprised of seven chapters, complete with prologue, epilogue, and interlude, as well as five appendices and a bibliography. There is something charmingly ludic about the organising principles at play; however, the vignette-driven structure and necessary elision of events occasionally obscures such matters as motivation and the passage of time. I suspect that the poetical part of Jean Whyte's nature would have forgiven the certain ambiguity and lack of unity, and, for all its necessary omissions, it cannot be denied that there is a surprising sense of completeness to the work as a whole. Perhaps the best summation of how a reader might approach her biography can be found in her remarkable presidential address, "A Word from Callimachus," which was first delivered to the South Australian Branch of the Library Association of Australia in 1946, and which she continued to revise over the next forty-three years: "all these things are true, but they are by no means the whole story" (09.1).

Whyte's story begins on a rather arresting note ("Jean's earliest memory was seeing her mother killed by shark"), and then recounts her early years in Yadlamalka ("the first home Jean could remember, a three-hundred-and-thirty-square-mile sheep station, carrying 10,000 sheep,

forty miles north of Port Augusta in South Australia, fifteen miles from the nearest neighbour and with few roads and few people, but in good spells there were kangaroos, emus, horses, foxes and camels”) (01.1, 01.4). There is much potential of thick description to be found in these opening sketches, particularly as they might relate to a perceived outsider status; however, the reader is then led with great rapidity from outback to boarding school, and, finally, to the first of a series of happy “accidents” which led to her work at the Public Library of Australia, her subsequent study at the Graduate Library School at the University of Chicago, and the acquisition of a lifelong syndrome that she referred to as “library-mania” (02.1).

The next three chapters (excluding an interlude in which Jean Whyte tells her own story of her editorship of the *Australian Library Journal*, from 1959-71), can be broken down into periods representing professional stays at the University of Sydney Library (1959-72), the National Library of Australia (1972-5), and Monash University, where she became the foundation professor of the Graduate School of Librarianship (1975-88). Although she was to receive the H. C. L. Anderson Award—the highest award given to professional librarians in Australia—in 1987, Jenkin makes it abundantly clear that, for all Whyte’s undeniable talents, her path was by no means without its trials, perhaps none more challenging than her comparatively brief stay at the National Library. For students of librarianship, the appropriately brief chapter on this period of Whyte’s career presents a unique insight into the “politicking, gossip, and intrigue” she so abhorred. There was, however, to be a “happy” accident to end this particular tale for, with the arrival of George Chandler, Jean Whyte was afforded the opportunity to forsake one Eden for another, and it would be at Monash where she would leave her most indelible mark.

For all the insight and interest to be found in the previous chapters, it is the last chapter that will most likely stay with the reader. Although divided into two parts (“Themes from Jean’s

work” and “Themes from Jean’s life”), Jenkin has already made such a distinction unnecessary by the final chapter of the text. In fact, it was oftentimes impossible to distinguish between the Whyte’s work and life. The contents of this chapter, therefore, bear no small resemblance to John Aubrey’s *Brief Lives* in that they raise myriad questions, even as they provide the reader with some very memorable sketches of a surprisingly elusive character. For instance, when Whyte was interviewed by the *Canberra Times* following her appointment to the National Library, she said she was quite unaware of the paucity of women in the higher echelons of her profession. (At the time, she was one of only two women among 850 men in the second division of the Commonwealth Public Service.) Indeed, Whyte commented that the preference for men in professional positions was “encouraged by women being so silly. They don’t apply for a job and then go round saying it was earmarked for one of the boys” (07.15). It would have been fascinating to learn even more about her thoughts on the matter.

In the end, perhaps, Jean Primrose Whyte represents a study in contrasts, a formidable nature belying a poetical soul. She also embodies, much like her Alexandrine predecessor, the history of the library in a very real sense. Her story, therefore, is by no means limited to those scholars who have also been stricken with “library-mania”, but, rather, ought to be read by anyone with a keen interest in the art and science of librarianship. However, it is unquestionably a most personal writing, and as such might also be read in a very different spirit. Among the assembled poems, correspondences, and assorted commonplaces laid out before the reader is a panegyric, written on the occasion of her retirement from the graduate school she was so instrumental in helping to found. Perhaps more than any other document, it might best illustrate how this most unusual of professional biographies ought to be read:

Jean! You’re leaving us! We’re more or less miffed;
Of time, your learning stands the test. Shift

Not your friendship from us; it's your great gift.
That's why we're here—a living festschrift! (06.14)

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