

Gwenda Clare Fischer, 1921-1998

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Gwenda Fischer

Gwenda Clare Fischer died in Adelaide on 16 November 1998, after two years of serious illness. Her passing, along with the death of Thurles Thomas last year, brings to an end a significant period in the development of law librarianship in Australia

Gwenda Sargeant, as she then was, was the first professional law librarian appointed to the University of Adelaide. She held the office of Law Librarian from early 1959 until the end of 1968. Halfway through this period she married Gerald Fischer, at that time the South Australian State Archivist. When Gerald was appointed Archivist of the University of Sydney, Gwenda left Adelaide to accompany him.

During her ten years in Adelaide Gwenda had built a very small collection into a well-organised Library of some 25,000 volumes. Moreover, she had managed to re-arrange the whole collection in a way that suited her users better than the simple Dewey classification that she inherited.

After working in the Fisher Library for some months Gwenda returned to the legal field and took a position in the Law Society of New South Wales Library. She succeeded the Society's Librarian when he retired, and set about changing the Library from a quiet repository to an extremely active information service. At Adelaide she had added a Law degree to the Arts degree that she had come with, and had also studied at the University of Washington, Seattle, for a Master's Degree in Law Librarianship. She was extremely well qualified to provide legal information, both to practitioners and to academics.

The year that Gwenda and Gerald arrived in Sydney was an important one for law librarianship in Australia. In December it saw the first meeting of law librarians from the whole of the country, and this meeting established the present ALLG. Gwenda was one of the small group whose work throughout 1969 had led to the December meeting, and she must be counted as one of the founders of the Group.

She was just as significant, too, in the birth of what is now the *Australian Law Librarian*, in that she was the Convenor of a committee set up in 1971 which lobbied potential publishers and searched for subsidies to produce a bulletin. This, along with a directory of law libraries, a list of subject headings for law in Australia and other things now forgotten, was seen as essential for the newly-created Group.

Throughout her twelve years in Sydney Gwenda continued to play a major role in the promotion of law libraries, and the respect that she created can be seen in some of the comments that her colleagues from those days made in the week following her death.

(These are quoted later in this memorial). She acted on Group committees, spoke at conferences, and wrote for journals throughout the whole period.

While at the Law Society she served on a number of the Society's committees. Not content to be a librarian, even a very effective one, she wanted to use her legal qualification to achieve whatever good she could from the law she had learned.

Her eminence as an authority on law libraries was recognised when she was invited to plan and advise on the reorganisation of the Supreme Court Library in Perth. It was also while she was in Sydney that Gwenda realised one of her earlier dreams and started the publication in 1973 of CANZLLI (Current Australian and New Zealand Legal Literature Index). This meticulously compiled and edited index to articles and case notes was Gwenda's single-handed achievement. When she returned to Adelaide in 1981 she had to rely on the resources of her old library at the University Law School as a source for her indexing. The smaller collections of the Law School, and the more restricted resources of Adelaide in general after Sydney, must have created many difficulties, but she kept the publication going until 1987 when she felt that she could honourably leave the field to others, notably Monash.

Although Gwenda's main achievements in librarianship and bibliography were in the legal field she was equally energetic and effective in other areas. In Adelaide she was involved in the old Library Association of Australia, serving as General Councillor and as a member of the (federal) Constitution Committee. She was Chair of the South Australian Branch's Education Sub-Committee, a group which had as its charge the establishment of courses in librarianship in the local tertiary institutions, the (then) Institute of Technology and the University of Adelaide. Both these aims were eventually realised.

Gwenda was a bookish person, whose interests went well beyond the law. When I met her late in 1963 she was building her collection of Virginia Woolf. Those who have been in any of Gerald and Gwenda's houses in Mosman, Lyndoch or Brighton or even back in Aldgate in the 1960s, will remember the enormous collection of literature and history that accompanied them wherever they went. They were both invited to be members of the newly-formed Book Collectors Society of South Australia in the early 1980s.

Gwenda and Gerald, the G.F.s as they sometimes called themselves, were an extraordinarily well-matched couple, and had a remarkably happy marriage. Gwenda was always a strong, outstanding personality, a battler, combative, and very direct. She was what would now be called a focused person, concentrated, a great fighter for any cause. A wonderful person to have on your side.

She was extremely well-organised. There was a great deal to admire in Gwenda, both professionally and as a human being. I could never admire her more than I did as a planner and mover of libraries. In her ten years at Adelaide she moved the Library three times. The second move, the only one that I took part in, showed how such things should be done. Everything was planned down to the last inch. It was brilliant. Sadly, as soon as the Library was in its attractive new quarters, planning for the next move had to begin.

As a manager, Gwenda's style was generally informal and relaxed. She was very practical, and set a wonderful example in always being willing to get her hands dirty. She never

shirked physical work, whether it was shelving books, unpacking cartons, using her own car to collect donations of books from law firms, or maintaining quiet in the library. In an age where Adelaide law students were predominantly male and it seemed, universally athletic and sports-mad, this last was never easy or to be taken for granted. In retrospect, her apparent ease and informality probably concealed a great deal of tension that was necessary to Gwenda if she was to achieve as much as she did. I still remember Gwenda's method of measuring distance, counting the tiles on the library floor as four tiles to three feet, and making certain that she had the number right by shuffling along, one foot ahead of another, very like a child playing trains. This method is infallible, but requires self-confidence when practised in a library full of easily-diverted undergraduates. Every time I use it, which I do often, it immediately recalls Gwenda, and my own first days in a law library.

When she came back to Adelaide, Gwenda had mellowed, and seemed very content. As a user of the Library - the Faculty had made her a Visiting Research Fellow - she was considerate and tactful (She often needed to be!) She was single-minded in her research but always interested in members of the staff. She was thoughtful and very helpful. The comments made by present and recent members of the Adelaide Law Library staff centre on her kindness and inner happiness. One said that she always had a smile on her face. For me she was the source of many insights, much useful information, and a lot of pleasant and civilised conversation.

Starting with the first few months when I worked as a sort of deputy to her, Gwenda has always been a good friend and colleague. Gwenda and Gerald were close friends to my wife, Margaret, and me. We saw them a number of times in Sydney and much more often since their return to South Australia. Only two months ago we were given lunch at their house at Brighton. Although obviously uncomfortable and worried about the future, Gwenda was in good spirits and the occasion was very enjoyable - just like old times.

The disease that was gradually killing her, and the treatments intended to alleviate it, were so crippling and debilitating that in some ways her death has to be seen as a release. But that can never take away the sense of loss. Someone as vital as Gwenda always had a great deal to give to the world. A person like her can never be spared. The loss to her husband, Gerald, is immeasurable.

In a journal dedicated to law librarianship, it is appropriate to finish with quotations from two of Gwenda's colleagues from the 1970s in Sydney:

She indeed was an extraordinary woman and one who was uncompromising in her views.

Gwenda was a down-to-earth, no-nonsense librarian with a strong sense of her own worth to the legal profession, and very knowledgeable about its needs. To many of us she was a model to be emulated.

Our profession of law librarianship is the stronger for having had a person of the stature of Gwenda Fischer as one of its practitioners.

Acknowledgements

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