

## ***Thurles Thomas BA LLB FLAA 1908-1997: A Tribute by Helen Bashford and Lynn Pollack***

***"PIONEER LAW LIBRARIAN AND LEADER WITH AN AWESOME INTELLECT"***



Australian law librarians lost a valued pioneer on 8 November 1997 with the death of Florence Mary Thurles Thomas. Generations of librarians and lawyers owe her much more than they realise. Her seminal influence on both professions was enormous and cannot be overestimated.

In recognition of her outstanding contribution to librarianship, particularly law librarianship, Thurles became a Fellow of the Library Association of Australia in 1972<sup>1</sup> and received the HCL Anderson Award, the Library Association's highest personal award, in 1977.<sup>2</sup>

A memorial service at Abbotsleigh Chapel on Tuesday 18 November 1997 provided the opportunity for her many admirers and friends to pay personal tributes. Three eulogies were delivered at the funeral.

The first was given by Kathleen McCredie (Headmistress of Abbotsleigh from 1970-1987) who honoured her contribution to Abbotsleigh where she was regarded as a "living national treasure".<sup>3</sup> A student and boarder from 1921-26, she gained a University Exhibition at the Leaving Certificate Examination, a Prefect's badge, a sports pocket and a large collection of prizes. She graduated from the University of Sydney in Arts (1930) and Law (1933) with the Rose Scott Prize for International Law and a University Blue for Cricket. This was at a time when it was quite extraordinary for a woman to study law. On becoming a solicitor, she served as a member of the Council of Abbotsleigh and in 1937 joined the Abbotsleigh staff, where she was employed first as a teacher and then as the school's first librarian. She also coached cricket, organised the debating society and became involved in Guiding. As a member of the Old Girls Union she served on the School Council for three terms and was particularly active in developing the Archival collection for the Centenary celebrations. She was made an honorary life member for her contribution to the Union in 1973.

Mary Thomas spoke on behalf of the family and focussed on Thurles' career as a Captain in the Australian Army and her long time interest in the Girl Guide movement, cricket and the Kuring-gai Historical Society.

Dr. Wilma Radford acknowledged her outstanding contribution to librarianship as a public librarian at Newtown and Canterbury; her pioneering work in the book trade at Swains and later at James Bennett; her law librarianship career at the University of Sydney Law

<sup>1</sup> *Australian Library Journal* 21 (1972) 32-33.

<sup>2</sup> *Australian Library Journal* 27 (1978) 7.

<sup>3</sup> *Sydney Morning Herald* 21 November 1997 at 35.

School Library (1959-1966) and her work assisting with the development of the collection for the new Macquarie Law School and teaching legal research at Macquarie University (1972 -1976).

The LAA recommendation for her Fellowship stated that “her most important contribution to Australian librarianship was through and in connection with the Library Association of Australia”<sup>4</sup> where she played a major role in the development of the Association’s Royal Charter, the Association’s By-Laws and the constitutions of several of the subordinate bodies. She was Councillor and President of the NSW Branch and Convenor of the Committee on the Role of the Association, Convenor of the Constitution Advisory Committee and Acting Executive Director of the LAA for six months in 1977 Her “legal knowledge, keen argument and force of personality”<sup>5</sup> were used to “great effect”<sup>6</sup> by the Association when free and adequate library service to the public was threatened. In her writing Thurles presented a “blend of vigour and careful statement”<sup>7</sup> and published many articles, “substantial letters”<sup>8</sup> and “searching reviews”<sup>9</sup>. Thurles also prepared a very influential report following her *Survey of Special Library Services to Migrants in New South Wales*<sup>10</sup> which brought together her broad interest in people’s needs and the role of the library in meeting them.

Lynn Pollack and Helen Bashford were privileged to work for Thurles in their formative years in law librarianship, Lynn at the University of Sydney Law School and Helen at Macquarie University. Thurles had an enormous influence on Lynn who considers that Thurles taught her everything she knows about law librarianship and teamwork. Helen also regards Thurles as an outstanding mentor and provided a personal tribute which highlights her personal qualities – her larger than life personality; her sense of humour; her love of life (indeed her lust for life); her great enjoyment of stories and jokes and her great understanding of human nature, which may have come from travelling (she had travelled to many very exotic places and believed you should go *everywhere* once and quickly to sort out the places you want to do properly later) She helped many of her staff to appreciate other cultures and many of those who worked with her became inveterate travellers. Thurles’ approach to both work and life was totally ethical. Everything she did was her personal best.

Her law librarianship skills were amazing; her exhaustive knowledge of legal materials; her insight into readers’ needs; her legal research and teaching gifts; her brilliant collecting skills; her administrative talents; her untiring energy and her inspiring leadership. Helen remembers Thurles patiently teaching her exhaustive research skills, even the *Australian Digest*, which was then a challenge for lesser law librarians. Thurles often had a sixth sense about which source to try. She was liked and respected by both staff and students and was always willing to spend time and share a joke with the students. Many judges,

<sup>4</sup> *Australian Library Journal* 21 (1972) at 32

<sup>5</sup> *Id.*, at 33

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid*

<sup>10</sup> *Australian Library Journal* 23 (1974) at 16

academics and lawyers are indebted to Thurles Thomas for their confidence and competence in using legal research materials.

The citation for the HCL Anderson award reads in part, "by her example and guidance she has influenced her colleagues in a positive and beneficial way"<sup>11</sup>. Australian law librarians should feel very proud that one of their number achieved so much and had such an enormous influence on the recognition of librarianship as a profession in this country.

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<sup>11</sup> *Australian Library Journal* 27 (1978) at 7.