Farewell to Warren Horton AM, 1938–2003

Staff of the National Library of Australia, the library community and friends were saddened to hear of the death, after a long illness, of the Library’s former Director-General Warren Horton on 25 November 2003.


Warren Horton was born in Ryde, Sydney, in 1938 and grew up in Dee Why on Sydney’s northern beaches. He began his education at Dee Why Public School in 1943 before transferring to Canberra Grammar School as a boarder from 1949 to 1955. He graduated in Arts from Sydney University in 1971. As recorded in a 1994 interview with the Canberra Times, a highlight of the week at Dee Why had been the family’s Saturday afternoon walk to the local subscription library ‘where we loaded ourselves up with many volumes for the next week’.

At Canberra Grammar School he developed an interest in history, especially the political history of the United States of America. He also had a particular interest in diaries, such as Tony Benn’s and Evelyn Waugh’s, and had a complete set of Graham Greene’s works on his home bookshelves, along with a large array of reference books. He treasured a first edition of George Johnston’s My Brother Jack given to him by a friend.

Warren Horton had been a member of the Australian library community for 42 years at the time of his retirement. In a farewell message he wrote for the National Library’s Gateways magazine in June 1999, he said that if history judged the National Library to have ‘reacted sensibly’ to the great changes in technology and telecommunications during his period as Director-General, and to have remained ‘balanced and flexible as an organisation’, then he would regard that as ‘sufficient reward’ for his service. He also wrote that he felt privileged to have been part of the 20-year ‘long march’ of the development of the Australian Bibliographic Network and its successor Kinetica.

In an Australian Library Week Oration he delivered in May 1999, Warren Horton declared that ‘when I was young my main ambition was to go into politics’. He confessed to being a ‘passionate political junkie’ and commented that the close involvement he had had with politicians in Canberra over the previous two decades had been ‘a fascinating and enjoyable part’ of his work, although he wryly regretted not having been able to make ‘bigger speeches’ when appearing before Senate Estimates Committees. In a Sydney Morning Herald feature article at around the same time he was quoted as saying that he relished the opportunity, once retired, of being able to express ‘strong opinions … not allowed in this job’. These included views on the Republic and euthanasia.

John Levett, in a testimonial in the Australian Library Journal on Warren Horton’s retirement, commented on the ‘Horton era’ as an eventful one in
which the Library had encountered ‘fiscal and electronic turbulence’. He said that Horton’s ‘ride’ had turned out to be ‘troubling in a different way from that of most of his predecessors’, with ‘major “restructuring”, a relative downsizing of the National Library workforce ... a shift from social to economic preoccupations as the driving force of the Australian polity, and a major shift in the status of the public service and its relations with the body politic’. Other challenges included those associated with the great advances in communications and information technology.

Levett praised Warren Horton’s significant role in bringing Australian librarianship onto the international stage, primarily through his work with the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA), noting that during his tenure the Library had accommodated numerous overseas delegations, library students and interns, especially from South-East Asia. Levett argued that Horton’s impact was also significant at the political level—‘he almost single-handedly educated and inspired a generation of Australian librarians to engage with the political process’—and that he had had a strong and beneficial influence on the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) when its head office was relocated to Canberra. Levett also acknowledged Horton’s role as friend and mentor to many in the library profession.

Warren Horton was president of the Library Association of Australia (now ALIA) in 1984, holding numerous offices within it and serving on key committees and reviews. He was a member, and for three years president, of the Australian Libraries and Information Council (ALIC) from its inception in 1981 until its amalgamation into the Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services (ACLIS) in 1988. He was a member of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO from 1993 to 1996, became chair of the Public Lending Rights Committee in 1991, and was treasurer of IFLA from 1993 until 1997; as well as being active in the Conference of Directors of National Libraries (CDNL).

The IFLA Gold Medal was conferred on Warren Horton in 1997 for his leadership and contribution to international librarianship. He won the Australian Library and Information Association’s HCL Anderson Award in 1988. He was appointed a Member of the Order of Australia in 1992, held an Honorary Doctor of Letters from La Trobe University, and was awarded the National Book Council Gold Medal in 1996. Most recently, in 1999 he was awarded an honorary IFLA Fellowship for his work as a ‘true internationalist’, campaigning ‘to bring into the global arena libraries and library associations most likely to benefit from the international network’.

Warren Horton was married to Patsy Hardy, who died in 1994; in her memory he donated to the Library a series of four specially commissioned embroidered panels entitled Australian Landscapes I–IV by renowned English textile artist Alice Kettle.