



Alec Thorley Bolton 1926-1996

Alec Bolton was elected to the Honorary Fellowship on 8 November 1996; tragically, he died ten days later. His citation acknowledged his role in the history of both commercial and government publishing, and his extensive honorary advice to the Academy on the design and typography of the *Academy Editions of Australian Literature* project.

Born in Sydney on 22 January 1926, Alec Bolton served three years in the Royal Australian Navy before entering The University of Sydney in 1947. Following his completion of an Arts degree, he commenced his distinguished career in publishing by joining Angus

and Robertson in 1950. His first major contribution was a long stint as assistant editor of *The Australian Encyclopaedia*.

Rosemary Dobson, already a respected poet, also worked in the Editorial Department, and they married in 1951. Their careers were aided and sustained by their mutual concern and pride in each other's creative capabilities.

Following a period in the early sixties as Editor at Ure Smith, Bolton returned to Angus and Robertson as London Editor. Stimulated to produce superior books, he enrolled as an evening student at the London College of Printing.

In 1971 Bolton was lured back to Australia as the inaugural Director of Publishing at the National Library of Australia. Then followed years when he was responsible for bibliographical works including the *Australian National Bibliography* and for a number of elegant publications from the library's wealth of manuscript and artistic holdings, including the diary of James Burney, Bligh's *Bounty* notebook, drawings by Augustus Earle, flower paintings of Ellis Rowan and Joseph Lycett's sketches of Aboriginal society.

Bolton purchased an unfashionable Chandler and Price treadle platen press of 1920s vintage, in 1972, and established his personal *The Brindabella Press* in his Deakin home. Appropriately, poems by Rosemary Dobson were his first venture. His output totalled twenty-eight titles, of which twenty-three were books, small in size but outstanding in quality.

Academy Fellows were prominent authors in the Brindabella imprint of this craftsman printer: Bob Brissenden, Manning Clark, A.D. Hope, James McAuley, Geoffrey Serle and Judith Wright. Other titles published were by David Campbell, Les Murray, Kenneth S Jessor, Christina Stead and Harold Stewart.

Following his retirement in 1987, Alec Bolton retained productive links with the National Library, acting as a valuer of papers and as an evocative interviewer for the oral history project. He wrote a guide for prospective oral historians on *Interviewing for Oral History*. A fine photographer, he made a valuable series of portrait studies of Australian writers. The memoir by Michael Richards, *A Licence to Print Alec Bolton and the Brindabella Press*, published in 1993 for the Friends of the National Library of Australia, reproduces some of Bolton's photographs together with his comments on his selection of book titles.

Alec Bolton was a modest and gentle character, diffident in manner, precise in speech and neat of dress. A genial host, he exuded old fashioned values - courtesy, decency and a capacity to listen and

bring out the best qualities in his guests. Professionally, also, he was efficient, determined, but always encouraging to others. His friends included many who had taken and respected his advice.

Australian cultural life has benefited substantially from his activities during his final months. The handsomely produced volume, *The Recollections of Geoffry Hamlyn*, testifies that his skills have assured a stylish and notable Academy series. This time, as the interviewee, he completed a series of tapes on his publishing career for the National Library oral history project. One of Alec Bolton's last positive appraisals of a potential Library acquisition was the collection of the personal papers of Eddie Mabo.

John Mulvaney

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