

John Foster

A recollection by
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the University of Melbourne Library



Doctor John Foster retired from the University of Melbourne in August 1993 because of illness. On 2 September of that year, he launched his biography of Juan Cespedäs, *Take Me to Paris, Johnny*, which received unanimous critical acclaim and was short-listed for the *Age* Book of the Year. He died, aged 50, on 6 May 1994.

In 1995, the Library learned that he had bequeathed the sum of \$468,000 to the University of Melbourne Library “for the purpose of increasing the research collections in the fields of modern Jewish history and modern German history”. This extraordinary bequest will ensure that a resource, already of national importance, continues to support the growing scholarly interest in these areas. For all of us who have lost a friend as well as a colleague, the Foster Bequest will be a continuing reminder of his impact on the intellectual life of Melbourne and the University.

John Foster was one of the first members of the academic staff I met after my appointment in April 1978. I had been here less than a week when, having read of my appointment, he rang to make himself known, to congratulate me on getting the job, to express his pleasure at the establishment of the Collection Development Division and to set a time for us to discuss what the new division could do for his department, his students and his work.

Within the Library’s Collection Development Division primary responsibility for subject areas and

departments was divided and I had assumed responsibility for European history. I had studied history at this university for one solitary year more than a decade before I came to work here, but I was fortunate enough to have some command of German, the language of much of John’s teaching and research.

From our first meeting, a steady stream of books which John had acquired made its way to the Library. (“I notice the Library hasn’t got this. I bought it a few years ago and don’t think I’m likely to read it again.”) These books covered everything, from mainstream German history from the nineteenth century onwards, to catalogues of exhibitions of Nazi art, to a nineteenth century work on agriculture and cattle-breeding.

He encouraged others to give books to the Library too, either their own, or their family’s, or material from organisations to which they belonged. John’s book *Community of Fate: Memoirs of German Jews in Melbourne* could not have been written if the people he studied had not taken him to their hearts and, most importantly, trusted him. They are also people to whom books and recorded history are especially important and they trusted his judgement in questions of the disposal and safekeeping of their libraries. John’s conviction that Melbourne University Library could build an internationally-important resource helped to achieve it. Many of the important private libraries which enrich our nineteenth and twentieth century German history holdings have come to us either as a direct result of John’s persuasion or from people who are friends of those who knew him.

He trusted the librarians too, despite a deep distrust and dislike of much of the new technology which has so facilitated the scholarly researches of others. “I tried to use your new catalogue”, he told me once with more than a touch of

Schadenfreude, “but it’s broken”. This trust manifested itself in his willingness to involve librarians as colleagues in planning new courses and recommending essay topics as much as in suggesting themes for exhibitions, or possible sources of funding for acquisitions.

Even when absent from the University, John continued to support the Library. Readers of *Take Me To Paris, Johnny* may have wondered about his trip to London on behalf of the University Library. Unfortunately, his negotiations there for a magnificent collection came to nothing, but during his time at the Leo Baeck Institute in New York before and after his trip to Berlin and London, he found time to persuade the Institute to sell us a considerable body of books and microfilmed material. It is difficult to overstate the effectiveness of this kind of direct personal intervention of the expert reader with library curators and directors.

Apart from any other considerations, academic experts (and John was no exception), can sometimes be just that little bit cheekier than librarians are likely to be. In John’s case, when I mentioned to him that the University Librarian had arranged a luncheon with Father Timothy Healey, Director of the New York Public Library, his reaction was immediate and to the point. “Ask him if we can have the duplicates from his Judaica collection.”

The New York Public Library has, of course, a well developed program of disposal of surplus material, but my tentative enquiries at the lunch did in fact yield about 16 cartons of books!

John’s advice on what we should buy and who would use it was readily given and realistic. Recommendations for large microform projects, for example, were usually personally delivered to the Library and argued for by reference to their suitability for fourth year essays or postgraduate programs. Gratifyingly, he also remembered to tell us when students or visiting scholars found something of particular interest in the collections.

Our holdings of books, archives and manuscripts for the study of the history of Germany from the nineteenth century

to the Holocaust are exceptionally wide ranging and exhaustive and a tribute to John’s tireless endeavours to make them so. Everything from the parliamentary papers of the period to the art, architecture, music and creative literature, to the economic history and scientific theories of the time were the subject of phone calls, little notes from his office, postcards from overseas and recommendation slips as John suggested specific titles, or asked that I find out what was available in a particular field or by a particular author.

We are however, speaking of the man who described himself in the 3/1988 issue of *Meanjin* as a “gardener and poultry-keeper in North Melbourne. He also works at the University of Melbourne”. And, of course, he read books about gardens, published *Victorian Picturesque: the Colonial Gardens of William Sangster* and took considerable interest in the Library’s purchases of books on gardens.

It is interesting that such a supporter of the institution should not have been one of its Friends. Many Friends of the Baillieu Library and their guests, however, will recall with pleasure a talk which John, already not in the best of health, gave in 1989 on *Floral Fashions in the Garden 1850-1900*, illustrated by reference to a carefully-chosen display of books from our Botany Branch Library.

His interest in the Library did not wane with his health and even while on sick leave towards the end of his employment at the University he continued to come in (generally, and by invitation in time for a cup of “Proper Coffee”) to look through the mountains of selection slips furnished by our German book supplier. This not only brought the immediate advantage of keeping the flow of appropriate books coming to the Library for his students and colleagues. It also enabled me to discuss selections with him as they were being made and to improve my ability to select in the same field when his health no longer allowed him to do so.

He was also concerned to cover areas outside his own immediate field of interest and it was John who offered to

help me select, among the explosion of publications of the last six years, the most important German books on German political developments following unification.

Others will be able to assess John’s impact on his field of scholarship and on his Department. What I valued most and what brought the greatest benefit to the Library’s users was his involvement of Library staff in his work. This was evidenced in his willingness to travel for the Library, to negotiate on its behalf and to discuss ideas for courses, projects and new departures with Library staff as well as with academic colleagues. Without this willingness, our collections would be much weaker. Because of it, John’s successors and generations of researchers will find in the University of Melbourne Library an impressive and inexhaustible resource. ♦

Suggestions of appropriate acquisitions should be addressed to Juliet Flesch, Collection Management Librarian, Baillieu Library, The University of Melbourne, Parkville 3052. Phone (03) 9344 5374. Fax: (03) 9347 5138.