Fred Derek Osmond Fielding
14 August 1929 – 25 June 2014

Derek Fielding was born in Belfast, Northern Ireland, of English parents. Both parents, Harry Osmond Fielding and Elaine née Harvey, died before he turned 10. Fortunately he was taken in by the Masonic Orphan Boys’ School in Dublin. In vacations he visited a grandmother living at Sheffield: later he was often eloquent about how often he had crossed the Irish Sea.

Derek graduated from Trinity College Dublin in 1951, having concentrated on modern history and political science. He met Audrey May Reynolds, who became his wife in 1953. (They were to have three sons.) He worked in Sheffield City Libraries, 1951-57.

The Fieldings migrated to Auckland, where Derek had been appointed Deputy University Librarian (1958-60), and thence to Perth, where he was Deputy University Librarian, 1961-65. Harrison Bryan had left The University of Queensland, and after more than a two-year gap, in June 1965 Derek Fielding became James Forsyth Librarian of The University of Queensland. The collection at the end of 1964 had been about 360,000 volumes; by the
end of 1992, the year of his retiring as University Librarian, there were to be over 1.5 million volumes. Derek Fielding had a strong instinct to manage (but not overmanage), and to change organisations for the better. As an administrator he was deft both in teamwork and also in delegation. Again and again in his career he saw a disordered situation, and in annual reports, articles in periodicals, or agenda papers of the university, the profession, or government agencies, he described the disorder, and set out possible solutions. If committees were formed, he reported progress to the university or the profession or more generally. He always remembered administration involved human beings. Once, during a time of some imaginative daring in women's dress, a staff newsletter set out his answer in staid language, but I am sure that I remember his oral presentation to a meeting: ‘It is impossible to set out a detailed dress code for library staff, but staff are asked to dress in a way that is no more than momentarily distracting to readers or to their fellow staff members’.

When Derek Fielding arrived, much of the collection was spread through nearly forty libraries other than the Main Library. Harrison Bryan, his predecessor, had at least established a central card catalogue recording these holdings: Derek planned a much stronger service amalgamating small libraries into very broad subject divisions. There could be more senior staff available, and facilities such as microfilm readers and photocopying machines more usefully placed. Derek steadily negotiated for this growing structure. The Biological Sciences Library was the first success, opening in 1976. I remember meeting him in January 1990 as he walked with great satisfaction towards the opening of the last major building on his list, Physical Sciences and Engineering Library. In 1971 Derek’s book had appeared: Australian university library administration.

We’ll return to the library system later; but let’s see him settle (?) in Brisbane. Queensland in 1965 was not a place for someone keenly interested in public policy and free discussion to ‘settle’. Alex Byrne, in the September 2000 issue of Australian Academic and Research Libraries honouring Derek Fielding, quotes John Bjelke-Petersen musing on the state and nation if there were no media: ‘Then we would live in peace and tranquility and no one would know anything’. Derek worked against censorship, particularly in public and school libraries, and chaired the Library Association of Australia’s Freedom to Read Committee, 1969–74.

Derek’s stance on censorship and civil rights was a fine protection for University of Queensland Library services during student protests for greater civil rights: students waiting to stage an all-night sit-in in the Walter Harrison Law Library were given permission as long as there was no disorder or detriment to the library. Derek was President of the Queensland Council for Civil Liberties 1975–79. At times the university or the council requested him to be an observer at points of possible protest. This included a match during a 1971 Springboks Rugby tour during apartheid protests: happily, there was no violence, except on the Rugby field. At other times his reports to QCCL were much less reassuring.

Derek had become a member of The University of Queensland Senate 1972 (till 1983). He chaired a committee of the Senate, reporting on university organisation in 1982. In a PhD thesis on politics and organisational reform at the university, RK Kidston includes him in a list of seven individuals who by their ‘dedication and personal ability ... played the most prominent roles in the reform of the University’s system of governance over the 1969-1982 period’.

Back to libraries. With an explosion in student numbers, ease of photocopying, and electronic transmission of texts, traditional copyright laws were under great strain. Yet again we see Derek setting out the problems, and then very active in copyright law review committees established by the Commonwealth Attorney-General and by the Australian Vice-Chancellors’ Copyright Committee.

Communication between whole library systems, let alone branch libraries, became more and more demanding in an electronic world. Derek was prominent in committees to help major libraries interact well with the National Library of Australia, such as the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services. After a trip to the United States in early 1968, he had had the cataloguing staff reclassify the whole University of Queensland collection to the Library of Congress classification (very many of the titles had already been classified to that classification by LC or elsewhere, but it still proved to be a 10 year project). The steadily increasing demand of users was for an increasingly borderless information world. Derek, his Technical Services Librarian Mary Rose McCarthy, and various specialists worked steadily towards this world. The task is endless, but Derek Fielding and his allies worked thoughtfully towards it.

Many other official positions in Derek Fielding’s profession are not mentioned above. He went briefly to be Pro-Vice-Chancellor, Academic Services, at The University of Queensland, August 1992–July 1994. On retirement he was made Librarian Emeritus of The University of Queensland. In 1991 he had received the highest award of the Australian Library and Information Association, the HCL Anderson Award. More generally, in 1996 he was honoured as AM, Member of the Order of Australia.

In retirement he had much more time for family, including, at the time of his death, ten grandchildren. He read, he listened to music, he followed public affairs. But in the last year or two the once great ability to express his thoughts clearly was fading. He died at his home on 25 June.

SPENCER ROUTH retired from The UQ Library in 1997 after a career spanning 38 years of service as Reference Librarian and later as Collection Development Librarian. He was a member of the Queensland Working Party of the Australian dictionary of biography, as well as contributing biographical articles to this work. Spencer was awarded an honorary doctorate from UQ in 2005 in recognition of his distinguished career and contribution to the University Library. He was awarded an OAM in 2011.