
This work, not written specifically for librarians, is important to them. Moreover, it is an easy read, sometimes entertaining and certainly very revealing. Golding is an experienced journalist, who in this case is clearly reverential towards his subject and with good reason. Fleming emerges as a man of exceptional qualities which might be summed up in the word ‘integrity’. His life had a rocky start when his family split up in his childhood. He was hard up, and a minor theme of the book is the shortage of money. But the qualities which marked his path in life were very early recognised by schoolmasters and people who assisted his career changes in journalism, military life and public service employment, which led him to senior library jobs. Early difficulties thwarted a conventional education, but he matured very quickly and gathered a considerable network of well-wishers who helped his advancement. Golding describes in detail Fleming’s exemplary military career, with its painful episodes in the disasters of Greece and Crete. These are gripping pages. His subsequent career in civilian life in the Commonwealth Department of Trade led to spectacular overseas experience, and it seems that good luck was now a constant companion for Allan Fleming. After retirement from the National Library his career took another turn, when he played a major role in the development of Australia’s security and secret service activities.

Reader of this review will be certainly more interested in the sections devoted to Fleming as Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian and then, unexpectedly, as successor to Sir Harold White at the National Library. There is much material that is useful here but not much that is really unknown. This reviewer had the strong impression that Fleming came to a world that was in both content and personalities below the level he was used to. One weakness of the Golding account is that the political milieu of the Federal Parliament and the social parameters of the bush capital are not analysed more deeply. Many interviews by the author are cited, and lots of names from our profession occur, but we need more for an understanding of both the values and motivations which were so striking in Fleming’s case – striking but not exactly flaunted.

Harold White’s name recurs in the book, and his presence is inescapable to the story. The author acknowledges his eminence but seems hostile to his image. This is unfortunate. The same might be said of references to Gordon Richardson, who is seen as a kind of nemesis of the National Library. Librarians need to make their own minds up on these and other matters, but the reviewer cannot dismiss a feeling that our profession does not emerge with any glory. Why is this? A review of this length cannot help out here, but urges the value of introspection we might gain from looking at the life of Allan Fleming, exemplary
in so many ways, commanding respect and convincing in its values of patriotism, force of character and ability to lead by example and solid hard work. One should also pay tribute to a wonderful gift of commonsense, unique then as it is now.

R. L. Cope
Sydney