

"A SINGULAR ORNAMENT IN THE UNIVERSITY"

by Neil A. Radford

2002

In 1597, when Sir Thomas Bodley offered to restore the library of Oxford University, which had been destroyed several decades earlier in a period of civil unrest and religious persecution, he told the Vice-Chancellor that he hoped that the new library "may perhaps in tyme to come, prove a notable treasure for the multitude of volumes: an excellent benefit for the use and ease of studentes: and a singular ornament in the University".

The founders of the University of Sydney, although they lacked a philanthropist like Bodley, must have had a similar aim when they began to establish a library for the colony's first university. One of the first decisions of the first Senate, even before it appointed any professors or teachers, was to devote a part of the modest funds at their disposal to the purchase of books to form the nucleus of a library.

These first books, 64 in number, were purchased from a local resident, the Rev Dr Mackaen. They were primarily dictionaries and grammars in Greek, Latin, Hebrew, Sanskrit and other languages, together with some classical authors including Aristotle, Plato and Horace. To these were soon added the library of the defunct Sydney College, described as "a small collection of books, mostly classics, some dictionaries", and a sub-committee of the Senate devoted much effort to compiling lists of desiderata which were sent to a bookseller in London.

When the foundation professors took up their chairs they, too, were pressed into service to compile lists of books necessary for their teaching, and, "after much research and labour", more lengthy lists were sent to England. A librarian was appointed in 1852 and the first steps were taken to organise the collection for use.

In the University's first three years more than one-fifth of its income had been devoted to purchasing books for the library, but after 1854 the initial enthusiasm subsided and for the next twenty years or more, appropriations of funds for the library were infrequent and insignificant. However, books continued to trickle in, mostly as gifts. In 1878 the businessman Thomas Walker purchased and presented to the University the private library of the late Nicol Stenhouse, a lawyer and leading figure in the literary and cultural life of Sydney. The 4,000 volumes of the Stenhouse collection increased the bookstock by fifty percent and precipitated a crisis in accommodation. The library had long outgrown its original home in what is now the Senate Room at the northern end of the main University building, and thousands of books were stored in the clocktower and other rooms nearby. Accommodation for the library had become the University's most pressing need.

In announcing Walker's gift to the annual ceremony of Commemoration of Benefactors, the Chancellor, Sir William Manning, appealed for "one of our men of great wealth and equal public spirit" to erect for the University "a library worthy of comparison with like edifices at Home". In his audience was Thomas Fisher, a retired bootmaker and property investor who

lived nearby. Fisher frequently walked in the University grounds and talked with staff and students, so he would have been aware that the University's greatest need was for library improvement. Although not a man of much learning himself, Fisher had known Stenhouse and would have been impressed that his friend's collection had been such an important addition to the library.

When Fisher died in 1884 it was discovered that he had made the University the residual beneficiary of his estate, specifying that the bequest should be used "in establishing and maintaining a library". The University received more than thirty thousand pounds, equivalent to several million dollars today, but it took several years to get agreement on how the Fisher Fund should be spent, and longer to persuade the State government to match the funds available by erecting a suitable building. In the end the government met the cost of erecting a building and the Fisher Fund would be preserved for the purchase of books. In fact, for several decades pressing financial problems besetting the University forced diversion of at least part of the income of the fund to pay library staff salaries but Fisher's bequest provided a real foundation on which the library's development could proceed, and stimulated an unprecedented growth in the collection, both by purchase and gift.

Substantial gifts or bequests of books have come from many sources. They include the extensive library of the first Chancellor, Sir Charles Nicholson, rich in incunabula, medieval manuscripts and archaeology; the Deane collection of Australiana, erotica and the history of science; the Dalley-Scarlett collection of music, including notable early editions of Handel; and the Graham collection of science fiction and fantasy, said to have been the best such collection in private hands in the world.

The Friends of the Library, established in 1962, regularly adds to the collections by purchasing rare materials and by encouraging interest in the library on the part of collectors and potential benefactors. Among major purchases made possible through the Friends and other endowed funds have been the Macdonald collection of 17th and 18th century literature, including many early editions of Dryden; the Stewart collection in archaeology; the Chadwick collection, one of the world's important private libraries of Celtic studies; and the Hotimsky collection of Russian literature and history.

An important factor contributing to the development of the library's collections has been its status as a copyright deposit library for New South Wales publications. The library had had this privilege since 1879 and is the only Australian university library to be designated a copyright library.

The growth of the collection, though beginning slowly, accelerated dramatically during the Librarianship of Dr Andrew Osborn (1959-62). By the end of its first century the library's collection had grown to 400,000 volumes. During Osborn's brief tenure he doubled the library's size and set it irreversibly upon the path to being a world class library, an indispensable partner in the University's teaching and research. The one-millionth volume was accessioned in 1967, 115 years after the first book had been purchased from Rev Dr Mackaen. The two-millionth volume appeared a mere nine years later, in 1976, and the three-millionth only eight years after that. The collection passed the four-million mark in the early 1990s when several colleges amalgamated with the University and their libraries became part of the University Library. The five-millionth volume has been reached, very fittingly, in the library's sesquicentenary year.

The opening of the Fisher Library in 1909 heralded a new era in library service to the University, providing for the first time adequate space for collections, staff and readers. But the inevitable growth in all three gradually brought overcrowding and inconvenience, and within half a century it was clear that the building was no longer adequate. A new library was opened in 1963 and the name Fisher Library was transferred to it, thus nicely maintaining the link with its principal benefactor. The original library reading room is now known as MacLaurin Hall after Sir Normand MacLaurin, the Chancellor at the time it was built.

For the first four decades the University's only library collection was housed in the main quadrangle. When the Law School opened in a building in downtown Sydney in the 1890s it was necessary to establish a branch library there. A second branch library was created in the new Medical School building, opened in 1933. But long before then numerous unofficial "libraries" had sprung up through the action of professors borrowing the books and periodicals most relevant to their disciplines and housing these in their departments. In time these grew to form substantial collections over which the main library had no effective control, and to which students often could not obtain ready access. It was not until the early 1960s that serious efforts were made to bring these collections under central control as official branch libraries, properly organised and administered. The University of Sydney Library now comprises the Fisher Library and [X] branch libraries.

Increasingly, with reliance on electronic technology, the physical location of a wanted piece of information becomes less relevant. The library of the twenty-first century is less a reservoir of printed materials and more an access point for information, no matter where it may reside physically and in what form. Yet the traditional form of the library survives, the great store of printed materials now joined by electronic publications, the space and facilities to consult and study them, and the availability of librarians to assist users to navigate through the mass and identify the wanted item or the most fruitful source. University staff and students routinely access information sources which may be at the University, elsewhere in Australia, or across the world. As the anarchy that is the Internet proliferates, the librarian's navigational skills become more, not less, essential and the library's services become even more closely interwoven with the University's teaching and research work. In this expanded role, of fostering access to information wherever it may be and in whatever form, the University of Sydney Library is very much "a singular ornament in the university".