

# From convict to librarian

## An investigation into the motley career of one of Australia's earliest librarians

Robert Holden

The humble beginnings in 1826 of the Australian Subscription Library – Australia's 'first substantial private subscription library to be established in this country',<sup>1</sup> form the acknowledged foundation of the State Library of New South Wales.

Operations in this fledgling library were commenced with about 1000 volumes on 1 December 1827, under the direction of the first librarian, Peter Cooke.

So much is reasonably well-known and certainly gives cause for reflection by today's librarians in that their profession has evolved from such untrained laymen. What may be cause for further thought is the little-known fact that one of our progenitors was an alumnus of the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement.

George Baxter, who served as the third librarian to the Australian Subscription Library from April 1829 to January 1832, was tried in Sydney on 15 August 1827 on a charge of having misapplied a quantity of soap and salt stated to be the property of the Crown.

On 27 August he was sentenced to seven years transportation. Being a second offender (he had earlier served a 28-year sentence for a first offence) Baxter was dispatched to the Moreton Bay Penal Settlement in the brig, the *Governor Phillip*.

But lest one suspect that Baxter was a hardened criminal for whom detention in the infamous Moreton Bay was a disciplinary necessity, it would do well to review the background of his case.

While clerk and storekeeper of the Female Factory, Sydney, Baxter sold 560 lbs of soap and 1000 lbs of salt to one Henry Harvey, supposedly in complete error and under the impression that this surplus stock was his by right.

Whatever the truth, Baxter's subsequent plight seems to have elicited considerable interest and many personal testimonials and petitions to Governor Darling indicate the esteem in which the man was held:

### FEMALE FACTORY 1/9/1827

*At the time that Sgt Baxter was appointed to the situation he has held in this Establishment, the Books and Accounts were very much in Arrears, and have (sic) been most irregularly kept; but he very soon brought them into order, and by his zeal and assiduity continued to discharge the duties of his office, to the entire satisfaction of the Managing Committee; and except in the case which has led to his conviction before the Supreme Court we have every reason to believe that he was faithful to the trust which was reposed in him.<sup>2</sup>*

This petition was signed by the Managing Committee, one of whose members was Samuel Marsden.

Obviously, friends and well-wishers continued to press Baxter's case for, on 16 March 1829, the following request was addressed to the Governor via the Colonial Secretary,

signed by F. Rossi, Chairman of the Committee of the Australian Subscription Library (and Superintendent of Police):

*At the desire of the Committee of the Australian Subscription Library held this day I have the honour to beg you will submit to His Excellency the Governor this request that His Excellency will be pleased to allow George Baxter a Prisoner of the Crown now at Moreton Bay to be assigned to their Secretary or to any other officer of the Society with a View of officiating as Librarian. This arrangement has been suggested from a belief that John (sic) Baxter will prove well qualified to fill the Situation and it has also the advantage of observing the strictest economy of the Funds of the Society . . .<sup>3</sup>*

This request would appear to be a mere formality following on a decision already vouchsafed by the Governor who was, it must be revealed, Patron of the Library, for official sanction was granted only two days later. Thereafter, on 2 April 1829, George Baxter, accompanied by his wife and child who had joined him at Moreton Bay in April 1828 left for Sydney on the *Isabella*. Later that month he took up his position with the Library and remained there until January 1832.

As a profession therefore, librarianship in Australia can claim kinship with convict forebears as well as more dignified and law-abiding figures from our past.

### References

- 1 G.D. Richardson. 'The colony's quest for a National Library'. RAHS, *Journal*, v47, 1961, p66.
- 2 Colonial Office microfilm reel A2.3/394.
- 3 Ibid. A2.3/380.

# News from the Divisions

## NSW BRANCH

### Orientation meeting for divisional executives

THE NSW Branch Council organised a special meeting for 1980 divisional executives at the University of NSW on 9 February.

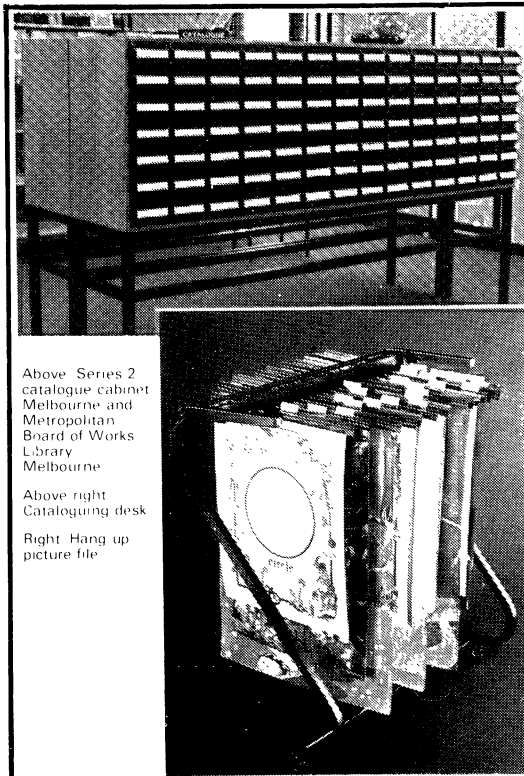
LAA Industrial Officer Brian Henderson discussed head office procedures and services, and the NSW Branch Treasurer David Butler discussed the Branch budget and divisional allocations. Divisional representatives then outlined their 1980 programs as a result of which some profitable joint ventures are being planned. All of those who attended agreed that the chance to meet other office-bearers to discuss plans and ideas is one of the chief benefits of such a meeting.

## NSW PUBLIC LIBRARIES

AT the LAA NSW Public Libraries Group AGM held on 13 February members of the 1980 committee were introduced. The committee comprises: Margaret Whittaker (President), Jill Cuthbert, Diana Revington, Grahame Sandry and R. Diracca.

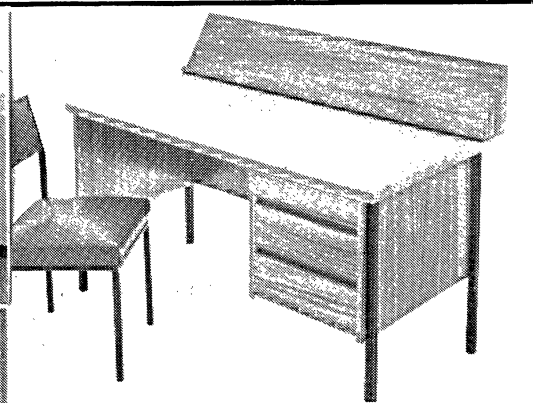
In her presidential address Ms Whittaker detailed a full and interesting program for 1980. Highlights of this program include: a weekend in Wollongong on 22-23 March (see *Incite* no2, p6 for full details); a meeting planned for 21 April at Chester Hill Branch Library, Chester Hill, when the Premier of NSW, Neville Wran, will speak on Public Library Financing: problems and possible solutions. All members are urged to attend this meeting and take the opportunity to ask Mr Wran questions about public libraries. See elsewhere this issue for more details.

Full details about activities of the Public Libraries Group for 1980 are available from Secretariat, LAA NSW Public Libraries Group, GPO Box 2959, Sydney 2001.



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