

Australia's oldest sound recording

THE OLDEST existing Australian sound recording — made in 1899 by a Tasmanian Aborigine, Mrs Fanny Cochrane Smith — has been successfully re-recorded for the National Library of Australia, after several earlier unsuccessful attempts.

Made with the assistance of the latest sound equipment, the new recording was the work of a private sound archivist, Mr Chris Long, of Launceston.

The original recording was made on 5 August 1899 by the Royal Society of Tasmania on a wax cylinder. Those present included the Bishop of Tasmania, the Rt Reverend H. H. Montgomery, a museum curator, a historian and a sub-inspector of police.

Mrs Cochrane Smith, who also claimed to be the last Tasmanian Aborigine, spoke her own language and sang Aboriginal songs. She was born at Flinders Island and in 1903 said of herself 'I am the last of the race, a Tasmanian. I'm the daughter of Tagnarootara, of the East Coast tribe . . . I'm just over 70 years of age'.

The wax cylinder recording has been kept at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery Hobart, for the past 83 years. The National Library's archivist, Mr Peter Burgis, said he thought it appropriate that Australia's oldest sound recording should have been made by an Aborigine. 'A number of recordings were made of Aborigines in the early days — by white men who . . . did not think of recording their own history in this way', Mr Burgis said.



One of the photographs taken at the time of the 1899 recording shows (left to right) the photographer, Mr J.W. Beattie, seen timing the exposure, Mr Robert M. Johnstone, government geologist, Mr Fisher, graphophone owner, Mr John Cook, police sub-inspector, Mr Alex Morton, museum curator and secretary of the Royal Society, Mrs Fanny Cochrane Smith, her nephew 'Gussie' and Mr James Backhouse Walker, Tasmanian historian. (Photo: ALLPORT & Tasmanian Museum).

Priceless books lost in bushfires

THE DEVASTATING bushfires which raged through the Adelaide Hills on Ash Wednesday, 16 February, 1983, struck with disastrous effect on St Michael's House, Crafers (on the Mt Lofty Summit), including in their path of destruction, one of the finest theological libraries in Australia. The library building was totally destroyed and not one of its 40,000 volumes spared.

The historic and architecturally important buildings were bought by the Bakewell family in 1879 and extensively added to in 1880, 1895 and 1902. The property was taken over by the Society of the Sacred Mission in 1946 and further extended in 1959 and 1967. The latest of these additions, the refectory, was the only building to survive the disaster. Curiously, it was from this building that the residents had fled when the fire first descended upon the idyllic hills retreat. All seven residents (including two guests) escaped with nothing worse than minor burns, although their final dash to safety (after 40 minutes of being trapped inside the building) led them past a flaming staircase.

The books and periodicals destroyed included some that were unique and priceless. The library had contained an exceptional collection of rare books, including 243 volumes (140 titles) of pre-1801 imprints. (Records of these items have been preserved in the Early Imprints Project of SA.) In addition, there was a collection, unique in Australia, of books on the religious and monastic life, personal piety and prayer; (some 2,500 books, many of them irreplaceable), sermons (some 800 volumes) and some rare Australiana. The two thousand biographies included the stories of Anglican and other church divines and missionaries, as well as many first edition works of early Australian colonists, missionaries and explorers and books of Australian songs and ballads. Politics and economics were also strongly represented.

The oldest books were a work of Erasmus (1512), a Roman missal (1512), a volume of Lucretius (1515), and a work of George Agricola (1533). There were two Geneva ('Breeches') Bibles (1600), one of which had come from Lord Nelson's Flagship.

This magnificent collection, which included many other irreplaceable books, was established and largely built up by Anthony Snell. Its commercial value would have been about a quarter of a million dollars, but its real value was in the information contained in the volumes destroyed.

The above is part of a report from Trevor Zweck, Chairman of the Association of Theological Libraries (SA). Donations towards the rebuilding of the library may be sent to the Society of the Sacred Mission, c/- The Prior, St John's Priory, 14 St John's Street, Adelaide SA 5000.

School libraries —

The National Book Council is conducting an appeal to assist in the restoration of the school libraries in Victoria and South Australia destroyed during the bush fires.

Cash donations and books should be sent to Stewart Edwards, Executive Director, National Book Council, Book House, 199 Cardigan Street, Carlton, Vic 3053.

1983 membership fees are now overdue!