# YESTERDAY'S NEWSPAPERS
## by Robin Robertson

'Yes,' the librarian assured me on the phone, 'we hold copies of 1930s newspapers. You're welcome to come and read them any time we're open'. So, I did. I was writing an article about the 1930s, and I had to search through the newspapers of that time.

This was not my first visit to the State Library of NSW. I'd spent many a wet afternoon

Inside the rabbit hole was a small room. The ceiling was ordinary mortals' height which, I suppose, is as high as you can aspire when you read old newspapers.

Around the room were tables, chairs, microfilm readers, but no newspapers. They were falling to pieces, and could no longer stand the rigours of being read. After all, newspapers

those with a sign on them, saying: 'Out of Order'.

I had to get up early to read old newspapers. By 10 a.m., all the readers were occupied, sometimes for two, three, four hours.

When a reader was finally available, a kindly librarian threaded the microfilm on to it, and showed me how to wind it on. When I had my first test run, I turned the handle the wrong way, and instantly unthreaded it. Keeping his thoughts strictly to himself, the librarian rethreaded it, then left the room. I was on my own.
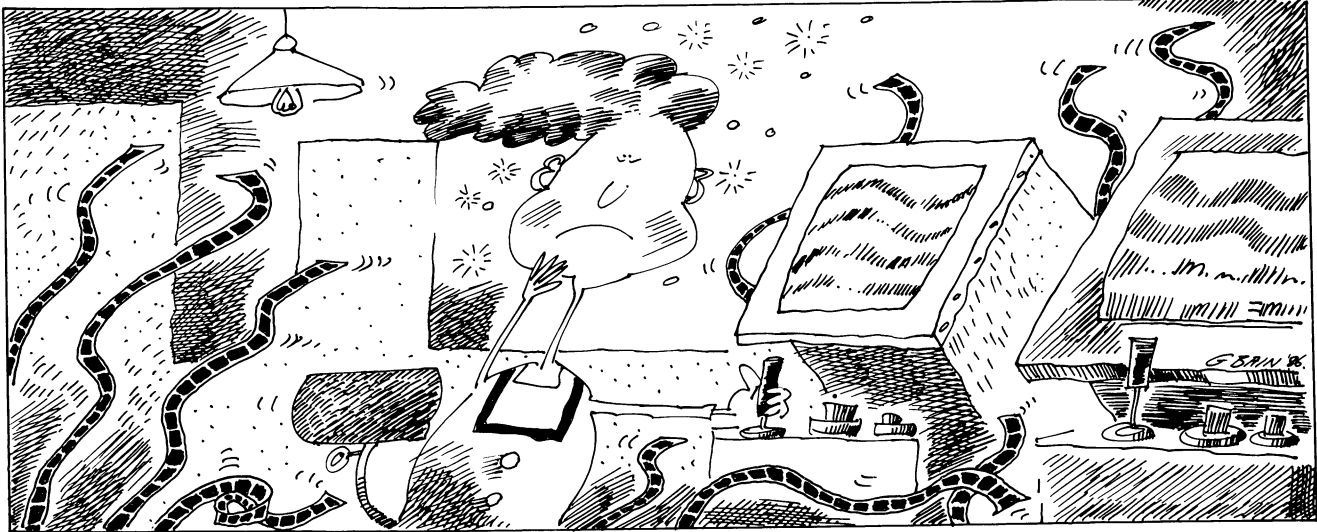


in there, awestruck by its immensity. To be able to touch the ceiling of the main library room, I'd have to be six storeys tall. The walls, also six storeys high, were lined with row upon row of books. I felt like Alice through the Looking Glass, when she suddenly shrank — and she couldn't be full size again until she'd read every book on the shelves.

Fortunately, there were many other shrunken Alices in the library, and I asked one behind a desk where she kept the old newspapers. I was disappointed to learn they weren't kept in that wonderful room. They were through that door there, and she pointed to a rabbit hole in the wall.

were only meant to last a day. So, they had been retired, very gently . . . but not before they had spawned a whole tribe of microfilms. Every page of every newspaper had been photographed, joined on to a long film strip and wound on to a reel.

Each microfilm was given its own small cardboard box, labelled and stored, in date order, along the shelves around the walls. To read one, I needed a microfilm reader. I couldn't stand at the shelves and browse.

I chose two boxes from the 1930s, then looked around the room for a reader. There were about twenty, and of these, there were two kinds . . . those already being used, and

The newspaper page was displayed on a screen thrust forward at face level. Below it, the film ran from reel to reel, and I could wind it forward or backward with a little handle. The machine magnified the newspaper page to its full size which, of course, was too big for the screen. I could only display half the page, and to see the other half, I had to push a little joystick.

These controls were under the screen, and when I was holding them, I was too close to read the print. Not that my arms are THAT short, or my sight SO long. But to focus on the screen, I had to release the controls, and push back my chair until the print unblurred.

And that was how I read the microfilm for an hour or three — I wound on the reel, pushed back my chair, read the top half of a newspaper column, lunged forward, flicked the joystick to display the bottom half of the page, leaned back, read on, leaned forward again . . . cha cha cha.

Then another reader became vacant. It looked more co-operative, so I transferred my microfilm on to it. It was a kind of overhead projector, only it pointed downwards. The microfilm was threaded across the top, and if I stood on my toes, I could just see what I was doing. The picture was projected on to a flat surface, more or less parallel to the table top, and tilted slightly towards me when I sat in front of it.

It was big enough to display a whole newspaper page at one time, and I would have rejoiced in this if it had been in focus as well. One part of the page was always blurred — the top, middle or bottom. To read one page, I had to partially stand, stretch up to the lens, and refocus several times.

The winding mechanism was at the side, in reach of my hand when I rested my elbow on the desk. As I turned the handle, slowly enough for me to read the passing headlines, the pages billowed over the screen in a gentle swaying motion. I got seasick.

I noted the pages I had to photostat. I wound the film off the machine, and joined the queue for the machine which photostats microfilms. There were three of these, and two were out of order . . .

## POLITICIANS ONLINE

The Australian Political Register (APOL) which was released on Ausinet in February, is the first directory of local politicians availabe online in Australia.

Both the database producer (Australian Consolidated Press) and the vendor (ACI computer Services), believes it will meet a big need in Australian libraries.

APOL will provide details of :
- all Federal and State politicians (with short biographies of all Ministers)
- Upper and Lower Houses in the Federal and each State Parliament
- all State and Federal ministries, plus the shadow ministries for the main opposition party in each case
- the officials of any political party which has at least one member elected to an Australian parliament
- the heads of all diplomatic delegations to Australia
- Australian diplomats abroad

With time the Register will grow to include people who have held political office in Australia but who do not currently do so. For instance, when Bill Hartley was expelled from the Victorian ALP in February, he was not similarly booted out of APOL. Just amended . . .

In the coming months APOL will be expanded to include government departments and ministerial staff. Further expansions in other areas are planned.

APOL should be particularly useful to anyone in the political field, in media, in marketing, libraries, researchers, academics and lobbyists, and companies and individuals who ever have need to contact government or politicians.

It is the second database produced by Australian Consolidated Press to be released on AUSINET. The full-text of Australian Business (AUSB) went up in September last year. The full-text of economic and political articles from *The Bulletin* will be ready for release later this year.

APOL is true electronic publishing. It exists only as an electronic database with no printed version. It is AUSINET's 44th database, joining a stable of economic, financial and business-oriented databases. 'APOL further enhances the usefulness of Australia's very own public access database service,' said Mark Wilson, of ACI Computer Services.

To access APOL you need to be an Ausinet subscriber (contact ACI Computer Services in your capital city, or in Melbourne on (03) 544 8433). If you would like to know any more about APOL contact Nicholas Hay at Australian Consolidated Press (02) 268 0666.

A User Clinic will be held in Sydney on Thursday April 30, at 3pm at ACI Computer Services, 1st Floor, 99 Alexander St, Crows Nest. If you're interested in attending ring Amanda Russell on (02) 437 6322, or just turn up.

*Sue Wannan (ACP)*