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PEOPLE, PRINT AND PAPER



The National Library's major Bicentennial exhibition 'People, Print and Paper: A Celebration of the Books of Australia 1788 - 1988' opened recently. Four hundred books have been chosen from the Library's 4 million strong collection with a few added gems (such as the first book published in Australia, *Standing Orders of 1802*) coming from the Mitchell Library and other collections. The exhibition's curator, Michael Richards, sees it as a celebration of the 'power, the beauty and the companionship of books'.

The Exhibition looks at the art of printing and publishing - the works of Louisa Lawson, Henry Lawson's mother, who started *The Dawn*, Australia's first women's magazine, and that of Percy Neville are on display. In the Arts Press section works by

Norman Lindsay, Margaret Preston, Frederick McCubbin and Donald Friend are featured as well as the magical fairy paintings of Ida Rentoul Outhwaite. The Exhibition also includes a section devoted to books by and about Australian Aborigines.

Production processes and new 'book' formats appear cheek by jowl with the inclusion of a working printing press and CD-ROM technology. Aspiring writers can take advantage of the 'Publishers' Wall' and listen to the advice of some of Australia's leading publishers while a special showcase allows for the public's favourite titles to be displayed on request.

'People, Print and Paper' is open from 9.00 to 4.45pm at the National Library and runs until the end of August. It is likely that the Exhibition will travel to other states.

land and of its exceptional flora and fauna and remarkable indigenous that dominate the collection brought together in this important Exhibition.

John Milton, whose words open the catalogue of the Exhibition, once declared that: 'A good book is the life blood of a master spirit - embalmed and treasured up to a life beyond life.'

This is a collection of the good books of some of the master spirits who have enlivened the soul of Australia during the last 200 years. What does it matter if we have the biggest flag pole in the world, but have no soul? What does it matter if we enjoy a high standard of material life but surround ourselves with a crass, imitative and derivative culture? Surely after 200 years we could boast of more than this.

Well, this Exhibition allows the observer - the jury of local and visiting examiners - to scrutinise the works of the master spirits of Australia. They are not all here. Necessarily, the medium being books, the great spirits of the Aboriginal people who preceded us are not fully represented. Nor are there here those private spirits of family and loved ones, unsung in history, but vital in the development of the inner being of every one of us. Nor are the notes of music captured or the daubs of paint, the drawing of great buildings or the flights of an advocate's fancy before an open mouthed and captive court. These words either perish or must be found elsewhere. Yet the sample is representative. It stretches back to the First Fleet. It takes us up to our own time. A thoughtful reflection upon the books collected here will evoke the proper response to the Bicentenary - a mixture of pride and shame; of disappointment and yet of hope.

Land of contrast

The Exhibition will demonstrate the many paradoxes of Australia. Paradoxes were inevitable in the very notion of founding a colony transplanted from the windswept islands to the north of Europe to the perimeter of a great desert land on the opposite side of the globe. As the catalogue points out, we have more records of the doings of the First Fleet and of the early explorers - many represented here - than we have an understanding of what actually motivated the sending out of those lonely vessels. Of course, the externalities are known. The loss of the American plantations. The overcrowded prisons. Cook's reports. The fears of French expansionism.

We also know that from the start we were second best - Australia being the second choice after West Africa was abandoned. I suppose some early Humphrey Appleby is really responsible for us being here tonight.

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BOOKS IN A LAND OF PARADOX

This is the title of the entertaining and informed speech given by The Hon Justice Michael Kirby, CMG* at the official opening of the Exhibition. This speech is reproduced below.

First Fleet - first books

The Chief Justice of New Zealand opened his recent judgement on the attempts to suppress the book *Spycatcher* by Peter Wright with the comment that it was 'probably the most litigated book in all of history'. That may be correct; although I suspect that the Bible may yet have a slight edge.

The Bible was probably the first book carried from the ships of the First Fleet when they anchored in Sydney Cove in January 1788. From reading the catalogue which accompanies this Exhibition, I get the impression that the Rev Richard Johnson - sent to his country by an organisation with the engaging name of the Eclectic Society - was rather like those annoying people who nowadays clamber aboard a jumbo jet struggling remorselessly on with the entirety of their worldly possessions.

Johnson was just such a man. He carried with him no less than 100 Bibles, 350 New Testaments, 500 Psalters, 100 Prayer Books and 200 Catechisms - all made available to him by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Amongst his most precious possessions were twelve copies of Bishop Thomas Wilson's *An Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians*. Sadly, guns and hangings all too soon quickly replaced words and books in the relationship between the newcomers and the indigenous inhabitants of the Great South Land.

Many of Johnson's books were lost when his church was burnt down in 1793. However, his King James Bible survived. I was present a

few weeks ago, in St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, on the 200th anniversary of the first Christian service, when that Bible was brought out and its familiar, comfortable words were read in a service of reconciliation and remembrance.

In his first sermon, happily recorded, Richard Johnson spoke to the entire assembled colony of the First Fleet. Even Mr Christopher Skase with his ever burgeoning network, could never hope to reach 100 percent of the literate population of the Australian continent, as Johnson did that day. Johnson's message was remarkable for such a time. 'I speak to you,' he said 'not as Anglicans; nor as Baptists. Not as Roman Catholics, nor Methodists. Not as Jews, nor as Gentiles. But as mortals; and yet immortals.'

It is one of the tragedies of Australia - recorded in the books that trace our history in this Exhibition - that Richard Johnson's unseasonable spirit of ecumenicism and reconciliatory harmonism faded away as his flock scurried from his sermon to their arduous tasks. Perhaps the sun was just too strong. Perhaps anger at the clearing of the bullock tracks fostered intemperance. Perhaps, as Sir Mark Oliphant once suggested, the genetic pool of the founding guards and convicts doomed us inescapably to a discouraging start. Whatever the reason, the history of Australia after the arrival and the first sermon was all too often the opposite of the message of love contained in the 350 New Testaments carried by the Reverend Richard.

And yet Johnson's assertion of immortality suggested, from the start, that even in trying, rustic and seemingly daunting circumstances, the new settlers (or some of them) lifted their sights from the necessities of worldliness to the world of the spirit. It is this world - of poetry, of history, of descriptions of the new

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There was the usual talk up and down Whitehall. There were the interminable meetings of interdepartmental committees, rounded always with the finest sherry. Doubtless, there were the politicians incessantly calling for more law and order. And the judges, reaching for their nosegays to fend off the odours of the courtroom, sentencing more and more to hanging and to prison. It was then, no doubt, that Sir Humphrey dealt his trump card. New South Wales it was. The ships were packed off with their human cargo and the 300 Bibles. Sir Humphrey could turn to other, more pressing things. So are the great decisions made in Canberra. So they were made in Whitehall in 1787.

Just imagine the depressing prospect, if you were a person of books, stepping into the mud at Farm Cove in Sydney 200 years ago. The Bible is a treasure house. So is the Prayer Book. But the inquisitive spirit seeks other literature, poetry, adventure and science beyond those pages.

There were no printing presses for the publication of books. The hand written journals became the early record of our history. Many of those famous books are collected here. Blaxland's journal; Oxley's journal; the records of Hovell and Hume and the other explorers who slowly and with pain opened up the continent. These records were soon in great demand in England and Europe. They began a tradition of books on the exotic and unique features of this continent which continues today. The books of the birds by Lewin and Gould gave way in due course to the descriptive books, such as those of Ion Idriess with his vivid tales of the Inland.

A number of themes run through the collection displayed here. The first is the overwhelming influence of, and resistance to, the Englishness of early Australia. For much more than a century, there was very little multiculturalism here. When John O'Grady wrote *They're a Weird Mob* in 1957, he tried to look at Australia through the eyes of Nino Culotta. He and other pensmiths pushed an often inward looking, even xenophobic, nation towards the ideal of diversity and respect for difference.

From the start there was the paradoxical relationship of transplanted language, culture and values living beside a stream of nationalism and even republicanism which accompanied the many loyal books such as the *Empire*

Annual for Girls.

Overwhelmingly the authors of the early days were men. And yet, there are books here that demonstrate that we were early participants in the great movement of feminism. Some of our finest authors, who are featured here, were women. But few can be seen in the earliest days. The comment is made that James Charles Bancks, who devised Ginger Meggs, portrayed the 'safe middle class familiar world' of Australia in the 1930's and 40's — a world that knew little of multiculturalism and nothing of the women's movement. Both tides were still to come.

Much of the early material is prose description of the remarkable new land. This should not surprise us. A voyage to Australia was the then equivalent of interplanetary travel — the human mind thirsting after adventure and the opening up of new knowledge.

A thoughtful reflection upon the books collected here will evoke the proper response to the Bicentenary — a mixture of pride and shame; of disappointment and yet of hope.

But even in the earliest time there were poets. Remarkably enough, one of them was Baron Field whose book in 1819 *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* started the tradition that led on to Henry Lawson, A. B. Patterson, Mary Gilmore, Christopher Brennan and Judith Wright — all exhibited here. Field was not only remarkable for his very early publication. It was the more remarkable because he was a judge — sadly wordsmiths rarely given to lyrical poetry.

I have said that the early Aboriginals left no books. And some of the early books here talk of them in terms which now appear dated and prejudiced. But we also see the evidence of 'black voices': the descriptive works; the novels and ultimately black Australians speaking for themselves.

We are called a tolerant, easy going 'she'll be right, mate' society. Yet there are books here which show the harsh actuality of stereotyping prejudice and of censorship which was a feature of publication in colonial

and much later times. Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory* is here — a book courageous because published during the rising hysteria of anti-communism that threatened our liberties 30 years ago. We should remember that time.

Here too is the paradox of a country whose originality and spirit can so often be found in the bush, where May Gibbs discovered it with *Snugglypot and Cuddlepig*; yet a metropolitan land of a few big cities clinging to the coast around the great inland lake which turned out to be a desert.

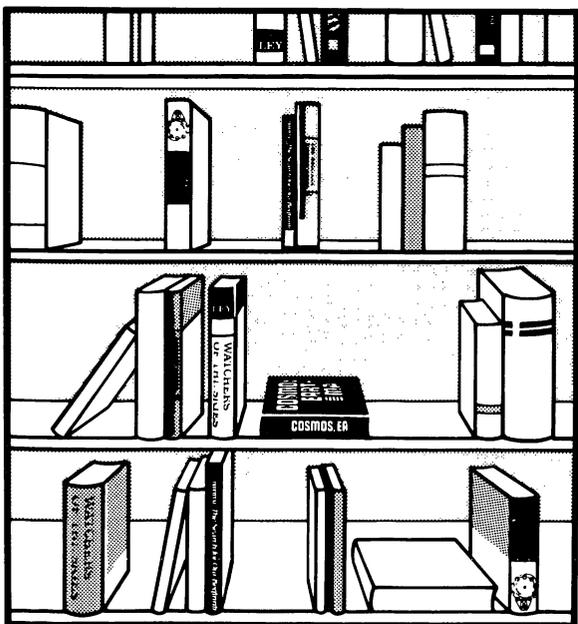
And amidst all the banality, prejudice and derivative culture is the redeeming spirit of Australian egalitarianism. This was described in 1951 by Shakuntala Paranjpye — the daughter of the first Indian High Commissioner in Canberra. She found white Australian prejudice and indifference to the Aboriginals suffocating. Only our informal egalitarianism, in contrast to the 'class ridden attitudes of the old world', partially redeemed us. May it continue to do so.

The National Library has put this record of our past together with great sensitivity. Inevitably, it is but a tiny part of its marvellous collection. It will eventually go on tour, bringing this microcosm of Australian history, moods and spirit to a wider national audience. It is appropriate that a country whose history has accompanied the popular development of print, should celebrate its Bicentenary in this way.

I acknowledge the work of the curator of the Exhibition, Michael Richards, who also wrote the most interesting catalogue. His sensitivity to Aboriginal Australia has been a healthy corrective to some of our earlier failings. If the Bicentenary means anything lasting, its lesson lies in the need to establish a new relationship between all people of this land. Until we have righted past wrongs, we cannot claim the title of a civilised people.

Ingrid Slamer designed the Exhibition. She brings the flair and imagination of multicultural Australia to delight us in its presentation. The Exhibition co-ordinator, Harry McCarthy and the very large number of other staff worked beyond the normal call of duty. The Director General, Warren Horton, gave the same efficient support to the Exhibition as I remember, nearly a century ago, when we were both young and when he responded to my insufferable demands at the State Library

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The more things change, the more they stay the same

— Elizabeth Bunker reports

In the old days, when printing was first invented, books were expensive and heavy, and needed careful looking after lest they were stolen, or eaten by rats, or spoiled by water or fire, or simply mislaid. Today things are very different in many ways, but books (and now a vast range of other materials) are still expensive, heavy, and need careful looking after lest they are stolen, mislaid or spoiled. What has changed is the productivity required of the librarian, who is now expected to be able to catalogue books, move books around, shelve books, and look after books with a previously unheard of speed and efficiency, while at the same time working under the stress of being without privacy in an open-plan area.

Of course, this is all achieved by the use of computers, which make so many previously boring jobs effortless. Unfortunately, this is not so. The computer has not made books any less heavy and computer programs can be user 'unfriendly'. The computer is incapable of keeping an eye on valuable books, and unable to find mis-shelved books. Their use does mean, however, that librarians now have the additional task of making sure that information is fed, accurately and efficiently, into the system.

What can be done to make this situation better? Well, there is ergonomics — the science of designing work practices, places and equipment so that people can use them effectively.

I have recently had the opportunity to work with the library staff of some large academic institutions, to address some of these problems. Take, for example, the work of preparing newly purchased books for the shelves. Heavy books being held in awkward positions will at the very least cause back ache, while trying to operate a computer at the same time will add eye strain and neck problems. Ergonomists can help. The redesign of a work-

table or desk can enable a librarian to do all the things that have to be done in a librarian's day without heaving books about at arm's length, without peering at computer screens at odd angles, without twisting sideways, in short, comfortably and efficiently.

You will by now be saying 'What is it that enables an ergonomist to do all these wonderful things?' 'What kind of expert is an ergonomist?' Well, an ergonomist is certainly knowledgeable about a great many things to do with posture, lighting, muscle strain . . . and has expertise in engineering, physics, systems design, psychology, perception and stress management. In addition an ergonomist has the input of the people who actually do a job. They know most about it, and thus the ergonomist likes to tackle a job, such as the design of a desk for a library cataloguer, in consultation with the library staff who will use that desk. A mock-up will be made of the desk and the ergonomist will then watch, film, measure people using it, all the time refining the desk until it is right.

As part of my work with the National Safety Council, I have recently been able to follow this process through to the state where a desk, of registered design, is now commercially available. But of course, the desk is only part of the process, and an ergonomist would not dream of looking at just one part of the process in isolation: books have to arrive at the desk, be worked on, and then go elsewhere. Ergonomists can help with sorting out these processes, too. The layout of lending services areas has recently been addressed so that tasks performed can be done more efficiently and with less pressure on staff.

Perhaps before you spend millions of dollars on a new library building, or even thousands of dollars on extensions, or re-modelling, why not call in an ergonomist, not to design the building, but to help you decide what to tell the architect that you want to be able to do in the building, so as to make the whole working environment 'user friendly'. For more information please don't hesitate to contact me c/- National Safety Council of Australia (Qld Division), PO Box 133, Fortitude Valley, (07) 252 8977.

Elizabeth Bunker

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in Sydney. And the Chairman, Morris West lent his benign but active support to the whole enterprise. He is a distinguished and generous Australian author whose passion for ideas and for our country has been mobilised to great national use in this Library. As a citizen, I pay tribute to him and thank him.

To the Minister [Minister for Arts and Territories, Mr Gary Punch] I say: You have in your portfolio — and thereby in your temporary trust — a precious jewel of Australia: the National Library. These are hard times for libraries with the declining dollar and rapidly changing technology. Yet if a great disaster befell humanity and Parliament House was finally covered over entirely by the earth, and the High Court sank by its own weight into the lake, a future civilisation might stumble over this great Library. If they found just a few of the books in this collection they would say that here was a people who made many mistakes but occasionally turned from crass worldly pursuits, of football and circuses, to the world of the spirit.

Minister, it is a great privilege for an elected representative of the people of Australia to have in his charge this precious institution. It is an institution worth defending and supporting. And if you are in doubt, look about you in this Exhibition. As it was said of Christopher Wren, and is recorded on his tomb: 'Si monumentum requiris, circumspice' (If you really want our monument — look around).

**Justice Kirby is President of the Court of Appeal, Supreme Court, Sydney and Chancellor of Macquarie University. Formerly he was a member of the Library Council of New South Wales. The views stated are personal.*



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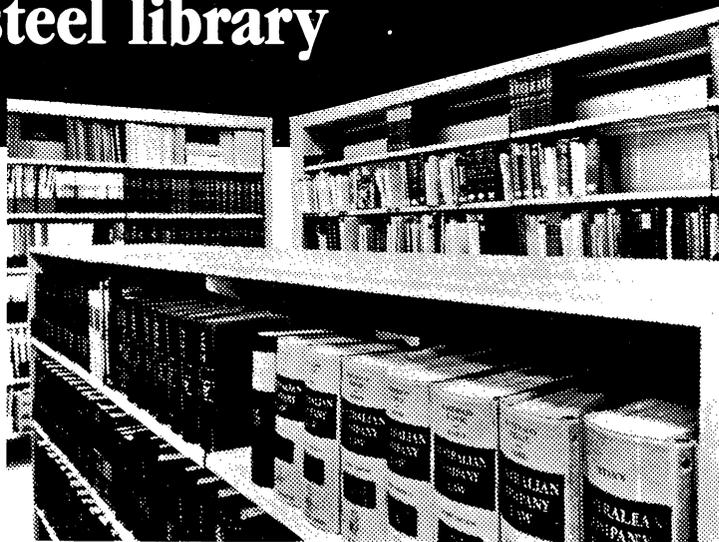
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