

## The Centre for the Book, Monash University

Monash University's Centre for the Book was reshaped in 1998 within what has become the School of English, Communications and Performance Studies. Before that, from 1981 to 1997, it was an autonomous unit called the Centre for Bibliographical and Textual Studies functioning in the Faculty of Arts. The new name makes clear the Centre's aim to cover all aspects of the history of manuscript and printed books: authorship, production, publishing, distribution and reading. Apart from editors of texts from antiquity to the present day and compilers of descriptive bibliographies, the Centre caters for all students of the material heritage of our means of communication through the written and printed word.

At present the Centre does not offer any programs leading to formal academic degrees, but people associated with it do supervise MAs and PhDs on appropriate topics registered with the School of English. A wider audience is sought through occasional seminars – some of them in the framework of the Melbourne Bibliographical Circle, co-sponsored by the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand and run at the State Library of Victoria. Otherwise the Centre reaches out via conferences (normally organized in conjunction with other bodies), extramural courses and various publications.

In addition to involvement in Melbourne conferences of the Bibliographical Society of Australia and New Zealand, the Centre took the leading role in an international colloquium on "Centre and Periphery in the World of the Book, 1500–2000" held in 2001 at Monash University's study centre at Prato near Florence in Italy. The proceedings (published by Olschki) are due out in a few months' time. In 2009 the Centre is joining with Mechanics' Institutes of Victoria Inc. to hold the next seminar on Australian library history at the Prahran campus of Swinburne University.

The main vehicle for the Centre's extramural teaching is the Australia and New Zealand Rare Book Summer School. The series began at Dunedin in 2005, then came to Melbourne in 2006 and again in 2008. The next Melbourne session will be held in February 2010. Arranged in close collaboration with the State Library of Victoria, the Rare Book School proposes an intensive week of tuition on one aspect (chosen from a menu of four) of bibliography or book history. The subjects treated in Melbourne by local or overseas specialists have included binding, lithography, medieval manuscripts, physical bibliography, Australian and Canadian nineteenth-century book history, and book collecting. This indicates clearly that the Centre, while putting a certain emphasis on Australian matters, has an international scope. It is possible that courses for locals spread over a longer time will be put on in future. The week-long formula is obviously more practical for people coming from other parts of Australia and from New Zealand.

Publishing pamphlets and monographs is a very important part of the Centre's activities, but it is limited by modest resources (a day and a half of paid assistance supported by the

Chaskett Fund of the Melbourne Community Foundation). A major recent effort was *The Commonwealth of Books: Essays and Studies in Honour of Ian Willison* (2007), but more usually the Centre issues pamphlets and smaller volumes like the "Naturae" series devoted to "the history, literature, biography, bibliophily, and fine art of natural history", the annual Foxcroft lectures on bibliography and book history of the State Library of Victoria, and a collection on "immigrant communities of writers and readers in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries". Overall the purpose is to work in tandem with other bodies with related concerns.

The Centre is conscious that, with a serious national diminution of teaching efforts in the book-history, bibliography and rare-book areas, it must offer possibilities of instruction and interchange to Australia as a whole.

Further information can be found <http://www.arts.monash.edu.au/cftb>

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## The La Trobe Rare Book Collection

Australia was luckier than most national literatures in having much of the pioneering work done on its bibliography by John Ferguson. His seven-volume *Bibliography of Australia*, published by Angus and Robertson, remains the single most important reference tool for the study of Australian rare books.<sup>1</sup> Equally important in raising the standards of bibliographic description have been the activities of antiquarian bookdealers, both Australian and overseas; their many published catalogues serve both as a significant reference source for the study of Australian rare books as well as an indicator of current and future market trends.

So what is an Australian rare book, or any rare book for that matter?

From the point of view of the La Trobe collection, a number of criteria come into play: date of publication, edition statement, fine production or binding, market value, notable illustrations or plates, variant copies, association copies, significant first editions, to name a few. In many cases, one or more of these criteria may be present, and The State Library of Victoria's *Selection Policy* for Australiana rounds off this definition in stating that the La Trobe Rare Books collection includes titles whose content relates to Australia, or titles published in Australia, regardless of content.<sup>2</sup>

The La Trobe Rare Books collection consists of four separate but interrelated collections: the Currie collection, the Buesst collection, the Moir collection and the main collection.

The Currie collection consists of approximately eight hundred books, primarily nineteenth-century material, and includes many important accounts of voyages and travels. The majority of items in the collection are to be found in their original state of issue, being in original boards, cloth or wrappers, with uncut pages, as distinct from so many State Library of Victoria books which were recased in standard Library binding at the time of purchase.