

# REMARKABLE OCCURENCES

## THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA'S FIRST 100 YEARS 1901-2001

BOOK REVIEW  
BY RALPH ELLIOTT



**The National Library of Australia**, with a Henry Moore sculpture in the foreground. Photo reproduced by permission of Canberra Tourism & Events Corporation.

Etymologically, a 'library' is a bookseller's shop; for Chaucer it was a place "in which I put bookes"; today it is a building or room containing collections of books, periodicals, and sometimes films and recorded music'. But for Joan Kerr in her chapter on 'Strange Objects' in this elegant book, the National Library of Australia contains "a rich treasure trove of three-dimensional objects", including a nineteenth-century copper kettle, Sir Robert Menzies' uniform as Lord Warden of the Cinque Ports, 'boring' inkstands used 100 years ago by the Department of Foreign Affairs, and a death mask of Vance Palmer with a chipped nose.

Such objects occasionally formed part of collections sold or given to the National Library, and several chapters are devoted to these. Nicholas Thomas gives an admirable

account of the remarkable literary and pictorial archive of the New Zealand-born art dealer and collector Rex Nan Kivell, which is one of the Library's most prized possessions. John Ferguson and Edward Augustus Petherick, very different characters, as Graeme Powell avers, collected invaluable Australiana, including the first printed book on 'Terra Australis'. But it is James Cook's 'Endeavour Journal', the Library's MS 1, which, "in number and in sentiment, is the foundation document of the National Library of Australia", as Greg Denning proclaims in his lively opening chapter.

Starting life in 1901 as the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library with one Remington typewriter, the National Library became an independent statutory authority in 1968, but already in 1902 books relating 'in

any way' to Australia were being acquired. It was the start of a century of diligent pursuit of manuscripts, papers, letters, books, maps, pictures, on behalf of the steadily maturing institution we cherish today.

Peter Cochrane, editor of this book, tells of the Library 'Becoming National'. By 1928 it possessed two typewriters and one of its renowned founding fathers, Kenneth Binns, called it the 'National Library' and managed to obtain special grants from Parliament to purchase not only Cook's 'Endeavour Journal' but the Ellis Rowan paintings of flowers and birds and the Hardy Wilson collection of Old Colonial architectural drawings — all for £13,000. Tim Bonyhady devotes his chapter to these collections, accompanied, as indeed is the whole book, with some superb illustrations, although the aureate captions are rather hard to read.

There is one name that crops up irrepressibly throughout this fascinating history, that of Harold White, one of the famed Seven Dwarfs of Canberra, whom John Thompson aptly describes as "when roused, this diminutive man was unstoppable". I can myself testify to being cornered on quite a few occasions at his hospitable Red Hill home, while Harold expounded on his vision for his Library and his insistent methods of achieving it.

White's pertinacious pursuit of the Vance and Nettie Palmer papers is a typical example, as well as what remained of Katharine Susannah Prichard's papers after the tantalising burning of so many others, reminding Thompson of that other ritual burning of his papers by the aged Thomas Hardy in his garden at Max Gate in 1919. John Thompson, himself for twenty years a senior member of the Library staff, also mentions Harold White's wife Elizabeth, his staunch supporter in all his tireless endeavours on behalf of the National Library. She, too, deserves to be affectionately remembered.

White succeeded Kenneth Binns in 1947 as National Librarian, as he styled himself, although this fitting title was regrettably changed to Director-General. He took a par-

ticular interest in politicians and, as Stuart McIntyre writes in his excellent chapter 'The Library and the Political Life of the Nation', White's "epistolary courtship" of politicians, active or retired, "was constant and insistent". There were of course other claimants, like the National Archives, just as other items coveted by the Library found their way to other institutions in Canberra. Thus ScreenSound Australia, the former National Film and Sound Archive, now houses the classic 1919 film 'The Sentimental Bloke', whose rescue by the Library's Film Division is traced by Peter Cochrane with appropriate photographs.

For too long the Library's accumulating treasures were stored haphazardly in most unlikely places: boxes in a grain store at the railway station, films in the nurses' quarters at the old hospital premises on the site of the Australian National University, with serials stored in the morgue, and other items in the old laundry. Eventually the splendid building by Lake Burley Griffin, strikingly photographed by Damian McDonald, was built and ceremoniously opened.

Along with his contemporaries Cliff Burmester and Courtenay Key, Harold White busily promoted the development of stronger Asian collections in the Library, as David Walker narrates. White himself visited librarians and scholars in various Asian centres and persuaded Sydney Wang at Taipei to join the National Library, which he did in 1964. While some scholars regretted the Library's move from the traditional European and American cultural heritage towards Asia, the opportunity to build a world-class Asian Collection proved irresistible, not least with such acquisitions as the Yetts Chinese collection and the Luce collection dealing largely with Burma.

One of the Library's major undertakings is 'The Oral History Collection', another of Harold White's brainchildren, established in 1970, which, as Barry York writes, is now a 34,000-hour sound collection, including the pioneering recordings made by the intrepid Hazel de Berg on her ancient metal and bakelite tape recorder, one of Joan Kerr's 'Strange

Objects'. The Collection includes music, folklore recordings, as well as interviews with Australians from all walks of life, conducted by a select group of interviewers like Terry Colhoun, formerly of the ABC, of whose interlocutory skills I was made personally aware. The Library's 'Bringing Them Home' oral history project, designed to collect and preserve a range of stories from Indigenous Australians and others involved in the process of child removal, has so far recorded interviews with more than 200 individuals. It is scheduled to be completed in 2002.

It remains to mention other aspects of White's design to systematically collect and preserve 'material of all kinds illustrating the life and development of the Australian people', as described in this book. Hence the well-researched and illustrated chapters by Helen Ennis on the Photographic Collection and by Robyn Holmes on 'Musical Dialogues', with its tributes to the well-known music critic and antiquarian bookseller Kenneth Hince and the distinguished musicologist Andrew McCredie. Suzanne Rickard writes on the Map Collection, which includes a 1535 edition of Ptolemy's *Geographia*, with its suggested existence of Australia as 'Terra Incognita', as well as a lively account of the

legendary Daisy Bates mapping Aboriginal places in situ from the Nullabor Plain to the Kimberley, maps now being used in connection with Aboriginal land claims. By the end of the twentieth century the National Library of Australia possessed over 600,000 maps, 2500 atlases, and over 800,000 aerial photographs.

In the final chapter, 'The Network and the Nation', Paul Turnbull looks at the National Library's increasing reliance on new technology. This development, closely watched by interested and sometimes highly critical observers, has not been without hiccups. But the fine achievement of the Library's many distinguished and devoted directors and staff, and its active body of Friends, live on, and the reader closes this book confident that under its present Director-General, Jan Fullerton, the vision of that young cadet cataloguer of 1923, Harold White, will remain alive and fruitful as the National Library of Australia enters upon its Second Century.

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