

REMARKABLE OCCURRENCES: The National Library of Australia's First 100 Years: 1901–2001

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Even before the first Commonwealth Parliament had met, Edmund Barton's cabinet was considering library services for the federal government. At a cabinet meeting on 13 April 1901 a decision was taken that a parliamentary library and a federal public library be created. In August of that year Barton was proposing that a library similar to the United States Library of Congress be established. In 1907 the Commonwealth Parliament's Library Committee further developed the goal of a national library in the Australian capital, created and operated by the Federal Parliament.

Establishment of the National Library, although it is now no longer a creature of the Parliament, is one of the themes examined in *Remarkable Occurrences*, a collection of essays celebrating the first 100 years of the National Library of Australia.

It is in no way a formal history of the institution; rather the book is a selection of snapshots, examining the origins and scope of major elements of the National Library's collections: these include an icon (Cook's Journal), the Hardy Wilson collection of architectural drawings, Raymond Longford's film *The Sentimental Bloke*, the Rex Nan Kivell Pacific collection, the Asian Collections, the Library's Oral History and Photographic collections. The important contributions to the Library's development of collectors E.A. Petherick and Sir John Ferguson is also chronicled. For readers of *APR*, however, the most interesting chapters are likely to be those concentrating on the National Library's parliamentary origins and role.

Peter Cochrane's chapter, 'Becoming National', charts the National Library's early history and records the inevitable tensions in a Library which was serving both the members of Parliament in their (temporary) home of the Victorian Parliament, while working towards the 1907 vision of a great national library. The story is very much one of imaginative and capable librarians such as Kenneth Binns, Harold White and Cliff Burmester. During the 1930s, after the library had moved to Canberra, the broader national collection was recognised as a distinct entity by being placed on the Prime Minister's estimates. By the 1950s two thirds of library staff were involved in extra-parliamentary responsibilities and these were funded by the Prime Minister's Department, although it formally remained a branch of the Parliamentary Library. Indeed, extra-parliamentary functions had by this time become larger than the Library's parliamentary functions. Prime Minister Menzies noted the anomalies of this situation and in 1956 a committee, chaired by Sir George Paton, was established. Its task was to examine the question of control of the Library and its diverse functions. Following the report of the Paton Committee,

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the National Library was established as a separate entity under statute in 1960, but formal separation of the two institutions was not completed until 1968. The Parliamentary Library continued under the control of the Library Committee, with its own collections, but with access to the resources of the National Library. Cochrane's chapter gives an entertaining narrative, recognising the contributions of Library staff, senior bureaucrats, politicians and collectors.

Stuart Macintyre contributes the chapter on the National Library and its impact on the nation's political life. This chapter largely concentrates on the Library's role in recording and collecting material on Australia's politics and politicians, rather than on the Library's earlier role in providing information and research services to the Commonwealth Parliament. The systematic collection of politicians' papers did not begin until the 1940s, assisted by Harold White's shrewd cultivation of politicians, his 'principal users and sole providers', as Macintyre calls them. Of particular interest in this chapter, as it recounts the post-war expansion of the National Library, are the tensions with other major research libraries, notably the Mitchell Library, within the (then) Public Library of New South Wales. In the federal sphere the rivalry between the National Library and the National Archives, formerly the Australian Archives, for the collection of politicians' papers has, Macintyre asserts, had a negative impact on the depth of the National Library's holdings and this trend has continued with some prime ministerial papers and collections now finding their homes in university libraries. Macintyre also displays a healthy scepticism about the benefits of such 'prime ministerial' libraries.

Inevitably, a collection of essays such as this concentrates on the national role of the Library; its parliamentary origins and history are only treated lightly. However, as an introduction to the richness of the collections and of the Library's varied history, this book is a valuable, entertaining and readable guide. (I suspect that non-librarians may find the accounts of Byzantine library politics intriguing and possibly surprising.) The illustrations are well chosen and the volume is handsomely presented, although I found the yellow photograph captions difficult to read against the book's cream paper. It is a worthy celebratory volume for a vital Australian institution. ▲