

Being There

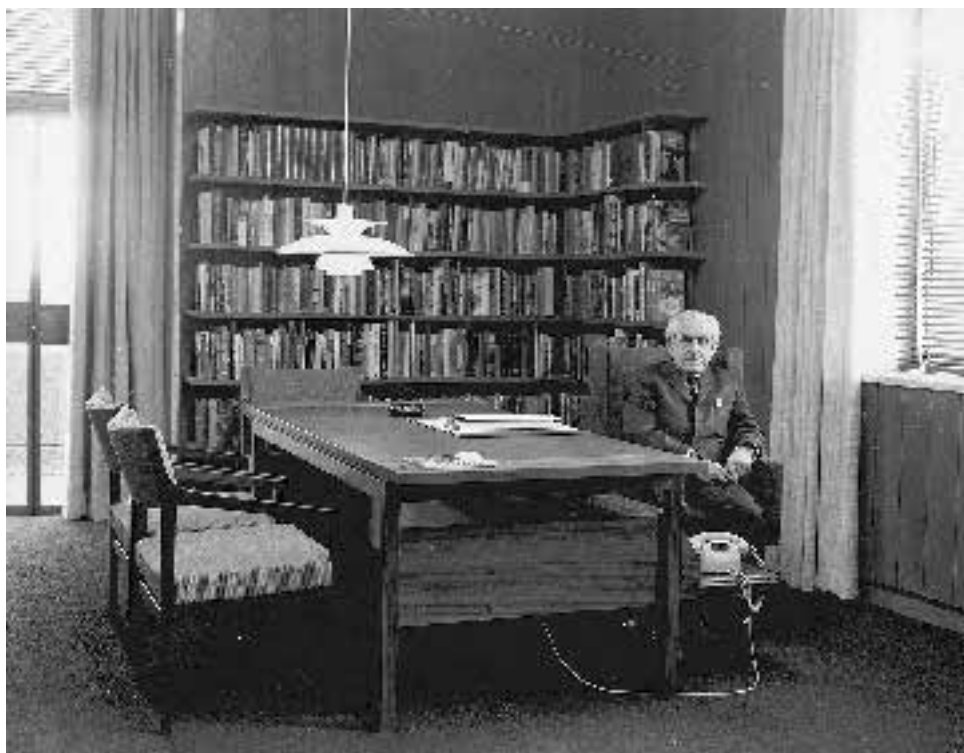
Carmel Maguire recalls experiences from before and after the cutting of the ribbon, back on 15 August 1968

The National Librarian, Harold White, often reminded us more or less obedient servants that he had been *proxime accessit* for the French Prize as a student at the University of Melbourne. He had a fondness for Latin tags—*primus inter pares* was another. I'm not sure whether he described 1968 for us as an *annus mirabilis*, but there was among the badly-housed troops at least bridled excitement at the coming of the new permanent building. C.A. Burmester and Pauline Fanning produced a handsome history for the occasion, simply entitled *National Library of Australia*, in which they remarked that the new Library would 'end a long and arduous occupancy of scattered and unsatisfactory temporary buildings.'

Memories of those times flood back—particularly of a warehouse in Kingston, where electric strip heaters attached to the walls above our heads baked our brains, while the concrete floor simultaneously iced our feet. Memories also of the miles of stacks in the basements of the old Admin Building, where Mr Eddie Gent cast a cold eye over the 'bloody BAs' who untied his amazingly tidy and clean domain. The fear of dropping a Kleenex there or losing a note book (in the ancient, pre-electronic sense of the term) was nearly as great as the possibility of never finding one's way out again.

National Library accommodation before the coming of the 'new' building is worth a history of its own. Whatever the perceived opinions of White as a boss, none of us could but admire the insouciance with which he refused to regard the dozen or more mostly raggedy library locations as anything other than a great cultural institution. This provided an admirable armour against the slings and arrows directed from some large libraries in other Australian capitals, notably Sydney. No

A PERSONAL AND MOSTLY MISTY MEMORY OF THE OPENING OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY BUILDING



wonder the classical beauty and the promise of eternal existence offered by the Greek temple rising by the lake were exciting.

I can't quite remember the building where I was located as director of training, but I do remember the fierce determination with which I defended my right to the mat beneath my desk. Younger people may have difficulty in appreciating the influence of the holy texts by which our lives as public servants were then ruled. One was the weekly *Government Gazette*. 'O tempora, O mores, O Google,' I thought, when I read a few months ago that this estimable publication had been replaced by an online version. (Of course, the holiest part of the *Gazette* by far was its inmost several pages, in which promotions and job vacancies throughout the Public Service were announced. Its popular designation was 'Starters and riders'. But I digress!)

Another holy book had an important influence on physical comfort in the

Max Dupain (1911–1992)
Portrait of Harold White in His Office, National Library of Australia, 1968
b&w photograph; 9.5 x 12.3 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3260006
Courtesy Max Dupain and Associates

below from left:
David Reid
Tom Bass at the Installation of His Library Lintel Sculpture above the Entrance to the National Library of Australia, 1968
b&w negative; 5.6 x 5.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24808660

National Capital Development Commission
Portrait of the National Library of Australia Council Members, Commissioners of the National Capital Development Commission and National Librarians, Canberra, 1968
Seated, l to r: Sir Harold White (National Librarian), Sir John Overall (Commr, NCDC), Sir A. Grenfell Price (Chair, NLA Council), W. Andrews (Assist. Commr, NCDC), C.A. Burmester (Assist. National Librarian), Sir Leonard Huxley (NLA Council member) and Sir Peter Crisp (NLA Council member).
Standing, l to r: W.R. Cumming (NLA Council member), Walter Bunning (Architect) and Kenneth Myer (NLA Council member)
b&w negative; 6.0 x 5.6 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4350753

Max Dupain (1911–1992)
Card Catalogue at the National Library of Australia, 1968
b&w photograph; 37.3 x 50.0 cm
nla.pic-vn4317941-s7
and *Display Cases in the Foyer of the National Library, 1968*
b&w photograph; 37.3 x 50.0 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn4317941-s5
Courtesy Max Dupain and Associates

workplace. This was *Standard Office Furniture*, issued by the Department of Works, which described precisely the size, design and quality of the office furniture and fittings appropriate to one's public service rank. I was not at all sure that the guardians of the new temple would allow entry to my bit of carpet, since bringing former furniture and furnishings was supposed to be forbidden. I thus persuaded some of the library-school students to carry it across the fields to the new site under cover of near darkness. Canberra in August was (and I assume still is) in deep dusk by 5 pm, and so the disobedient deed was done.

One early memory which has never left me was the stunning beauty of the multi-coloured reflections on the floor of the building's front foyer from the sunlight coming through the Leonard French windows. A picture of one window was reproduced on the front cover of the program for a concert in the Library Theatre by the Canberra School of Music chamber orchestra on the evening of 14 August, the night before the building's opening by Prime Minister Gorton. Only 'August 1968' appears on the concert program. All the publications produced for the occasion are tributes to the late Arthur Robinson's distinguished design and meticulous oversight of production.

The Burmester and Fanning Library history publication already mentioned has wonderful illustrations from some of the Library's manuscripts, printed items and paintings, as well as of two of the Matégot tapestries and one of the French windows.

The same care was taken in producing the concert program itself and the menu for the opening dinner. No doubt there were smaller items, such as place cards and directional notices created for the occasion. All of them have surely been preserved, not only by the Library itself, but also by more diligent collectors than myself. I have always regretted the disappearance of the griffin which adorned the early publications from the new Library. Probably the suspicion of a pun on Canberra's original designer, its clutching of an ancient artifact (a book), and the intricacy of the design, all made impossible its survival into the dawn of the age of logo dominance.

More excitement was had before the opening ceremonies, when word reached the Library school (already installed in excellent quarters on the fourth floor of the new building) that Tom Bass was at work positioning his great lintel sculpture over the main entrance doors. I suppose he must have had some help doing the installation, but the picture I carry with me of the occasion is of the sculptor himself greeting us from on high on a sort of wheeled dolly board, from which he later descended to talk about the work. As we left him, I overheard one of the students say, 'Gosh, he's not at all stuck up'. I have followed over many years the same notable lack of affectation in the sculptor's many sane contributions to public discourse, for instance in letters to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* signed 'Tom Bass, Turramurra'.

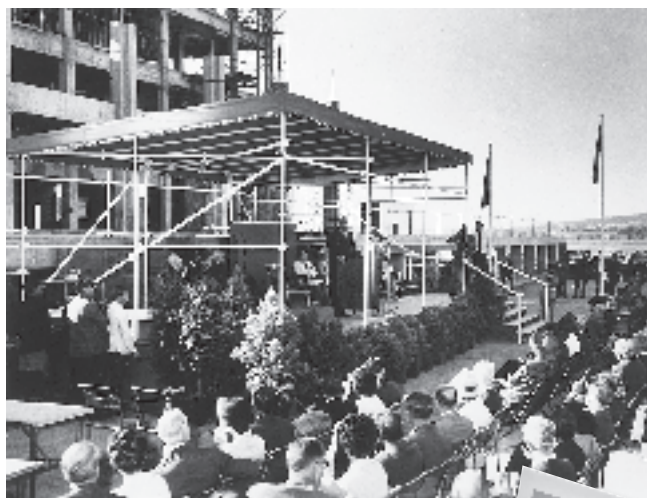
Perhaps at that time the Matégot tapestries had not been installed, or rather



more likely, I had not at that point had a chance to appreciate them, and I suspect that the lighting may not have been flattering to them in their original hanging.

Harold White gathered the formerly far-flung Library tribe in the new theatre to hear about arrangements and how we were to conduct ourselves for the imminent celebration of the building's official opening. I recall that, as was not unusual in his brief time as Assistant National Librarian, Athol Johnson sought to move things along, with measured and precise information capable of allaying the nervous tension in the gathering. My memories of the occasion can only be unreliable, due to a brief visitation of post-traumatic stress. Not far into his discourse, White praised the staff for their efforts in preparing for the historic opening, and went on to except from these compliments the students of the Library school, who had done nothing to help. I suspected that my less-than-subservient demeanour and the bit of carpet illegally retained were at fault, not the students. Incensed, I rose to my feet and begged to differ. That was my first and last 'performance' in the theatre. (Later indications suggested the possibility that White's chagrin had its origin in a firm refusal of his offer of a personally conducted tour of the new building from Lady Casey, wife of the governor-general.)

I remember much more happily the building's opening ceremonies, especially the excellent reception held that evening, at which the late Wilma Radford suggested that I apply for an academic post with her,



and thus opened for me nearly 30 years of a very satisfying academic career. I am sure that there were other celebrations of the opening, on levels far above my status, in which the political, diplomatic and military élites were entertained. But I doubt that many of those gatherings exceeded the joy and camaraderie of the assemblies which included National Library staff and librarians from all over the country.

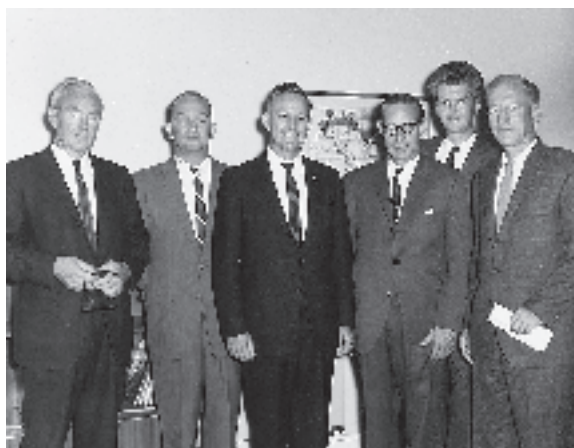
Two of the administrators at the time come vividly to mind. George Clark trod the difficult path of liaison between architects and clients, with energy and flair enough to be mistaken for an architect. Jack Edwards was secretary to the Library Council, and happily not a man easily disturbed with the demands of that body or anyone else. I remember that, having seen from my fourth floor window the arrival of a



top:
Unknown photographer
Sir Robert Menzies Speaking at the Foundation Stone Ceremony, 31 March 1966
b&w photograph; 16.5 x 21.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an24081333
and
Sir John Ferguson's invitation and the program to the foundation stone ceremony, National Library of Australia, 31 March 1966



Unknown photographer
*Senior Staff of the National
 Library of Australia* c.1963
 l to r: N.S. Lynravn (Chief Acq.
 Officer), D. Sprod (Chief Catlgr),
 F.G. Cassidy (Admin. Officer),
 C.A. Burmester (Chief Ref.
 Librarian), W.D. Richardson
 (Canb. Public Librarian), Athol
 Johnson (Asst. Nat. Librarian)
 b&w photograph
 18.9 x 24.5 cm
 Pictures Collection
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fire engine, I complained to him that an explanation of its presence should be offered to those furthest from the ground. Jack genially assured me that he would personally deliver me a memo if the place were ever to be on fire.

There are also quite a few ghosts: Athol Johnson, whose hard work got little acknowledgment in the short time between the opening of the building and his death; Cliff Burmester, whose zeal for the collections—and his remarkable knowledge not only of them but also in all things, historical and political—and the knowledgeable reference librarians like Marion Linley, who Cliff trained. I think also of Pauline Fanning, happily still with us, whose knowledge of Australian

is remarkable, as has been the legendary quality of her assistance to authors already famous and to those neither famous nor likely to be.

I look back on the late Sir Harold White not only as a worthy jousting opponent, but also as a remarkable visionary. He was larger than his eccentricities. He not only saw the National Library of Australia as a great institution long before its physical emanation

on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, but he also convinced others of its reality. His converts included hard-nosed people like Treasury officials and prime ministers, not all of whom were always notable for their willingness to support major national cultural initiatives.

CARMEL MAGUIRE, MA FLAA is indulging in the delights of retirement and the geriatric folly of a doctoral degree. She worked at the Library from 1960 to 1964 in the Australian Bibliographical Centre and the Union Catalogue Section, and (after a posting as Librarian of the South East Asia Treaty Organization in Bangkok) returned as Director of the National Library Training School from 1966 to 1969

*The following tribute
 (archived on a National
 Library file grandly titled
 'Opening Arrangements—
 New National Library
 Building Congratulatory
 Messages, G01/25/00041')
 clearly expresses the very
 deep relief felt by staff
 at the opening of their
 building after '40 years'
 wandering the 'wilderness'.
 (Poem reproduced courtesy
 of Lynravn family)*



Untitled Sonnet

BY JOAN LYNRAVN

A thousand years from now these marble halls
 may, like the Parthenon, be clawed by Time
 and all the Treasures sheltered by these walls
 to dust resolved, but here today no rhyme
 can adequately greet the castaways,
 so long a-wandering, at last come home:
 no more to spend the years, the nightmare days
 like unhoused Romans waiting for a Rome,
 nor patiently set up a new beachhead
 for priceless manuscripts, and paintings rare
 in any vacant basement, shack or shed,
 with books a millionfold stored everywhere.
 Such patience surely sets a precedent,
 for Job ne'er earned a marble monument.