

# A FOOTSTEP IN TIME



G.A. Mawer tells the story behind a two thousand-year-old stone set in the foyer floor of the Library

‘LET THERE BE COLUMNS.’

So said Sir Robert Menzies, and Walter Bunning complied. The National Library of Australia took form in the 1960s as a temple of knowledge. Its minimalist classical exterior deliberately evokes the great building on the Acropolis of Athens, which is dedicated to the titular deity of the city and goddess of wisdom. The owl is her attendant, but knowledge is not its own defence and so Athena sprang into the world fully-armed, with helmet, shield and spear. Today her temple is a melancholy reminder of the strange disorder that afflicts our species—what we create we also destroy.

Athena’s temple, the Parthenon, was built in Pentelic marble. In homage, the marble for the foyer staircases of our temple-by-the-lake was sourced from the modern quarries of Penteli, but there is a much earlier Pentelic stone set in the foyer floor. To find it, you must make your way towards

the staircase leading down to the Library’s theatre. At the foot of a column, like a founding left on the steps of an orphanage, it awaits discovery by the passer-by. Do not be deceived by its worn and undistinguished appearance. It is of ancient and noble extraction, and its present state belies former glory.

In about 100 AD, a minor Greek philosopher, Titus Flavius Pantainos, presented his fellow Athenians with a gift.

On the south-east side of the ancient market place, the Agora, on a corner of the Panathenaic Way that led to the Acropolis, he dedicated a public library to the Emperor Trajan and to Athena Polias, protectress of the city. Like the Parthenon, it was built of Pentelic marble. Its collection of papyrus and parchment scrolls was shelved around a hall 9.8 x 9.0 metres and perhaps one and a half stories high. Beyond this repository was a peristyle where the visitor could stroll, talk or read. This in turn was

above:

Loui Seselja (b.1948)  
*View of the National Library of Australia from across Lake Burley Griffin, Canberra, 22 October 2004*  
colour digital print  
Pictures Collection, nla.int-nl39391-ls17

below:

Margaret Michaelis (1902–1985)  
*Portrait of Walter Bunning* 1945  
colour digital print; 19.0 x 24.0 cm  
Pictures Collection, nla.pic-vn3582922





above:  
 Hardy Wilson (1881–1955)  
*The Parthenon* c.1925  
 pencil; 45.5 x 35.0 cm  
 Pictures Collection  
 nla.pic-an2769344

below right:  
 Loui Seselja (b.1948)  
*National Library of Australia  
 Building, Front View, Canberra,  
 1999*  
 colour transparency  
 9.9 x 12.0 cm  
 Pictures Collection  
 nla.int-nl39436-ls87

separated from the street by colonnades lined with tradesmen's workshops.

The library's location was symbolic. Its northern frontage was on a street that linked the Agora of classical times to the Agora of Caesar and Augustus. Athens in the second century was politically insignificant but still universally admired as a seat of culture and learning within the Roman world. The city's Academy and other educational institutions were not what they had been in Plato's day, half a millennium earlier, but Pantainos and his contemporaries were respected heirs of a great tradition.

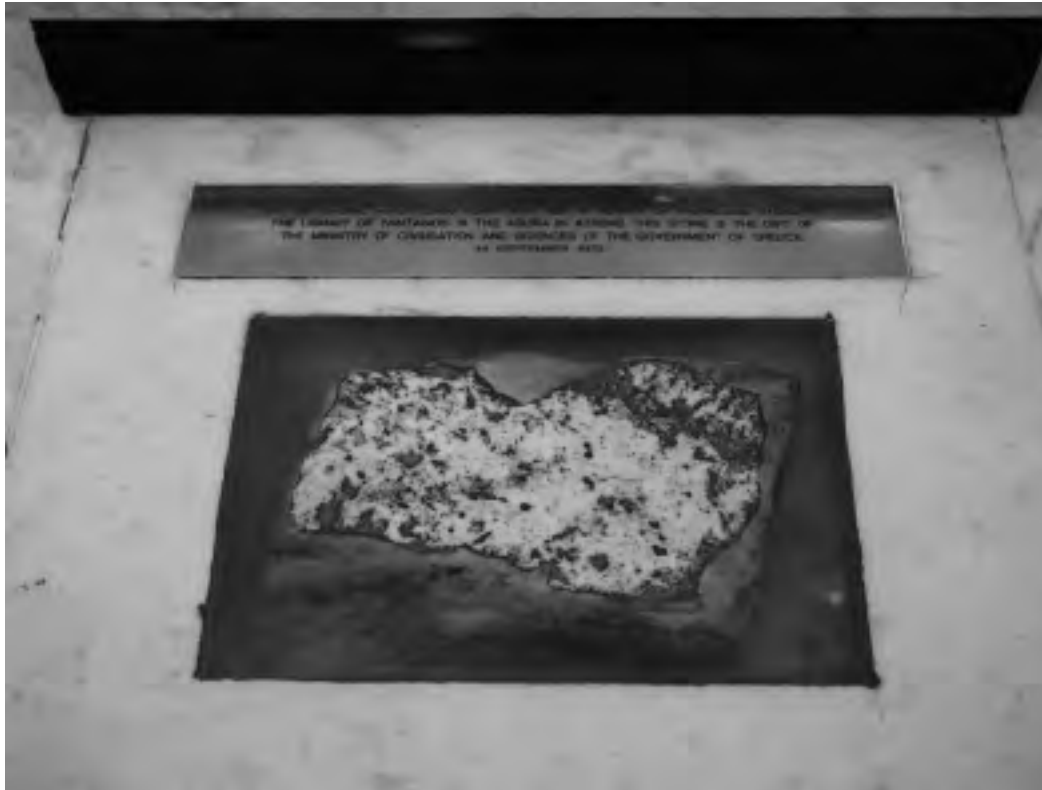
Sometime around 111, Publius Aelius Hadrianus, an enthusiastic philhellene, was elected to the magistracy of Athens. He would almost certainly have visited Pantainos' modest facility. Later, as the Emperor Hadrian, he gave

the city a far grander library that faced the Roman Agora, but for another century and a half the gift of Pantainos also continued to serve the people of Athens and the Empire. Public libraries were rare and it is unlikely that scholars whose business took them to Athens during the period—among them Plutarch, Arrian, Lucian and Pausanias—would have passed by without paying a visit. In 267, a sea-going Gothic tribe, the Heruli, broke through the eastern defences of the Empire and sacked the city. One of the casualties was the library. The north colonnade was rebuilt but the library was not.

Fast forward to 1933. American archaeologists are excavating the Agora. In a wall built with stones salvaged from the Herulian devastation, they find an inscribed lintel. It rests just a few metres from the entrance it once surmounted. The inscription reveals the function of the ruined building and the name of its benefactors. Pantainos mentions his son and his daughter, and proudly records that the three of them have given 'the outer colonnades, the peristyle, the library with its books and all the furnishings at their own expense'. The excavators also find a stone that sets out the library rules:

BOOKS SHALL NOT BE TAKEN  
 OUT OF THE LIBRARY AND  
 IT SHALL BE OPEN FROM THE  
 FIRST TO THE SIXTH HOUR  
 [AFTER SUNRISE].





Four decades later, the Greek Government presented Australia with one of the stones—regrettably not the rule stone—excavated from the floor of Pantainos' library. Walter Bunning was consulted. His first thought was to place it on the ground between the entrance doors but it was thicker than the slate of the podium. He then suggested setting it in the foyer floor, where it would symbolically relate to the Pentelic marble of the staircases. With this rationale, and symmetry in mind, one would expect to find the stone located between the staircases. Instead, Bunning proposed that it be offset next to a column, specifically the one adjacent to the theatre stairs, on which a descriptive plaque could be mounted at a readable height.

So, is the Pantainos plaque on the column? No, it too is set in the floor and similarly hard to find. Noel Potter, the architect who was Bunning's Canberra representative during construction of the Library, explains that there was reluctance to disturb the pattern of the foyer flooring. Its arrangement of golden Wombeyan marble is not merely regular; lines of square stones are alternated with lines of smaller oblong stones, the latter being more lightly coloured. The arrangement leads the eye along the axis of entry. Development of the bookshop and the café since has lessened

the visual effect, not least because the marble then laid down could not be matched to the original. Compromises are inevitable during the lifetime of a working building.

This year is the 40th anniversary of the temple-by-the-lake. It would be a timely gesture to relocate the stone to the position originally contemplated by the architect, but the moment has probably passed. You will have to visit it in exile where, like the oracles of Delphi, it offers wisdom beyond words. Listen carefully, it whispers. Few can claim, like your Newton, to see further by standing on the shoulders of giants, but anyone can walk in the footsteps of the wise. And remember what the barbarians are capable of.

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top and above:  
Loui Seselja (b.1948)  
The Pantainos stone and its plaque  
in the Library's foyer