

THE NEED FOR A NATIONAL LIBRARY



Loui Seselja (b.1948)
A display of tulips and other
flowers in front of the National
Library of Australia
nla.int-nl39391-ls37

Veronica Brady argues the case for seeing libraries, local and national, as indispensable resources

Ever since I learned to read, I have been in love with libraries, and it is hard, if not impossible, to say how greatly they have contributed to my education and to my professional life. As far as the National Library of Australia is concerned, I have had the privilege of being awarded a Harold White Fellowship in 1996, without which I would not have been able to write my biography of Judith Wright (*South of My Days*, 1998). So I am particularly aware of, and grateful for, the contribution that the Library makes to scholarship. These days, however, it is difficult not to be aware that cultural icons like the National Library are no longer unquestionably accepted—at least

by those in power—as vital to our national wellbeing.

By definition, debates about priorities in governments' use of budgets involve questions of value—of what is more or less, for the life of our nation. It is easy to demonstrate the importance of defence and security, of providing adequate health care and ensuring the wellbeing of those who are unable to provide for themselves. But most people would also grant the importance of education (in the general sense of the word), and this is where libraries belong.

Yet, the goal of education is often defined as the means of supporting and expanding economic growth. By providing access to information, technical skills, or linking up with global markets and opportunities, it seems that libraries are regarded as worthwhile. If they are not seen as helping this expansion, their other cultural activities are sometimes viewed as of secondary importance.

That, however, is to accept a limited notion of 'value', at the national as well as personal level. The evidence of history suggests that ultimately, to quote William Blake, in a society without a broader kind of vision, 'a people perishes'. I would argue that the National Library has a central role in promoting this vision and setting the life of our nation in a wider context, interrogating present commonsense and pointing to different, possibly more humanly rewarding, possibilities.

In *Areopagitica* (published in 1644), John Milton's great defence of freedom of thought and expression, he wrote one of the most eloquent descriptions of the place a library may have in the life of a nation. Milton exhorts the Parliament to be true to the promises they have made and describes what he thinks this new society should look like. It will, he argues, be built by a people 'prone to seek after knowledge'. Equally significant is that he sees the library as their central resource:

Behold now this vast city: ... the mansion house of liberty ... the shop of war hath not there more anvils and hammers waking, to fashion out the plates and instruments of armed justice in defence of beleaguered truth, than there be

pens and heads there, sitting by their studious lamps, musing, searching, revolving new notions and ideas ... others as fast reading, trying all things, assenting to the force of reason and convincement.

It is true that this did not shake the politicians of his day to change their determination to censor and control views which they regarded as dangerous or subversive. But Milton's point remains an important one. The resources of any library, but especially a national library, provide insights and information which offer alternative and sometimes unfashionable views which are able to interrogate and expand current notions of possibility and value in creative ways. Our ideas of society and its purposes may be different, of course, from those of Milton, which were essentially theocratic. But most people who believe in a free and open society would see the value of the space a national library can provide for stepping back a little from everyday concerns and assumptions and reflecting on them in a wider context.

The National Library of Australia, as a central point of reference and sometimes of in-service training for librarians, provides essential support in the work of local libraries as the focal point of the community's information. In the Library, those in the community can find out about, and reach towards an understanding of, the larger world, and the place of their community in it. This underlines the unique nature of the role the Library has to play in the life of the nation as a whole, in its self-understanding and sense of a future direction. It needs to be emphasised that this leadership role is a crucial one, and that it is necessary that the Library receives the funding it needs to fulfil this role.

Ideally a great library is a centre of scholarship, a place in which people may come together to explore and expand our understanding of our actual situation and experiences as a people, but also to reflect on possible alternatives, often in the light of the wisdom of the past. This, of course, is what has happened throughout history from the time of the great library of Alexandria to the Bibliothèque Nationale in Paris and the British Library in London. It would be good to think that Australian governments would, in the future, endow more fellowships

and scholarships for younger scholars, to supplement the relatively few which our National Library is able to provide from endowments or from its own resources. Most cultures, after all, recognise and honour the importance of scholars to their national life.

The Library's archives and manuscript holdings are areas of crucial significance for the understanding of our national heritage. They provide information about the lives of 'ordinary' people who never became famous or rich but contributed, each in his or her unique way, to the story of our nation. This is also true of much of the material from other cultures and times, most of which takes us behind the headlines to understand more deeply the common lot of humanity, and of people otherwise

below:
Greg Power (b.1974)
Looking through bound historical newspapers

bottom:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
View of the Manuscripts Reading Room, National Library of Australia
nla.int-nl39436-ls14



forgotten, reminding us of the ways in which libraries have contributed over time to the human story and how they may continue to do so in the future. This contribution is more necessary today, in a culture in which we have an opportunity to hear and be enriched by a range of stories, making us, one hopes, more open and tolerant people.

It is part of the Library's task to be counter-cultural, to make us aware of ideas and experiences which exist outside the narrow frame of a future-oriented culture which takes little or no account of anything but a romanticised (and therefore unreal) past, and is in danger of forgetting many of the discoveries made about ways in which a better society might be achieved. To keep this kind of awareness alive may be essential if we are to remain a civilised society (as the *Macquarie Dictionary* defines civilisation): one in which 'a high level of art, science and

Craig Mackenzie (b.1969)
The Main Reading Room at the
National Library of Australia



government has been reached', and in which people live together in mutual respect and everyone has an opportunity to achieve his or her full potential in life and contribute to the life of the community.

This involves knowledge of cultures and thus notions of reality different from our own. But this is something which the culture to which we belong makes difficult. As Luiz Carlos Susin argues in his article 'A Critique of the Identity Paradigm' (2000), settler societies like ours are the product of an imperial history which is based on the story of Ulysses, who left home and journeyed through strange places, but always with the intention of returning home or of making the strange places like home. Though it would like to think it is, our culture is not an adventurous one, least of all intellectually, since it exists within what Susin calls a 'closed circle around sameness', with the self and its desires at the centre. This is not the kind of culture best able to deal with the uncertain future which probably lies ahead. But it is another reason why the work of the National Library matters, since it provides resources to enable us to move out of this closed circle and see ourselves from the perspective of other times and different cultures, from which we may have much to learn, and with peoples with whom we must learn to live, not least, for instance, this land's Aboriginal peoples.

One of the most important tasks of a National Library may be to provide time and space for reflection on the 'way things are', in the name of more truthful, creative and more generously humane ways of thinking and feeling. Knowing what is happening in our own place is important, but knowing what is happening elsewhere, and being able to locate those events in their cultural and historical context, is to be less alarmed by them, and allows us to respond more judiciously. The National Library is a source of worldwide information and can offer the latest information about current events and their underlying causes, thereby helping us to evaluate them. This, I think, is no small thing in a time in which governments sometimes seem to promote suspicion and fear of the 'unknown' for their own ends, thereby fuelling the social violence, wars and rumours of wars of our time. Indeed it may be a crucial contribution; as Kofi Annan warned during his time at the United



left:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
Promotional material for the
Library's 'National Treasures'
Exhibition

below left:
Greg Power (b.1974)
A section of the Lakeside Stack,
National Library of Australia

below right:
Loui Seselja (b.1948)
National Library AskNow service
operators Liz MacKenzie (front) and
Kate Davis

Nations, closed minds, and lack of sensitivity to others and tolerance of beliefs different from ours, may lead to new wars of religion and ideology on a global scale. The freedom and space to think independently, but also to learn from past experience in doing so, may enable the divergent and even unpopular thinking which would question the direction in which we seem to be moving—freeing us from the manipulation of images imposed on us from outside to serve the interests of those with power, and reminding us of ideas and values arrived at by thinking people over the centuries.

Milton's ideal was a 'knowing people' with 'much desire to learn', who would create a society in which there would be 'much arguing, much writing, many opinions',

since in his view 'opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making'—the kind of society and the kind of citizens we need, if we are to meet the challenges facing us in the twenty-first century. As Milton argued, a great library will help to form these citizens and therefore remains an important national resource today.

(SISTER) VERONICA BRADY is a Roman Catholic nun and Honorary Senior Fellow in the Department of English, Communications and Cultural Studies in the University of Western Australia, where she taught for many years. This piece is based on an article which appeared in *Dialogue* 26, 2/2007; Academy of the Social Sciences 2007, pp. 23–29

