

Australian Libraries Summit — The Rural View

The mission statement for the Library Summit is to 'determine and reach agreement on the most effective structure and process for delivering library and information services throughout the nation'. If the rural point of view fails to be represented, the Summit will not achieve its mission. It will not produce a national plan and an important sector of the Australian economy and a fraction of its population will remain without adequate library information services.

Libraries have always been creatures of capital cities. With its population concentrated in six capital cities and more than 80 percent of its population urban, it is not surprising that library provision in Australia in reality consists of clusters of libraries in each state and in the ACT. Australian country towns have not developed the community infrastructure of their North American counterparts. They have not developed strong local government in the North American sense. They have not seen the development of educational and cultural facilities as being their responsibility. Where they have seen requirements for schools, technical colleges and teachers' colleges they have secured these by political pressure on the states rather than the locally based development.

Library provision in rural Australia, apart from a brief period when the Schools of Arts flourished, has always been weak. From Munn-Pitt to the present almost all visiting commentators have noted the weakness of library services outside of capital cities. The closest the Steering Committee papers come to dealing with rural Australia is a paper entitled 'Users with special needs — remote

users'. Australian country towns and cities are not large but they are economically important. They do have significant library and information needs, some of which are different in kind to those of the capitals. A national plan which ignores them is not a national plan at all.

There is a need for five discussion papers of a rural nature to be inserted into the Steering Committee's commendable list. The papers could cover the following:

- The requirement to reach realistic conclusions on the financing of libraries in rural Australia.
- The need for collections in rural Australia to be tailored for the community.
- The need for realistic approaches to the staffing of rural libraries.
- The need for rural Australians and their industries to have usable intimate access to national and international networks.
- The need for user education which spans all sections of the rural community.

Public libraries, based on weak local governments answerable to communities which have never had the value of libraries demonstrated to them, are never likely to meet the needs of their users. School libraries operating in isolation, remote from their source of supply and bereft of adequate professional guidance, are unlikely to meet the needs of their schools. Collections capable of supporting rural industries are not to be found co-located with their clients.

Importing patterns of library provision based on North American and European precedents is unlikely to work for the simple reason that rural Australia is unlike North

America and Europe. There must be an investigation into how meaningful collections can be developed and exploited to meet the needs of rural Australia. Persisting with weak school and public library networks is unlikely to produce the answer. Attempting to solve the problem by the provision of more sophisticated delivery systems which can only deliver material not selected for the purpose is not likely to succeed. One has only to visit school and public libraries in rural Australia to see there is a requirement for a totally new approach to their provision.

Over the last two decades there has been some improvement in the staffing situation in rural libraries. However with the exception of those educated at Riverina-Murray Institute of Higher Education, professional librarians are not being trained to serve rural communities. Could this be due to the reluctance of most librarians to serve in non-capital-city appointments?

The exploitation of the new electronic library environment depends as much on the supply of well-trained technicians as it does on professional librarians. Technicians are paid less than librarians; there is no incentive for technicians who come from the less mobile traditional clerical groups to move to the country. There is no satisfactory way of producing library technicians for rural Australia and the lack of technical capability could be the most restrictive factor in the provision of library and information services in the rural community. The human resources situation for rural librarianship should be based on a real assessment of needs rather than the surplus capacity of urban library schools.



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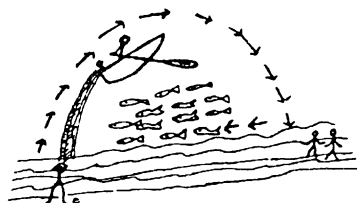
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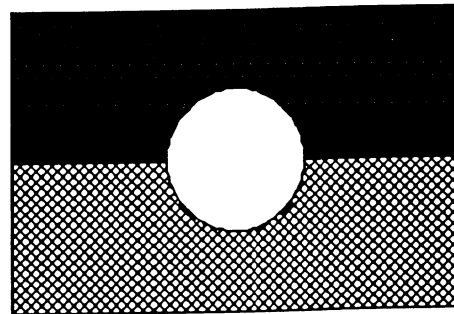
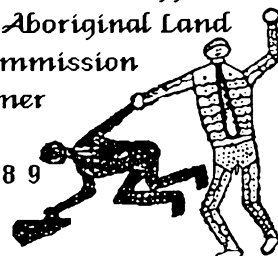
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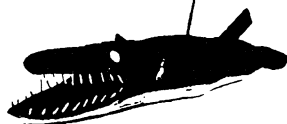


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Since 1788 isolated Australians have reacted to the lack of library facilities by becoming the largest private purchasers of books in the world. The bookshop and not the library has been the significant supplier in rural Australia. With the advent of online information, it remains to be seen whether this can be reticulated through effective libraries or whether Australians will become direct users of networks on a large scale. It is possible that the new networks will not lend themselves to individual access and as a result, rural Australians will suffer a significant information shortfall. This is particularly disturbing because it could mean information-starved rural industries.

The Summit needs to address the problems of planning adequate access to online information for rural Australia so that it is available at the same level as it is to urban users, who approach it through the skilled officers of their library staff. The matter of 'user pays' is of great concern in the country where access is via very long telephone lines. Cries of cultural deprivation are not new and are unlikely to produce more than the odd regional art gallery or under strength public library which, though important, have not changed realities in the bush.

Demands for information are already being met at a superficial level by Telecom and commercial vendors but potential demand will only eventuate when rural users understand the importance of what is available. With information now being a significant slice of our gross domestic product (GDP) it is vital that one sector of the Australian community is not starved for information.

The major problem facing rural library information interests at a national summit, is who speaks for them. The New England Regional Group sees a requirement to place a rural view before the Summit.

New England Regional Group
Summit Sub-committee

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Special Libraries Section

Ahoy Specials! A dinner harbour cruise will be held after the Section's AGM on the luxurious motor vessel Matilda III. Join in for the presentation of the Maria Gemenis Award, good food, plenty of drinks warm convivial company and spectacular vistas of Sydney harbour. There will even be a troubadour guitarist to serenade you. The inclusive cost is \$40, so be at Pier One, Hickson Road, Dawes Point at 6.45 pm or catch one of the buses taking guests from the AGM at 6.15 pm. For further information contact Wendy Bartlett (02) 543 3935 or Robin Jenkins (02) 20512. Send cheques to LAA Head Office.

University and College Libraries Section dinner dance.

See you at the Summit! Dancing, dramatic views of the Sydney skyline and top quality food will be the order of the day. Come and meet distinguished guests Harrison and Florence Bryan, Prof. Jean Whyte and Miles and Briony Blackwell among others. The cost of \$50 covers a delicious meal, complementary wine and free car parking. Meet old friends and dance the night away. Contact Pat Howard (02) 697 2670. Forward cheques must be sent to LAA Head Office.

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Australiana Night
1 September 1988**

We are pleased to announce a change of venue — the historic Argyle Cellars, Courtyard and Wool Shed in Sydney's Rocks Area.

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- During all the on-stage entertainment the delegates will be able to see sheep shearing, sheep dogs in action, look at several displays of aboriginal artifacts, wool weaving, sheepskin and opals.

The Australiana Night is a highlight of our IFLA/LAA Conference — book now to avoid disappointment for yourself, partners and friends

Booking details: Conference Circular p.48

The proceedings of Online 87 are here! 410 pages of latest online information for \$45 or \$25 LAA members (plus \$3 postage and handling).

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