

The SLV moves to the drawing board!

Jane la Scala discusses the problems of the State Library of Victoria, and what is being done about them

(Jane was the after-dinner speaker in April to *The Society of Editors [Victoria]*. This elegant account of her speech, written by Diane Carlyle, has been taken by kind permission from the Society's Newsletter.)

DESPITE A RUN ON the rabbit, the speaker did get her preferred dinner option. And just as well too, since Jane La Scala gave us a thoroughly engrossing talk about the state of the State Library and the shape of things to come underneath its splendid dome.

Once counted as one of the great libraries of the world, the SLV, though bearing the brunt of underfunding, cramped conditions, and the demands of an ever-increasing number of users, is still a formidable institution. Its founder, Redmond Barry, described it as 'a great emporium of Learning and Philosophy, of Literature, Science and Art'. And many distinguished visitors—from Bavarian botanist Hermann Beckler (he of the Burke and Wills expedition) to *Age* journalist Vitali Vitaliev—have concurred, heaping praise on both the extent and democratic availability of the library's collections.

Officially opened in 1856, just two years after the laying of its foundation stone, the original library occupied the area now serving as the foyer and the level immediately above it. At that time the collection numbered some 3000 books. Today, after twelve major structural phases—the latest of which led to the opening of the La Trobe wing in 1965—the SLV occupies a very much larger area. And its collection is measured not so much by the number of its titles, but by the square metres required to store them—some 14 000 m² in all. Moreover, this collection is currently increasing at such a rate that an additional 2.5 kilometres of shelving is required annually—more than can possibly be squeezed into on-site storage stacks.

In order to overcome this critical space shortage, options have been threefold: either the SLV and its equally cramped co-tenant, the Museum of Victoria (MoV), would abandon the Swanston Street site and together move into new and much larger premises; or one or other co-tenant would shift to a new site, so allowing its neighbour to become the sole Swanston Street occupant. Thus, at various times over the last decade, the solution seemed to lie in new joint SLV/MoV facilities on the former Queen Victoria Hospital site; or in designs for a new library building near the Queen Victoria Market; or in a Museum relocation, which would allow the SLV to expand over the whole

Swanston Street complex. This latter solution won the day and now, as Jane outlined with a sigh of relief, progress is finally tangible.

Off-site evidence of progress is amply provided by the MoV's partial relocation to Spotswood, and in foundation work at its Southbank site. On-site signs of it are most evident in the scaffolding that girded the SLV's facades for some months (and has now come down, revealing impressive bluestone footings) and in the refurbished foyer, which now features an elegant, previously hidden, staircase. The more observant will also have noted the two new storage buildings that now complete the Russell Street side of the complex. And there is an air-conditioning plant to cover the entire complex. At a symbolic level, though no less significantly, the SLV has finally received from state government official acknowledgment of its ownership of the whole site. The mood of staff, Jane said, is now decidedly upbeat.

So to the promise of things to come—a promise no longer based on Fantasyland aspirations but on real drawing-board previsions. The next stage of development will see the new storage facilities become a temporary home to the entire La Trobe section, while the latter's own wing, along with the north-western courtyard, undergoes refurbishment. Beyond that, heritage buildings are to be sealed against the elements and the deleterious effect of pigeons; the latest retrieval technology is to be installed; warehouse storage facilities are to be computerised; the many and varied buildings are to be converted to a single, functional and harmonious library; the ground floor will be redeveloped in such a way that general and undergraduate readers will have greater and speedier access to frequently requested materials (only 3 per cent of which are currently shelf-accessible); specialist librarians will be freed up to provide better assistance to researchers. The project, due for completion towards the end of the decade, will have the net effect of opening up the splendour of the collections to the widest possible



Jane la Scala

readership.

And what do these splendours comprise? Special gems include *Historiae Augustae*—a fifteenth-century illuminated manuscript that once belonged to Lorenzo de' Medici; the complete Burke and Wills archive; the papers of Governor La Trobe (recently retrieved from Switzerland); journals of detective extraordinaire John Christie; and a rare copy of the masterpiece *Lewin's Birds of New South Wales*. Jane detailed with due pride the strength of collections focusing on Australia, on Victorian India, on Egyptology, on Shakespeare, on the Bible, on children's literature and on more esoteric topics including beer, chess and conjuring. Added to which there is a huge newspaper collection (some items available on receipt, and an ever-increasing proportion on microfilm); the tremendously popular genealogical material (130 million records on 80 CD-ROM disks); and a stunning picture collection.

In conclusion, Jane affirmed that 'There can be no more important expenditure than that which ensures this ongoing and ever-changing flow of ideas and knowledge.' Assent from her audience was unanimous. Finally, the speaker kindly presented the Society with a copy of Peter Ryan's now out-of-print book on the SLV's founder, Redmond Barry. ■