

Twenty-five glorious years!

Diana Carroll has found that the National Library of Australia has been building non-stop ever since it opened

In 1927 the Government moved to the federal capital of Canberra, to a new Parliament. Amongst the new buildings that were built in the sheep paddocks was one to house the National

to be appropriate not only because of the inherent tribute to the background from which Western culture has developed but also because of the sheer monumentality of expression. The site is in the parliamentary triangle of the National Capital.

The building was designed by the Sydney architects Bunning and Madden in association with T E O'Mahoney. It stands on a spacious podium paved with black and grey-green Norwegian slate with a handrail of South Australian black granite. The columns surrounding the building are faced with white Carrara marble from Italy. The walls are of Roman travertine. The foyer is paved with golden Australian Wombeyan marble, and the foyer staircase is of Pentellic marble from the Parthenon quarry in Greece: the stairwell is of blue-green Italian marble. Australian timbers including black bean, jarrah, red cedar, bleached

coachwood and Tasmanian oak have been used in the internal finishing of the building.

The Library opened with large areas of Lower ground floor 2 incomplete and Lower ground 1, except for the Theatre, virtually a shell. There has probably been not a year since that it has not echoed to the sound of the jack hammer.

This was not unexpected. The Council decided from the start to maintain the concept of 'continuous building' which it adopted at the commencement of its planning. The first Annual Report after the opening also recorded the



The Death of Captain Cook by George Carter is one of the People's Treasures on exhibition as part of the anniversary celebrations (all photos by NLA Photographics)

Library. Unfortunately there was a lack of office space for the new government departments moving to Canberra, so the Library occupied only part of its designated space and then only for two years. From then on, Kenneth Binns, who had succeeded Arthur Wadsworth as Librarian in 1927, had to struggle, until he retired in 1947, to secure suitable housing for the Library's growing collections and services outside Parliament House.

In 1934 the foundation stone was laid for a new building in Kings Avenue, the second to be called the National Library, and this was opened the following year. This building was demolished in 1970 to make way for the Edmond Barton offices. The foundation stone of the present National Library of Australia building was laid by Sir Robert Menzies on 31 March 1966 in a ceremony presided over by the then Prime Minister, Mr Harold Holt. On 15 August 1968 the building was opened by the then Prime Minister Mr John Gorton (now Sir John Gorton).

The building is based on proportions which, while not adhering to the detail of Greco-Roman architecture, is clearly a contemporary derivation in the spirit of classical design. This was considered



decision to complete the remaining areas of Lower ground 2 during 1970–71, and the Henry Moore sculpture.

By 1974–75 the Library was able to record (*in its Annual Report*):

'When the building was occupied in 1968, several underground areas were left incomplete to provide future expansion. The National Capital Development Commission has progressively completed these areas over the years, the last to be fitted out being the Newspaper Reading Room. The expansion of the building has always been regarded as inevitable to accommodate the natural growth in the collection and services. However, the emphasis now being placed on increased accessibility of the collections has altered previous plans for underground extensions and planning is now underway, in concert with the NCDC, to develop the National Library site by the provision of above ground buildings.'

Meantime the Library had opened a series of subject specialist reading rooms, notably ANSTEL for science related materials and ANSOL for Social Sciences. The economic climate changed and also a later generation was less than happy with the original conception of the original building being flanked by 'Pavilions' on the lake and Treasury sides. So that when by, mid 1980 the preliminary drawings for the extensions had been prepared these were for an extension below podium level—7 000 square metres of additional space on two sides of the existing building.

These would provide improved location of the Library's computer facilities and its staff, greatly enhanced facilities for conservation and better reader accommodation on the lower ground floors.



Two Prime Ministers put their heads together in the Friends' Lounge before the celebration NLA Council dinner

These extensions were begun in 1983 and finished in 1986. The oral history and sound preservation facilities were opened by Mr Hayden in November 1989. During the building there were unforeseen delays caused by the decision to remove asbestos from the building and the fire.

Most recently we have seen improvement of the foyer, change of location for the shop (completed December 1989), construction of the cafe (December 1990), change to the entrance (removal of air lock), the visitors centre, exhibition areas, and upgrade to other areas of the building some simply required by passage of time, some because of the fire. The fire prevention and recent major building works were largely funded as new policy proposals.

Along the way there have been some noteworthy quotes, among them one that must have been the worst piece of doggerel since McGonegall. Its author was Sir A Grenfell Price (newly-appointed Chairman of Council), who early in the building process wrote:

*'On the banks of the lovely Molonglo
Our Library is coming alonglo.
But basements and huts are hardly the guts
For an epic, an ode or a songlo.'*

Yarrowonga School
pupils busy at the
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