

## New Norcia Library – religious tradition and national heritage

Today, we came across a recently donated book published in 1672 written by early scientist Robert Boyle. The book is in a very poor condition, but it was an exciting find.

Donated books are the basis of the New Norcia Library, a private library owned by the Benedictine monks of New Norcia. The large collection (over 80 000 books) has greatly increased over the last thirty years under the guidance of Abbot Placid Spearritt, who died suddenly in 2008. Abbot Placid encouraged donations of religious books to develop New Norcia Library as a repository of last resort. Books no longer needed in universities, seminaries, colleges, convents, or in private collections have a long-time home in New Norcia.

This library is a heritage for the nation, available not only to the monks but to interested students and researchers (see <http://www.newnorcia.wa.edu.au/library-archives>) The basic Catholic collection has been enriched by gifted books covering a broad range about Christianity as well as other religions. There is also an extraordinarily eclectic range of non-religious books, with strengths in Western Australian and Australian history, Indigenous Australian history, and sacred art. On request and to my continuing surprise, I have found books on such diverse topics as vintage rose varieties, Druid medicine, maritime navigation, and Lord Nelson's letters to Lady Hamilton. Why are those books in a monastic library? Generally speaking, it is because someone at some time donated them.

Benedictine monks take a vow of stability, and their monastery has been a stable presence since 1847 in the small settlement of New Norcia, 130 kilometres north of Perth. The monks came with books, and their library has been growing ever since. Benedictines value reading, and lectio divina, or sacred reading, is an important part of their regular religious practice. Books are read aloud during their mealtimes, so that

even the most reluctant reader becomes informed. Our book budget is spent on relevant and current religious publications.

In the early 1900s, the monks built a beautiful baroque style library with wood panelling, ceilings of pressed metal, and large wooden book shelves reaching to the high ceiling. This room is no longer adequate for the growing collection, which is now housed in ten rooms in four buildings spread across the whole site of New Norcia. I identify with Terry Pratchett's librarian as my knuckles become ever closer to the ground from carrying books from building to building.

The journal collection is extensive. Its holdings of monastic journals are unequalled in Australia, with some unbroken runs from the 1880s. The library continues to receive journals in hard copy.

A library committee makes policy decisions. The librarian works for three days a week, with help from qualified volunteers when they are available. Visitors can visit some parts of the library when the librarian is at work. Books and journals can be read on site, or borrowed by inter-library loan.

The library also hosts an annual lecture day for librarians. This is well supported by professionals across the library spectrum, as well as by the Curtin University Department of Information Studies. This year's lecture is on September 8, with the key lecture by broadcaster Geraldine Doogue, and supporting talks by Margaret Allen, CEO of the State Library of WA, Jan Rutherford from Murdoch University, and historian Geraldine Byrne.

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