The Fisher Library Centenary
1909–2009

A short history of the Fisher Library, University of Sydney, to commemorate the centenary of the opening of the original Fisher Library building.

“May it continue forever as the source of light and learning to the inhabitants of Australia”
Sir Normand MacLaurin, Chancellor, speaking at the opening of the Fisher Library, 20 September, 1909.
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Special thanks to Les Murray for permission to reproduce his poem "Incunabular".

Cover: Hand-drawn architectural plan of MacLaurin Hall dated 25 June 1902. Courtesy of the University of Sydney Archives.
Among the earliest decisions of the Senate as the governing body of the University of Sydney in 1851, was to purchase the first books for its Library. The decision came months before the first professors had been appointed and a year before the first students enrolled. A Sydney resident, D. A. Mackaen, Esq., Doctor of Philology, had written ‘rendering his services to the University’ and offering to sell some of his books. From those offered, a committee chose 52 titles (64 volumes) at a cost of just under 100 pounds. In the list submitted to the Senate for approval, the first item, now celebrated symbolically as the Library’s first book, was Scapula’s *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum Novum* (Basel, 1615), a large folio volume bound in calf. The remainder of Dr Mackaen’s books were philological works, dictionaries, and copies of classical authors such as Aristotle, Plato and Homer. To ensure that the new library was properly equipped a further five pounds purchased Dr Mackaen’s bookcase.

In 1852, 500 pounds and a list of desiderata were sent to a London bookseller. By the time these books arrived, in 1853, the first professors were on duty and they were asked to decide which additional books should be sought. A list ‘of the most appropriate works in the several departments of Literature and Science’ was compiled and sent to London with 2500 pounds. In the following year a further 300 pounds was found to complete these purchases. In addition, the infant University purchased the building and other property of the defunct Sydney College, including its modest library, described as ‘a small collection of books, mostly classics, some dictionaries’. In its annual report for 1853 the Senate stated proudly that ‘the foundation has been laid of a Library, which in the character of its contents, if not in the number of its volumes, is superior, it is believed, to any other collection in these Colonies.’

Although from the beginning it had been the Senate’s intention ‘to appropriate a fixed sum every year for the establishment and maintenance of the Library’, this enthusiasm subsided around 1854 and regular appropriations were discontinued, although donations continued to trickle in. When the University moved to its permanent site the Library was assigned to what is now the Senate Room, adjoining the Great Hall, but it quickly ran out of space. Additional shelves were requested by the Library Committee in 1858 ‘for the books for which at present there was no room’. By 1859 the Library held 8000 volumes.

The first significant benefaction for library purposes was received in 1878 when Sydney businessman Thomas Walker purchased and donated the book collection of the late Nicol D Stenhouse, a solicitor and literary patron. Stenhouse’s 4000 volumes precipitated an accommodation crisis, and suitable housing for the Library became the University’s most pressing need. Walker’s gift was announced at the Commemoration of Benefactors ceremony in 1879, at which the Chancellor, Sir William Manning, told the audience of ‘the deficiency and ... the practical inconvenience of our Library accommodation.’ Sir William hoped ‘that the day will come when one of our men of great wealth and equal public spirit will ... earn the gratitude of their country by erecting for this University a library worthy of comparison with like edifices at home.’

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Above: The Library in today’s Senate Room.
Left: Celebrated symbolically as the Library’s first book; title page of Scapula’s *Lexicon Graeco-Latinum Novum* (Basel, 1615).
Below: Work in progress on the original Fisher Library, now MacLaurin Hall.
University Commemoration ceremonies were open to the public and a regular attendee was Thomas Fisher, a retired bootmaker. He lived in Darlington, a mere five minutes walk from the Great Hall. Fisher frequently walked in the University grounds and was known to staff and students, with whom he often engaged in conversation. He had only a basic formal education, but from these contacts he would have come to appreciate the value of higher education, and would have known that one of the University’s most pressing problems was the inadequacy of its Library.

Thomas Fisher was born in Sydney in 1820. Both his parents were former convicts. His father, John, had been sentenced to death for stealing a sheep but his sentence was commuted to transportation for life. His mother, Jemima Bolton, was sentenced to seven years transportation for stealing some clothing. They met while serving as assigned convicts in Parramatta and were married in 1811. They had four children, of whom Thomas was the youngest. Both parents died in 1832, leaving Thomas, aged 12, in the care of a friend of his father’s who was a bootmaker. He left school and became apprenticed in the trade.

When he turned 21 he received a modest legacy under his father’s Will and set up in business as “T. Fisher. Ladies’ and Gentlemen’s Boot and Shoe Manufacturer” in Pitt St, near King St. Fisher never married, and profits from the business were invested in mortgages on property, and in ownership of properties from which he collected rents. In 1873, suffering from increasingly poor health, he closed the shoe business and retired to a substantial two-storey house in Darlington, close to the University. The house was on the corner of what are now called Maze Crescent and Bulfin Avenue, the site of the Biochemistry building.

If Fisher was in the audience for the 1879 Commemoration ceremony, which seems likely, he would have noted the applause accorded to former benefactors when their names were read out, and the cheers which customarily greeted the announcement of a new endowment. He had known Stenhouse and would have been impressed that his friend’s collection had enriched the University Library and aware that it had precipitated an accommodation crisis. The following year he made his Will, naming the University as residual beneficiary and specifying that the bequest be used “in establishing and maintaining a Library for use of the said University for which purpose they may erect a building and may purchase books and do anything which may be thought desirable for effectuating the objects aforesaid”. He had seized an opportunity to do something constructive which would have a lasting benefit.

Fisher died in 1884. The following year the University received approximately 32,000 pounds, the equivalent of more than $3.5 million today. Not bad for a shoemaker, the son of convicts, who was orphaned at the age of 12!
There was some difference of opinion within the University as to the best way of utilising this unexpected but very welcome endowment. The Chancellor, Sir William Manning, wanted to spend most of it on a building, with the remainder to comprise a ‘partial endowment’ of the Librarianship. A contrary view was held by the Vice-Chancellor and the Library Committee of the Senate, who desired at least part of the bequest to be reserved as a perpetual book fund. Eventually the decision was made to devote 20,000 pounds to the erection of a building, to ask the state government to provide a matching sum for associated buildings such as a museum for the Nicholson antiquities, a student refectory, etc., and to set aside the remainder of the bequest as a book fund.

It did not prove easy to persuade the government to contribute a matching sum, and negotiations dragged on for more than a decade. However, after a Parliamentary inquiry in 1900 the government finally agreed to meet the entire cost of the new building, including space for a museum and other facilities. The Fisher Fund was preserved ‘to provide an annual endowment for defraying all the expenses of the library, including salaries of librarians, and the purchase and binding of books’.

When Fisher’s bequest was received the collection stood at approximately 12,000 volumes. Books purchased from its income flowed in, and by the turn of the century the collection had reached 50,000 volumes. The original Library room had long ago been filled beyond capacity, the Ante-Room below was similarly full, mainly with Stenhouse’s collection, though part of that had had to be stored elsewhere in boxes. Various rooms in the Clocktower had been taken over ‘where many of the books are difficult of access’. So as to make the most important volumes more readily available to students, the professors had ‘borrowed’ them and housed them in their departments; these departmental collections were to cause unanticipated difficulties in the future.

Income from the Fisher Bequest sustained the Library for many years. During the lean times of the Great Depression it was virtually the only source of funding for the collection. The fund continues to provide income that is used to acquire significant items that could not otherwise be afforded.
Building the first Fisher Library

The Daily Telegraph proclaimed the Library to be “the finest piece of Gothic architecture in Australasia worthy of any institution in the world.”

Construction of the long-awaited, and desperately needed, Fisher Library commenced in January 1902 and took nearly eight years. Architecturally it was designed to complement Blacket’s masterpiece, the main building and Great Hall, though in a more ornate style. A contemporary description claimed that “no other building in Sydney has such a wealth of carving and grotesquerie, for, continuing the Gothic tradition, the gargoyles grin in stony ecstasy from every cornice.” John Le Gay Brereton, the Assistant Librarian, compared it with the Great Hall by observing that “there are … more carvings of grotesque beauty – more grinning and goggle-eyed monsters glowering from every coign of vantage”.

Certainly no other building in Australia, and only one other building in the world, could match the awe-inspiring open-timbered cedar roof with its span of 50 feet. Westminster Hall in London has a timber roof spanning 68 feet; the splendid timber roof on the University’s Great Hall spans only 40 feet, though it is higher and longer. “So huge are many of the beams, and so great was the quantity of cedar required, that the contractors found it necessary to purchase a forest in Northern Queensland.”

The interior decoration was, and still is, magnificent. The 16 stone corbels on which the roof rests are painted with the arms of countries whose universities were at the time affiliated with the University of Sydney. As well as the Royal coat of arms, the sandstone walls contain carved panels of prominent governmental and University figures of the day – Sir Normand MacLaurin, Earl Beauchamp, Sir Harry Rawson, Sir Joseph Carruthers, Sir Arthur Remwick, and Judge Alfred Backhouse. On the ornate exterior of the western wall is a central niche “reserved for the bust of the munificent founder, Mr Fisher”. However, because no image or physical description of Fisher is known to exist, a bust could not be prepared and the niche remains empty.

At right-angles to the monumental reading room, and forming part of the western side of the planned quadrangle, was a self-supporting seven-storey fireproof steel and glass bookstack, the cutting edge in library design which set a standard to be envied and emulated for decades. It was concealed behind a Gothic stone facade so as to blend in with the rest of the quadrangle style, and its capacity was estimated at 250,000 volumes (three times the then holdings) with room for further expansion. At last the University would have sufficient, indeed very generous, space for both readers and books. A new era in library provision was confidently in view.

The Fisher Library was opened, with considerable fanfare, on Monday 20 September, 1909. It had cost 72,000 pounds, only 5000 pounds more than the estimate of its architect, Walter Liberty Vernon, the NSW Government Architect, in 1900. The University hosted a colourful evening assembly and “open house” for over 1000 guests, led by the State Governor, Lord Chelmsford.

It was a joint celebration for the formal opening of both the Library and the new Peter Nicol Russell School of Engineering. A military band played, and the mummies in the Museum were “pressed into the corners” so as to provide space for the crowd to enjoy refreshments. The local press reported ecstatically on the splendour of the occasion, the extravagant costumes of the academic staff and their wives, the fascinating things to be seen behind the scenes in the different academic departments and laboratories, and the architectural glory of the new buildings.

The Daily Telegraph proclaimed the Library to be “the finest piece of Gothic architecture in Australasia worthy of any institution in the world.” Its reporter seems to have taken his cue from the Chancellor’s address, in which Sir Normand MacLaurin said “it is, I think, not merely one of the most beautiful, but also one of the best arranged buildings in Australia.”

Libraries grow and, with the stimulus of income from the Fisher Fund, the collection grew rapidly. In 1900, in evidence before the NSW Parliament’s Committee on Public Works, which was considering the University’s request for the government to meet the cost of the new library building, Henry Barff, the Registrar and Librarian, had estimated that the proposed building would be sufficient for the next 20 years. This turned out to be optimistic. The bookstock was filling up faster than had been forecast and within a dozen years it was clear that the need for the planned extension was becoming increasingly urgent. Work on the extension began in 1924 but the Great Depression halted progress and for the next decade or more the Library’s accommodation problems became increasingly desperate.
Details from architectural drawings of MacLaurin Hall.
Tom Fisher was my Grail King: he endowed the Gothic library to which my life had been pointing. His high sandstone box held the Culture bush folk were scorned for lacking.

On its milk-glass stack levels I still hear stiletto heels clacking, glass floors for the light to perfuse, not for voyeurs; you could only make out the sex of shoes.

The lipsticked gargoyles downstairs kissed much social ascent. Above, I’d browse beside the point power made, for the points it didn’t. Reflex, more than intent.

The reading-room beam supported heraldry and a roof like a steep tent. Mine was a plan-free mass querying of condensed humans off the shelves, all numbered, the tribal, the elderly.

Knowledge was the gait of compressed selves and poetry seemed windows of italic inset in grievous prose which served it and mastered it: few grapes for many rows.

Students murmured anitly of the phallic they were going to be marked by but the shelvers book-trolleys were parked by closed gaping tomes and stood them drily back, vogue, value, theory.

The stacks clanged down metal stairs to floors below reality, to books in dragon-buckram, books like dreams, antiphonaries and grimoires, philologies with pages still uncut:

my blade made a sound like a rut.
I never used the catalogue, it held no serendipities.
The lateral book’s the tip: it is the seminal one near the set.

You must range real shelves to find it. Strict exams could have excluded me; soon they did weed out my sort. Critique closed over poetry, the hip proved very straight.

What our donjon of kisses and cribs held they say now it will go on line. This does not light my taper. Others may have my joys at home? Fine. But I surfed the true paper.
At the end of 1852 the Senate appointed as Librarian a student in the first group of matriculants, Frederic Hale Forshall. He had previously studied at Trinity College, Cambridge, although he had not graduated. By a happy coincidence his father had been Keeper of Manuscripts in the library of the British Museum. Unfortunately, Forshall’s claim for advanced standing towards a degree, based on his Cambridge work, was disallowed and in 1854 he withdrew from the University. The position of Librarian then lapsed for 60 years, the Library being supervised by the Registrar, Henry Barff, who was re-titled Registrar and Librarian.

Barff did not always have sufficient time to devote to library matters and an Assistant Librarian essentially ran the Library during this period. Because the Library was already one of the country’s major collections, this was an influential position in Australia’s fledgling library profession. In the 1890s, for example, Assistant Librarian Caleb Hardy had pioneered the use in Australia of the new-fangled Dewey Decimal Classification which was subsequently copied by almost every other significant library in the country.

In 1902 John Le Gay Brereton, a poet and a scholar of English literature, was appointed Assistant Librarian from a selection of 91 applicants. The selection committee noted that (for unstated reasons) it was “not desirable that a lady be appointed”. Brereton had drive and a keen ambition to improve the Library, and was an ideal appointment to lead the Library into its eagerly awaited new era. As one commentator put it, “The age of the talented and enthusiastic amateur had arrived” and the professional standing of the Library increased markedly during his administration. Academic qualifications were made a condition of permanent appointment to the staff.

To improve efficiency he made changes in the technical matters of cataloguing and binding, and succeeded in carving a modest “general fund” from the annual budget to be spent at his discretion on research materials which did not fit readily into the existing departmental interests. His particular interest in Australian literature led to the Library assembling an impressive collection in this field, although it was not to be taught as a separate subject until the 1950s.

His flexibility in the use of funds was circumscribed by a decision of the Senate in 1902 to cease making a regular grant to the Library. It was expected to exist entirely – for both salaries and books – on the income from the Fisher Fund. This difficult situation continued until, in 1911, the Fisher Fund income was supplemented by an annual government grant of 1000 pounds. Regular funding for the Library from the University’s budget did not resume until after World War I, and then only as a supplement to the Fisher Fund income.

Brereton supervised the Library during its last years in the severely overcrowded rooms of the main building, and during what must have been the glorious luxury of a reading room seating 250 and a bookstack designed to accommodate a quarter of a million volumes. Not surprisingly the new building attracted an enormous increase in student use of the Library, placing the Library staff under great pressure. He introduced a card catalogue in place of the earlier printed book lists (which were necessarily always out of date). Although cataloguing practices were streamlined and simplified, a backlog of unprocessed books was a constant embarrassment.

Short-sightedly, but perhaps not surprisingly, the Library Committee always opposed any efforts to increase Library staff numbers because their salaries would inevitably reduce the amount available for expenditure on books and periodicals. On Brereton’s appointment the staff comprised only himself and one assistant; the next year a second assistant was appointed, and a third came in 1906. Brereton’s de facto position in charge of the Library was confirmed in 1914 with his appointment as Librarian, a position he held until 1921 when he was appointed Professor of English. Even by this time the Fisher Library staff numbered only nine plus two in the Law Library in the city.

In 1902 Henry Ebenezer Barff, Registrar and Librarian, 1882–1914

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John Le Gay Brereton, Librarian, 1914–21

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Brereton’s successor was Henry Green “a distinguished graduate of the University who has had considerable experience in business and literary work.” Actually, Green’s background was in journalism which, while not exactly academic, had exposed him to the world outside the academy. It had given him skills in arguing a case and recognising when a situation could be turned to political or public relations value. He wasted no time in drawing, very vigorously, attention to the Library’s needs, and one of his first actions was to prepare a frank report on the most pressing need, namely additional staff.

Work had increased, there were 12,000 volumes awaiting cataloguing and a further 90,000 or so which needed recataloguing. In the last four years the academic staff had
increased by 87, but the Library staff by only two. To make matters worse, salaries paid by the University were significantly below those paid at the Public Library of NSW, making it difficult to recruit good people. Being a realist, Green requested only three additional Library staff. Two were approved for 1922, as well as general increases in Library salaries but only by reducing funds available for the purchase of books. Green then broke with tradition by recruiting the Library’s first female assistants.

Green steered the Library through difficult times. Both the University’s funding from government and the income from the Fisher Fund were adversely affected by the onset of the Great Depression in the late 1920s, and then came World War II and the diversion of resources to the war effort. For more than half of his 25 years as Librarian, the Fisher Fund interest was almost the only money the Library had to spend. Nevertheless, he strengthened the collections generally, particularly in Australian literature in which he was expert, by building on Brereton’s very solid foundations. As the student body increased in numbers so use of the Library increased, and Green encouraged this and tried to make the Library more “user friendly”. He also produced detailed annual reports which emphasised success and positive developments; his public relations instincts served the Library well.

Green retired in 1946 and was succeeded by his deputy, Edward Steel, who had been a member of the Library staff since 1911. He was, essentially, the first “professional” librarian. It had been a very long apprenticeship, there being no formal courses of study for librarians in Australia at that time.
Steel, like Green, faced difficult times. An unprecedented influx of students, particularly ex-servicemen, after World War II, strained the Library’s facilities and services almost beyond their limits. Books needed by undergraduates were in desperately short supply and the demands for books to be retrieved from the closed stack overwhelmed the staff. The reading room was fitted with shelving from which students could select the books which they most needed. This necessitated removal of some reading tables, and resulted in overcrowding and an almost intolerable level of noise and activity for those who needed to concentrate on their work. Some texts were in such short supply that Library staff were compelled to search the shelves on a regular basis to retrieve essential books which desperate students had hidden in areas distant from where they belonged.

By the early 1950s it was clear that the Library was in trouble. Its accommodation for readers, which had seemed positively extravagant 40 years earlier, was crowded and noisy. Its vast bookstack was full. Its staff were unable to keep up with the demands of the students and academics who thronged the place daily. Major extensions or a new building, could not be avoided and expenditure on additional staff was also inevitable. But where was the money to come from? The income from the Fisher Fund, once thought more than adequate to meet all the Library’s needs, was now but a minor proportion of the budget and no other equally generous donor was in sight.

Other Australian universities were also approaching a financial crisis as increasing numbers of students sought tertiary education. In 1956 the federal government appointed a Committee of Enquiry into the Future of the Australian Universities, chaired by Sir Keith Murray. Its report recommended a substantial commitment by the federal government to the funding of universities which, until then, had been supported largely by state grants. The University of Sydney’s submission to the Committee included a request for a million pounds for a new library. Murray recommended half for stage one of such a building, noting that the ‘immediate replacement’ of the present building was ‘a matter of the greatest urgency’. Somehow, by means of makeshift adjustments, the original building coped with the strains until Stage 1 of the new Fisher Library opened in 1963.

Steel retired in 1958 and was succeeded by Andrew Osborn, an Australian librarian who had spent most of his professional life in US, and most of that at the Harvard University Library. Osborn had grand plans to drag the University of Sydney Library into the 20th century. With a new building clearly on the horizon, he sought and was granted a considerable increase in the Library’s staffing complement, and secured nearby storage space for the growing collection. He pursued a flagrantly extravagant acquisitions policy which effectively doubled the collection in the three years of his tenure as Librarian. The several card catalogues were merged into one, access to the bookstacks was thrown open to all, multiple copies of texts in demand were purchased and eagerly used by students. A start was made on legitimising the informal ‘department’ libraries controlled by professors, and the Library’s role in the University changed dramatically from sleepy appendage to dynamic partner.

Unfortunately, Osborn’s vigorous campaign to improve the Library collided with the financial realities of University budgeting. He paid little heed to the budget allocated for purchase of books and had some bitter disputes with the University Accountant. He lost the confidence of the Vice-Chancellor, resigned in 1962 and returned to US.
Above: Reading Room, 1950.
Right: MacLaurin Hall, original Fisher Library reading areas, 1959.
Opposite: Site of the present Fisher Library.
Throughout his tenure, Osborn was actively involved in planning a new library. From 1958, he worked with the NSW Government Architect on the design of a building that reflected his vision as well as his knowledge of modern library design in US. It was a radical departure in concept from the old Fisher Library. The new building was designed to be flexible in its layout and swept away the clutter that had come to permeate Maclaurin Hall and its associated stacks and rooms.

Osborn’s tenure may have been brief and stormy but it had a dramatic and lasting effect. He changed both the Library and the University’s understanding of the importance of really good library service in supporting teaching and research. By example, he had also opened new horizons for all the Australian university libraries. He was certainly the right man at the right time.

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The second building to bear the name “Fisher Library” was opened for business at the beginning of 1963. When completed, it comprised two wings: Stage 1, the Undergraduate wing of mostly reading areas (1963), and Stage 2, the Research wing, mostly bookstacks (1967). It set a new benchmark for library buildings in Australia, and Stage 1 was awarded both the Medal of the Royal Institute of British Architects and the Sulman Award for Architectural Merit.

The award was shared by supervising architects Edward Farmer, NSW Government Architect, and Thomas O’Mahony as well as Ken Woolley, the design architect. Woolley was particularly involved with much of the design detail including furniture and other fittings.

It proved to be a flexible building, well able to adapt to new needs and uses. Its reading areas, seating about 3000 at single and multiple desks, were heavily used and often crowded from the beginning. The music listening area pioneered the provision of recreational facilities in a university library. Students could use headphones to listen to any of several thousand LP records being played on multiple turntables. It was an extremely popular service for 30 years until the advent of personal music players.

The building was constructed to a high standard and utilised imported materials and technology not previously used in Australian libraries. At the time of its construction, the Library had the largest reverse-cycle air-conditioning plant in Australia. Rubber tile floors and acoustic ceiling tiles were used to suppress noise. Andrew Osborn was particularly insistent on the rubber floor tiles which proved too soft for the stiletto heels then in vogue for women. Regulations were invoked to prevent damage to the floors but shoe fashions changed and total disaster was averted.

In 1964 the first coin-operated photo copier was installed for student use and a punched card system was introduced for loans.

At the time of its construction, the Library had the largest reverse-cycle air-conditioning plant in Australia.

From top: Moving into the new Fisher Library; Library staff taking a break; the old Fishery.

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1966 The Library's one-millionth book

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At the time of its construction, the Library had the largest reverse-cycle air-conditioning plant in Australia.
The stack building was occupied from 1967 and its interior design and function was influenced heavily by Harrison Bryan who succeeded Osborn as Librarian in 1963. Bryan had spent the previous 13 years as the Librarian at the University of Queensland and was a seasoned fighter in university politics. He convinced the University to build the stack as a single project rather than in stages. His victory required compromise in the standard of internal fittings, the use of part of the building for non-library functions and the deletion of the bronze cladding to the building exterior. The cladding was eventually installed in 1971 by which time it was evident that without it the building was not waterproof.

Forty-six years after it opened, Fisher Library is ready for a total renovation. The high quality of the original construction and design enabled the building to survive without major change. Even the greatest buildings, however, require significant care and periodic re-evaluation. Architects have been engaged to develop a masterplan to ensure compliance with current building codes and address the needs of the University into the future.

Collections housed in the Library will focus on the humanities and social sciences, and complement the adjacent Law Library.

The vision for the building is to retain and enhance distinguishing design and functional features, especially the flexibility of its layout, and to utilise the space to provide better facilities and services for learning and research. When the Fisher Library was built it served a total student population of about 17,000. Today there are over 47,000 and more space needs to be provided for study and informal learning. To achieve extra space, it will be necessary to reconsider the way in which the entire building is used. A significant proportion of the collection does not relate to the humanities and social sciences and will be considered for relocation to other libraries or to storage. Other parts of the collection have had very little use over many years and may also be transferred to storage.

Crucial to the renovation of the building will be the provision of additional lifts and emergency exits; replacement of the now outmoded air-conditioning plant and significant upgrading of electrical and plumbing services. Internally, each floor of the building will be refurbished including the provision of more facilities that enable access to the latest technologies for accessing and using information. Consideration is being given to a café and 24-hour access to at least part of the building.

Funding has been received from the federal government through the Better Universities Renewal Fund and the Teaching and Learning Capital Fund. These allocations will allow the basic infrastructure to be replaced or upgraded, and to renovate the four lower floors. The project will be completed in time for the 50th anniversary of the building in 1963.

The cladding was eventually installed in 1971 by which time it was evident that without it the building was not waterproof.
Although many regard the Fisher Library as the University Library, it is more akin to a large province of a quite diverse and dispersed empire. The University expanded rapidly following World War II and so did the number of libraries. The Librarian’s empire grew piecemeal as departmental libraries were transferred into the realm. By 1947, both the Medical and Law Libraries were branches of the University Library.

When the present Fisher Library opened in 1963, there were a number of branch libraries but none could challenge it in size or eminence. In the intervening years, the number of libraries increased to a peak of 29. Services are now provided from 13 locations on eight campuses.

The libraries have undergone significant changes in order to cope with collection growth, continual increase in student numbers and the high dependence on information and communication technologies. The Library empire stretches to wherever members of the University have access to the internet. At any time of the day it is possible to use millions of journal articles, books, images and other information through the Library website. In addition to online use, more than 3 million visits are made to libraries annually.

The origins of the current network of libraries date from the early days of the University. Shortage of space for the collection led to professors housing books in their rooms. When the Fisher Library opened in 1909, many were reluctant to relinquish the treasures they had appropriated. These collections were augmented by books donated by academic staff and over time many became departmental libraries. The integrity and independence of these collections was guarded zealously and access was usually restricted to researchers. The departmental library was frequently a place to meet other staff and a valued haven from maddening crowds.

Over time, space and other resource constraints led to some of the libraries being offered to the University Library for safe-keeping. Custodians of precious items rarely find it easy to surrender control. Departments and individuals maintained their interest in the libraries and sometimes were reluctant to accept changes that were necessary to make the collections more accessible or to meet changed financial circumstances.

As the University grew, buildings were erected to the west of the Quadrangle and small departmental libraries appeared in each new building. Fisher Library, however, remained the sole library for undergraduates on campus until 1934. In that year, a new medical building opened funded by the Rockefeller Foundation. A medical library occupied space in the central octagon of the building which was later renamed after former Chancellor, Sir Charles Bickerton Blackburn. The Medical Library relocated to the Bosch Building in 1968 and has also been home since 2007 to the Pharmacy collection. In 2010 it will include the Public-Health collection currently located in the Burdett-Ford Library.

Beginning in 1890, Law students attended lectures in the city in a series of locations none of which included adequate access to library materials. The situation changed in 1914 when space became available in the University Chambers building located in Martin Place. Provision was made to allocate four rooms for a library. When the Law School relocated to a new building in Phillip Street in 1969, the Law Library was allocated four floors and was second in size to the Fisher Library.

More departmental libraries were transferred during the period that Harrison Bryan was the Librarian (1963–80). By the end of 1975 the University Library comprised the Fisher Library, 16 branches and four departmental libraries. Many other departmental libraries existed but they tended to be small research-focused collections not available to undergraduates.

An outstanding exception was the Power Institute of Fine Arts Library. Its extensive collection was not only available but listed on the University Library online catalogue. It continues to be administered separately due to being funded entirely from the Power Bequest.

Harrison Bryan presided over the University Library during a period of considerable change within the University as well as expansion in tertiary education and the adoption of new technology to improve Library services. In 1964 the first coin-operated photocopier was installed for student use and a punched card system was introduced for loans. It was replaced in 1975 by a fully auto-mated circulation process.

Bryan resigned to become Director-General of the National Library of Australia in 1980 and Neil A Radford was appointed Librarian. With Bryan at the National Library, collaboration among Australian libraries intensified. The University of Sydney Library was a foundation member and became a leading contributor to the national database of library holdings.

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Scott Mitchell “Only a few copies were published fortunately. I withdrew the book from publication.”

A mere decade later a symbolic two-millionth volume was needed, and the Friends again offered to find a suitable candidate. They chose, fittingly, the first of only six manuscript copies made by former Librarian John Le Gay Brereton, of his Sea and Sky, a collection of poems. This copy is dedicated to his wife and is in his distinctively beautiful handwriting.

By 1970 the staff of the University Library had grown to over 200. Computer input of current cataloguing began in 1971 and in 1972 the first electronic book detection system was installed in the Medical Library. In 1976 the first tentative steps were taken to search an overseas database, Medline, on a computer terminal lent by the Faculty of Medicine.

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In 1993 a review of the Library was held, led by Professor Mairead Browne. Implementation of its major recommendations began the following year with the University funding a new automated system. The new system went live in 1995 and transformed the Library into a full network, offering automated services at all sites. The Library’s first web site was launched that year.

Another major recommendation of the review was that “all the University of Sydney libraries be managed as one system for which the University Librarian is responsible” and in 1996 three department libraries and the Cumberland College of Health Sciences joined the Library system. The Library then operated on nine campuses. Implementation of this recommendation was difficult and remains unachieved.

The 1990s saw the advent of the Internet which opened new horizons for the Library and the provision of access to information. The Library quickly recognised the opportunities of the new information environment. Training programs for students were introduced and the provision of computer workstations was expanded. The libraries became preferred places on campus for online learning and access to a wide range of knowledge sources.

The Scholarly Electronic Text and Image Service (SETIS) was established in 1996 to provide a platform for full-text databases and to facilitate textual studies at the University. SETIS was funded largely by a bequest from F G Clark. It provided space for over 650,000 volumes and eased pressure on accommodation in the libraries.

Sufficient suitable accommodation for the collections continued to be a concern. The gradual release of additional space in the stack ameliorated the situation in the Fisher Library but there was insufficient space for collection growth in the other libraries. The University provided storage facilities in various buildings but they were inadequate. After many false starts the Darlington Repository Library was opened in 1983 funded largely by a bequest from F G Clark. It provided space for over 650,000 volumes and eased pressure on accommodation in the libraries.

On 1 January 1990, three colleges of advanced education and two parts of a fourth amalgamated with the University. After protracted negotiations the Institutes of Education and Nursing of the Sydney College of Advanced Education joined the University Library but the three college libraries remained separate. The mergers took total staff numbers to 271, boosted the collections to 4.2 million items and increased the number of branch libraries to 22. The addition of the four-millionth item went unnoticed in the turmoil.

Neil Radford retired in mid-1996 and the Library was administered by Kate Sexton and Judy Campbell as Acting University Librarians until the appointment of John Shipp in late 1997. Shipp had been Librarian at the University of Wollongong since 1988.

The 1990s saw the advent of the Internet which opened new horizons for the Library and the provision of access to information. The three-millionth volume was acquired in 1983, again presented by the Friends. This time a splendid Bodoni printing of Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe (1786), formerly in the collection of Walter Stone, a founder of the Friends group. Another seven years brought the four-millionth book, Benjamin Franklin’s Experiments and Observations on Electricity (1769), part of the history of science collection given to the Library by Emeritus Professor Walter Moore.

Neil Radford, University Librarian, 1980–96

Trips to the stacks and the serials room meant there was plenty of exercise to be had. In the mid-70s, under the management of Neil Radford and Barbara Troy, the first evidence of the new information age appeared in a little office behind the reference desk. A computer terminal (PCs were a long way off) was installed, attached to a telephone and a large box leased from Telecom – the first modem we’d ever seen. Long distance telephone calls connected us to mainframe computers in the US, and the modem poured information onto the terminal screen at a heady 30 characters per second. Librarians were suddenly imbued with a kind of glamour – we were among the first visible users of computers anywhere. We started doing online searches for a lucky few academics, and the digital information tsunami had begun.

Reference questions and pleas for help in using the library always led to movement. Reader and librarian would go together to the huge card catalogue to pull out drawers full of cards to check holdings. More detailed questions about scholarly literature took us to long sessions wrestling with the very weighty tomes of Chemical Abstracts, Beilstein, the early printed Citation Indexes and more. There was much bending and stretching to set of encyclopedias, dictionaries, directories, and reference works of all kinds – all in print.

Katie Blake, 2009
and a member of the 1993 University of Sydney Library Review team. Although many of the review recommendations had been implemented, Shipp was expected to complete the task, continue the redevelopment of the University Library in an online environment and reduce costs.

A restructuring process was begun driven by a funding shortfall, the need to change the way in which Library staff worked as well as changes occurring in higher education. A large number of print journals were cancelled but a few years later the introduction of online versions enabled the Library to provide access to more than three times the number of titles available in 1997. A policy of acquiring networked electronic resources in preference to print was instituted in 1999. By the turn of the century the Library’s web site had become the primary access to library resources and services.

The Associate University Librarian (Branch Libraries), Judy Campbell sought every opportunity to implement the 1993 Review Committee recommendations. The Orange Agricultural College and the Sydney College of the Arts libraries joined the University Library in 1998. The Conservatorium of Music remained separate due to preoccupation with the construction of a new building adjacent to the Verbrugghen Hall on Macquarie Street. Responsibility for the Conservatorium Library was transferred finally in 2008.

On the Camperdown campus, the Geology and Geography libraries were merged to form the Geosciences Library in 1998. The Wolstenholme Library was closed that year and the collection transferred to the Fisher Library to join other economics and business collections. At the end of 1998, the University Library comprised 29 libraries located on 10 campuses. From then on, the number of libraries was reduced slowly as part of the strategy recommended by the Library Review Committee. Progress was achieved, however, more often by opportunism and pragmatism than rational decision-making by the University.

Further closures and amalgamations occurred over the ensuing years – the Alexander Mackie Curriculum Resources Library and the Chemistry Library closed in 2002 and the Biochemistry Library in the following year. In 2006 the Orange Campus was transferred to Charles Sturt University and its library was part of

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2009

John Shipp, University Librarian since 1997

1999 – a preference for electronic resources

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2008 – The SciTech Library occupies 4,500 square metres ... it provided a radically different environment to any library within the University.

Real progress with library consolidation was impossible without the provision of substantial contiguous space. A proposal to build a Science and Medical Library in Fisher Road was seen as a means of achieving the Review Committee’s recommendation. The proposed library would have replaced the Transient Building that had been erected in the 1940s as temporary chemistry laboratory accommodation! The proposal glimmered dimly for a while but was soon relegated to oblivion as other building priorities gained favour.

Librarians tend to be a tenacious and pragmatic breed often outlasting other powerbrokers within a university. Longevity and changes in university leadership frequently provide opportunities that can be exploited by having well-developed and reasoned plans at hand. The omens were favourable when the University embarked on its Campus 2010 development plan.

A key aspect of the plan involved a new building for the Faculty of Law on the Camperdown campus adjacent to the Fisher Library. Suddenly, there was an opportunity to provide improved accommodation for the Law Library and, perhaps, interconnect with the Fisher Library. Also in the plan was a student services building on the Darlington campus fronting City Road. That building was soon regarded as an ideal site for a library bringing together five physical sciences collections.

The SciTech Library occupies 4500 square metres in the podium of the Jane Foss Russell building. When it opened on 25 July 2008, it provided a radically different environment to any library within the University. It was designed by John Wardle Architects to be a student-centred place with an obvious emphasis on technology. Throughout the library there is an exciting mix of individual and group study places as well as rooms for collaborative work. Write-on walls and tables are a special feature avidly used by students. The library is distinguished by a series of terraces overlooking Cadigal Green. These areas provide a mix of study places that suit the diverse ways in which students learn and interact with one another. Closer to City Road are quiet study areas and book shelves. Overall, the SciTech Library conveys an impression of enthusiasm and excitement for learning that some might find overly stimulating but which suits those who use the library.

The Freehills Law Library was opened on 16 February 2009 and was named after principal sponsors, the law firm Freehills. Designed by Sydney architects FJMT, it provides 5000 square metres of floor space over two levels and is a dignified environment befitting the legal profession. In addition to housing one of the best legal collections in Australia, the library contains
a variety of reader places. These include individual study desks, group tables, lounge seating and collaboration rooms.

The north wing of the library has soaring wood panelled ceilings that provide a dramatic effect of spaciousness. A feature of this part of the library is a light tower housing a reading room sponsored by the Turnbull Family Foundation. While there is some interconnection with the Fisher Library, it is minimal. So long accustomed to having a separate library, the Faculty resisted any attempts to interconnect the two libraries.

In the centenary year of the Fisher Library, the University Library is re-evaluating its role and the way in which it will support learning and research into the future. Physical libraries will remain a vital part of the suite of services and experiences available to students, staff and other scholars. Space provided for collections may decrease as more resources are available online but the role of the library as a learning and research space will increase.

In 2002 the Library purchased its five-millionth acquisition, Early English Books Online (EEBO). The purchase was made possible by bequests from Richard Hanly and Barbara Browning. The purchase of EBBO presaged a new era for the Library. Online journals had become increasingly accepted by this time but the idea of an online monograph was largely untested. EEBO provides access to virtually every work printed in English from 1473 to 1700. Since the acquisition of EEBO, the publication of ebooks has increased considerably. The Library now provides access to more than 300,000.

The main users of the University libraries are students and they expect that the libraries will provide them with a range of facilities which enable them to study independently as well as to work in groups outside of class with access to significant online resources and associated technology. Most students juggle work, home and study commitments and require access to a range of learning spaces and resources for times longer than current University operating hours.

The Library’s future strategies are aimed at longer opening hours for the libraries with at least some of them open for close to 24 hours. This will be complemented by an extension of the digital strategy which is aimed at releasing some of the space currently used for book storage to enable the provision of improved facilities for research and learning.

A distinguishing feature of university libraries into the future will be their involvement in the creation, preservation and dissemination of knowledge. The Library developed a lot of expertise through the Scholarly Electronic Text and Imaging Service which has created electronic editions of more than 200 works already published in print. This expertise has been developed further by the creation of the Sydney eScholarship unit which undertakes a range of activities associated with the digital information environment. Services include advising scholars on how to create and maintain research data as well as providing facilities for storing data that has long term value. The unit includes Sydney University Press which operates as both a print and digital publisher.
It is interesting to speculate on how the University of Sydney Library might have developed had Thomas Fisher not made his bequest. The founders of the University knew that it needed a strong and well-rounded library, but financial stringency inhibited them from doing as much to achieve this goal as they clearly wanted to. Walker’s gift of the Stenthouse collection was an important encouragement, and books trickled in from other sources and from the small amounts available for purchasing. But, with no effective Librarian in the critical early years, no viable foundation was laid for the Library’s development.

There seems to have been no plan for accommodating the Library once it outgrew its original room, and its spread into makeshift accommodation in various other rooms in the main building did nothing to assist students to make use of what it offered them. The dispersal of the more important books into professors’ rooms was a short-term expediency which brought long-term problems of access. The University was struggling in its early years, and its Library was but a weak support for its academic work. While there may have been a desire to strengthen the Library and provide for its proper housing, the resources available did not allow much progress to be made.

Thomas Fisher’s endowment was critical to the Library’s success. It was only the regular income from the Fisher bequest which allowed the collection to be developed into one which could genuinely support the work of the growing institution, and it was only the existence of this endowment which persuaded the state government to provide a building to house the growing collection. The conclusion is inescapable that, without Fisher’s bequest, the Library would have limped along weakly for many decades, and would not today be the largest university library in the country, and one of world class in many respects.

‘All honour be given to Mr Fisher’s memory’ exclaimed Sir Normand MacLaurin at the Commemoration Ceremony in 1910, amid the cheering which greeted his announcement that the largest and most impressive library building in the country had been completed. “May his excellent example be followed by many other patriotic citizens.”

Statistics

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Since the beginning the Library has been singularly fortunate in attracting countless gifts and bequests, both of books and of funds. Requests and endowments have enriched the Library providing opportunities for acquisitions and development in keeping with the vision of a great library for scholarship. Gifts of significant collections and books have helped distinguish this Library above those of other universities.

The first significant benefaction was Thomas Walker’s gift of the Stenhouse collection in 1878. Thomas Fisher’s bequest in 1884 of the bulk of his estate for “establishing and maintaining a library” created the first endowment fund. In 1887 Sir Charles Nicholson, the University’s first Chancellor, made the first of many donations of rare books and manuscripts. Nicholson was probably Australia’s first great collector, and it is due to him that the library has the finest Australian collection of early manuscripts and one of the strongest collections of incunabula (books printed before 1501).

The Stenhouse and Nicholson collections provided firm scholarly foundations for the fledging library, and the Fisher Bequest provided the funding for the future building and collections.

Over the following century and a half the library has benefited significantly from the generosity of many benefactors, only a few of whom can be acknowledged here.

In 1959 William Deane gave his personal library of Australiana, erotica and the history of science, and also endowed two bookfunds to ensure the growth of these collections in the future.

In 1961 the private library of Australian composer and scholar Robert Dalley-Scarlett was gifted. This large and significant collection includes early editions of Handel operas and oratorios. This collection was consolidated by a further gift of rare Handel material by Edward Richardson in 1977.

One of the most significant single gifts to the Library was quietly donated in December of 1961 by Barbara Bruce Smith of Bowral—a copy of Isaac Newton’s Philosophiae Naturalis Principia Mathematica (1687).

During the 1970s the Library benefited from several major endowments and gifts, including the science fiction and fantasy collection of Ron Graham (1979); the Elis Troughton Bequest utilised for Badham Library (1974); and an endowment for the humanities from Tony Gilbert (1979), a fund continually added to till his death and subsequent bequest this year.

In 1981 the Bruce Williams Fund for the Library was established to mark the retirement of Sir Bruce Williams as Vice-Chancellor. This fund has raised substantial sums from graduates of the University. The regular appeals to graduates for the Fund also encouraged graduates to consider including the Library in their Will, and several significant bequests have subsequently been received. Other notable endowments received during the 1980s include those of Sir Alfred Meeks, GH McGregor, the J J Hunter Memorial fund, and the Matthew Morrissey Bequest for Asian pictorial works of art.

The Library was a beneficiary of several major endowments and bequest during the 1990s, including those of Eric Edwards, Charlotte McGregor, Barbara Browning, Selby Old, Ethel Richmond and Sir John Proud. These funds have been used for the purchase of many significant works supporting research and scholarship that the Library would not normally have afforded to acquire.

Over the last decade significant bequests were received from Leslie Lillie, Richard Hanly, (funding the purchase of Early English Books Online) and Library staff member Pamela Green. Generous funding has been received from Neil Burns for the purchase of material supporting Japanese studies, and Drs Bill and Sally Nelson. Former University Librarian Neil Radford endowed a welcomed staff development scholarship scheme for Library staff. Major collections received by gift include the Maurice Sady колл while of children’s literature, former ANU Librarian Colin Steel’s collection of science fiction complementing the Ron Graham collection, and the manuscript collections of science fiction writers Ian Irvine and Traci Harding.

During 2009, the year of the Fisher centenary, the Library has welcomed the gift of the Windy Greer collection, and the history collection of Malcolm Broun.

In 1990 – the four-millionth book, Benjamin Franklin’s Experiments and Observation on Electricity (1769), part of the history of science collection given to the Library by Emeritus Professor Walter Moore.

2002 – the Library purchased its five-millionth acquisition, Early English Books Online (EEBO), made possible by bequests from Richard Hanly and Barbara Browning.
“This generation will soon pass away but the torch of learning will be handed down by the influence of this great library to generation after generation of Australian scholars.”

Sir Normand MacLaurin, Chancellor, on the opening of the ‘old’ Fisher Library in 1909.

The Friends of the Library, who donated the one, two and three-millionth books, was established in 1962, only the second such library friends group in Australia. It brought together collectors and potential benefactors, united in the aim of supporting and enriching the library. Members donate books and subscribe to a bookfund with which the library can acquire important materials. Since their establishment the Friends have raised more than $300,000 to support the Library, have presented more than 500 rare volumes, and have assisted in the acquisition of major collections.

Among major purchases made possible through the Friends and other endowed funds have been the Macdonald collection of 17th and 18th century English literature, including many early editions of Dryden, the strongest collection of its type in the Southern Hemisphere; the Stewart collection of archaeology, the Chadwick collection, one of the most important private libraries of Celtic studies in the world; and contributed to the purchase of important Australian manuscript collections including Gilmore, Lawson, Norman Lindsay and Douglas Stewart. An on-going Friends project is strengthening the Library’s notable collection of books from Australian private presses.

The legacy of the Friends can be found in these works. A legacy provided through the Library to the University, to scholars and to the community.

1966 – the one-millionth acquisition was presented by the newly-established Friends of the University Library, 115 years after Dr Mackaen’s Lexicon Graeco-Latinum Novum had been acquired to start the collection off, it was Henry Lawson’s first book, Short Stories in Prose and Verse (Sydney, 1894). It seems that Lawson was not proud of it, writing to David Scott Mitchell “Only a few copies were published fortunately. I withdrew the book from publication.”

1976 – a symbolic two-millionth volume was needed. The Friends chose, fittingly, the first of only six manuscript copies made by former Librarian John Le Gay Brereton, of his Sea and Sky, a collection of poems. This copy is dedicated to his wife and is in his distinctively beautiful handwriting.

1983 – the three-millionth volume presented by the Friends was a splendid Bodoni printing of Longus’s Daphnis and Chloe (1786), formerly in the collection of Walter Stone, a founder of the Friends group.

We welcome new members!
To contact us for a membership form Phone: 02 9351 7266 or Email: friends@library.usyd.edu.au or print a copy from the Friends website: www.library.usyd.edu.au/about/friends

Above: Professor Margaret Harris curated the exhibition Speaking Volumes: the Three Decker Novel and spoke at the opening 26 May 2009, Rare Books & Special Collections, Fisher Library.
Principal sources


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Sydney Morning Herald, 21 September 1909, pp.7–8 and 25 September 1909, p. 5.


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Encapture Photography: The Hon Bill Windeyer p. 47.
Margaret Eva. Former staff photos p. 31.
Ted Sealey: Inside front and back covers, staff and students pp. 40–41.
Rare Books and Special Collections: Historical photos.
University of Sydney Archives: Architectural drawings of MacLaurin Hall.