

## **THE STATE LIBRARY OF VICTORIA IN 2006 – A REPORT CARD FROM REGULAR USERS**

During the last two decades the State Library of Victoria has taken over the whole of the Swanston Street complex it once shared with the National Gallery of Victoria and Museum Victoria. All governments since the mid-1980s have contributed to the gradual refurbishment of the buildings on site. In the most recent period various unsatisfactory offsite repositories in Melbourne suburbs have been replaced by a custom-built storage facility in the grounds of the University of Ballarat, and a four-year commitment has been made – in line with the massive *SLV21* initiative – to digitisation of important items from the Library's collections. The State Library User Organisations' Council salutes the progress that has been made and welcomes the interest all political parties have shown in the Library. However, the job of updating is not yet complete. The present document is intended to set out briefly what needs to be done by 2010, in other words during the next parliamentary term, to make the State Library of Victoria a place that meets all the requirements of regular users and professional researchers. Only then can the institution claim to have regained its premier status in Australia.

### **1. Completion of the Swanston Street Refurbishment**

At present the Queen's Hall and the three levels of the old Barry building on the Little Lonsdale Street frontage of the Library languish in a deplorably unrenovated state. These substantial spaces were effectively the institution for more than the first half-century of its existence. Hence, for heritage reasons alone, they call out for thorough and sympathetic restoration. As far as we can gather, the Library administration does not plan to integrate them fully into the day-to-day functioning of its core operations. In the view of our Council any plan of this kind should be carefully reviewed, in particular the commercial use of these areas. In the meantime thought should be given to ways in which additional space could help with some of the problems users experience in the other generous but heritage-constrained rooms in the building complex. Any such rethinking should not stand in the way of urgent completion of the refurbishment project.

### **2. Making Best Use of the Areas still to be Refurbished**

We understand that the Queen's Hall, now lying outside the security entrance to the Library, is to be reserved for functions (including those hired out commercially) and perhaps, at other times, for tourist viewing. Although we can imagine circumstances a decade or so hence when it may be desirable to reintegrate the Queen's Hall into the working areas of the Library, we accept this temporary solution provided the entire space is not leased on an annual or other basis to a commercial operator. Such use of the Queen's Hall is far preferable to the current practice of holding in the Cowen Gallery 'events' that are a major disruption for readers. At the same time, however, we believe that the restoration should preserve the fundamental library character of the Queen's Hall. The example of the Playfair Library Hall of the University of Edinburgh, which is used for functions and conferences as well as for the storage of lesser used sections of the University's book and periodical collections, provides a perfectly acceptable model.

On the other hand, the former Barry Hall, to which access can be obtained via the South Wing of the Domed Reading Room, should be seriously considered for restoration as an Advanced Reading Room, suitable for researchers wanting to make extensive use of the

Library's own collections rather than of personal notes they have brought into the building. In particular, this would make it possible to re store to open access extensive runs of government documents and other sets that were formerly available in the old La Trobe Library on La Trobe Street but cannot be accommodated in the Domed Reading Room. The complaints we receive constantly from regular research users indicate the pressing need for a facility in between the general rooms crowded with students and the Heritage Reading Room. The refurbishment is an excellent opportunity to tackle this problem. In our view it should not be missed.

### 3. **Problems Faced by Users at Present**

We are well aware of the problems faced by the Library as it attempts to make economical and effective use of a grand but hugely difficult building complex. Heritage rules limiting what can be set out on open access in the various rooms and the distances between storage and reading areas are only two of the reasons for a certain dys-functionality of the Library in the eyes of regular users. Various matters are, of course, being discussed with the Library administration. Because solutions depend in some cases on input from outside and in particular from government, the difficulties are listed summarily here:

- (a) the absence of advanced reference material on open access from reading rooms in both Australian and non-Australian collections;
- (b) the pressing need to review the operations of the Heritage Reading Room (absence of powerpoints at the central tables; no reference collection at all; episodic presence at best of specialist librarians whose role cannot realistically be filled by the rostered room supervisors; strain on staff of coping with many different classes of material – rare books, manuscripts, bound newspapers, maps etc.; need to tighten rules – in line with national and international practice – for communication of manuscripts in particular; lighting) and even to question the reliance on this one service point for so many diverse special collections;
- (c) absence of the possibility of ordering offsite material online;
- (d) no manning of specialist desks after 6.00 p.m., particularly sensitive in the La Trobe area, since reference material becomes *ipso facto* unavailable;
- (e) the unavailability of stack service beyond 6.00 p.m. from Monday to Thursday when 8.00 p.m. would be a fairer limit for readers occupied elsewhere between 10.00 a.m. and 6.00 p.m.;
- (f) lack of easy and reasonably prompt access to specialist staff, e.g. in Pictures or Maps – illustrated by the need for appointments and a frustrating system of telephone inquiries;
- (g) the *de facto* charge for entry to the Library because of the paying lockers (up to \$2.00 per day) – a situation it is far from easy to find replicated elsewhere in Australia or in the rest of the civilised world. (While the present service contract is in force, a whole-day charge – from 10.00 am – of \$1.00 would provide appreciable relief for heavy users of the Library.)

#### 4. **The Need for a Review of the Library's Recurrent Grant**

Many of the problems listed in 3 stem from the pressures on the Library's recurrent budget. A much bigger building has to be run, more services have to be provided (e.g. permanent and temporary exhibitions, public presentations etc), and staff have to maintain and enhance their professional expertise. In many ways they are doing a remarkable job, and we acknowledge their contribution. However, resources are being stretched too far. Perhaps priorities in other areas can and should be reviewed, but we do not know enough about the Library's budget to comment on this. What we do know is that a few more people on the ground and freedom from the need to charge for lockers and to make similar damaging savings would demonstrate a real commitment by the Government of Victoria to an institution that remains central to historical research in the broadest possible sense. Lifting the recurrent grant to a realistic figure and indexing it thereafter seem to us to be reasonable requests. They will help make sense of all the capital that has gone into remaking and extending the buildings.

We do not want to have to make the same complaints again in four years' time. Unfortunately we have had the impression for some years that the groups we represent in particular – the broad community of academic and professional historians, genealogists, private researchers, writers and the whole range of serious users envisaged in the Library's own *Collection Development Policy* of 2001 – do not have strident enough voices to be heard. Yet we are the ones who write the books and articles and prepare the family histories, in other words we are the ones who make sure that the body of knowledge enshrined in the Library reaches the widest possible audience. We should like to think that we could count in future on government support and sympathy manifested in adequate financing of our major working tool, whose digital and conventional resources are equally important to us.