

## The National Library Fire

On Friday evening, 9 March at about 7pm a fire broke out in the National Library. The alarm registered automatically at fire brigade headquarters and the brigade was quickly on the scene. Although at one stage it was feared that the whole building and its irreplaceable collections might be lost, the fire was extinguished by about midnight and Library staff were able to enter the building to do what they could to protect the collections from undue water damage.

In the cold light of day on Saturday morning, and increasingly as the days passed, it became clear that, while we had escaped a major disaster by the narrowest of margins, the damage done to the collections had been astonishingly light.

In summary, no item in the collections was exposed directly to the fire and only a relatively small number have been affected by water damage. There remains only the long term threat, which it is impossible to assess, of damage from smoke and soot. These pervaded almost every corner of the building and every item in it.

The cause of the fire will not be known for some time, since it is the subject of a coroner's inquiry. Hopefully, when the coroner's findings are released it will assist the Library and others in guarding against similar outbreaks.



**Librarians at work! Removing some of the surplus water the morning after the fire.**

What seems clear is that the fire broke out in or near the area of the fifth floor, that is to say the space immediately under the roof. It certainly burnt very fiercely in this area, destroying a considerable section of the Library's air-conditioning plant. It is thought that it may have been fuelled by plastic sheeting in use by the contractors removing asbestos from the roof area and by insulation surrounding electrical wiring.



**The drying area in the main foyer**

A particular complication for the fire brigade was the occurrence of 'spot fires' at some distance from the presumed centre of the outbreak. These may have been caused by flaming material dropping through ducting. Certainly, at one stage, such a fire sprang up in the main boiler room on Lower Ground Floor 2, some six floors distant from the main fire.

A further problem was caused by the thick, acrid smoke which quickly filled the building and hampered the brigade's efforts to fight the fire from indoors. Ultimately it was necessary to remove a considerable part of the roof and pour in water from above.

In the final outcome direct fire damage was restricted to the roof area, the air-conditioning plant and a substantial amount of electrical wiring in two major vertical ducts. All this was concentrated at the southern (Commonwealth Avenue) end of the building. With the exception of the roof, none of the fire damage is visible from outside the building or indeed from inside it in the areas used by staff or readers.

The effects of water, smoke and soot, however, were widespread and the building certainly looked a shambles on Saturday morning, with water underfoot in many stack areas and dripping constantly through every ceiling. It is a measure both of the superficiality of the damage and of the devoted work put to minimizing it, however, that only a week after the disaster it was difficult to see any evidence of it, with the exception of the soot deposited on the top edges of virtually all the four million or so items in the building.

A particularly worrying casualty, however, was the Library's computer. On Saturday morning it looked as if there were only three problems with it; an interrupted power supply, a lack of air-conditioning and what seemed to be a minor amount of water damage.

To these, however, had to be added, as with the collections, the unknown damage done by soot and smoke and, in the upshot, the suppliers of the mainframe and disc drives decided that their hardware would have to be removed off site for overhaul.

A fortnight after the fire virtually all the books which had suffered water damage had been dried and re-shelved, and the building itself was largely back to its pristine appearance. The staff had been back at work since the Monday following the fire, service to distant customers through MEDLINE and Loans and Locations had been restored and arrangements had been made for the effective cleaning of all soot-affected books.

Unfortunately the air-conditioning was not functioning, the computer was off the air, and the major part of the collections had still to be cleared of soot. How have these three major problems been addressed?

First, as to the air-conditioning, fortunately some 50% or so of the installation was spared and a successful experiment over the weekend of 16-18 March indicated that this "rump" could be persuaded to provide a reduced service to about 50% of the building. The served areas are not contiguous, however, and they do not include substantial staff work areas.

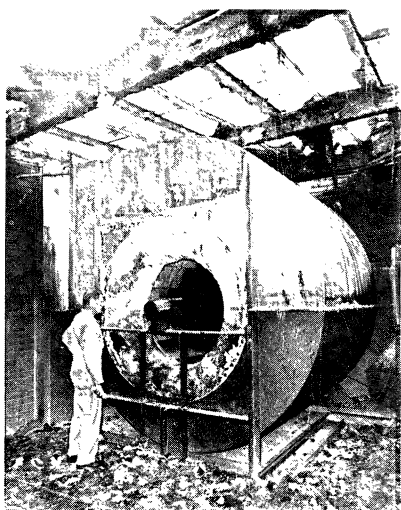
For the two weeks following the fire the staff worked without any air-conditioning at all, by dint of opening as many windows as possible and on the clear undertaking, given by the Director-General that if conditions became intolerable they would be sent home.

With the re-introduction of reduced air-conditioning, conditions may, in fact, worsen in some areas and considerable rearrangement of staff may be required including the temporary use of public space as work areas.

The Library was re-opened to the public on Monday, 25 March.

## NATIONAL LIBRARY FIRE — contd.

It is not known how long it will be before full air-conditioning can be restored, but the massive damage done to equipment ensures that it will be a matter of months rather than weeks.



**Why the air-conditioning does not work and what happened to the roof.**

Second, thanks to the efforts of the Library's ADP Systems Branch and to the co-operation of the authorities concerned, a temporary site has been found for the installation of a replacement computer, which the manufacturers have air-freighted from Japan.

This has been a remarkably successful exercise, given the premium on accommodation in Canberra and the range of interests to be co-ordinated, in particular our landlords the Australian Bureau of Statistics, the suppliers of the hardware and Telecom.

The third problem, cleaning the collections, raises massive logistic questions as well as issues of methodology. The latter have been addressed by the fabrication, in house, of an effective cleaner operating on compressed air. The former will require considerable temporary additions to staff.

The process of recovery and rehabilitation clearly will involve considerable expense. The Council of the National Library is deeply appreciative of the action of the Minister for Arts, Heritage and Environment, the Hon. B. Cohen, in acting virtually immediately after the fire, to secure Government commitment to the necessary funds.

What the final bill will be is still unclear. Detailed discussions have been initiated with the Department of Finance and all other interested bodies. Following an inspection of the building on the Monday following the fire the Minister accepted a preliminary assessment of the damage as being of the order of \$3.5 million. Subsequently he noted publicly that damage to the computer was more extensive than had been thought and that to replace that one item would cost in the order of \$4 million.

May I take this opportunity of expressing publicly, as I have already done directly to the people concerned, the Library's appreciation of what others did during and after the fire to help us avert what could have been a major catastrophe.

First the emergency services, the fire brigade in particular, but also the police, responded with promptness, professionalism and complete dedication. A word too must be said for the Salvation Army who appeared magically with a much appreciated free canteen for exhausted fire-fighters.

Next, as one would have expected, the Library staff performed with great credit, from

the group who worked for hours under quite impossible conditions immediately the fire was extinguished to protect the collections from water damage, to the one hundred and fifty who arrived spontaneously on the morning after, prepared to see at least part of their weekend go up the spout and indeed to the more than six hundred who have carried on uncomplainingly under much less than ideal conditions ever since.

Finally, the Library greatly appreciates the offers of help and expressions of sympathy it has received from a wide spectrum of the community in Canberra, throughout Australia and indeed from sister institutions overseas.

We are particularly grateful for the assistance given by volunteers from the Australian Archives, the Australian National Gallery, the Australian War Memorial, the Museum of Australia and the National Film and Sound Archive during the immediate clean-up operations over the first weekend and since.

It has been particularly heartening to discover, through this near calamity, the high regard in which the Library is held throughout the community and the importance which is attached to it both by the Government and the public.

*Harrison Bryan*  
Director-General

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