

Conserve them all my days

The decay of library collections has often been described as 'a hidden problem', since to a large extent it involves a process of internal destruction that is taking place quietly and invisibly. Yet the aspect that remains most hidden and unrecognised is the destruction of books at their source — through the use of acidic paper in new publications. Despite the apparent freshness and strength of such books, the bulk of them are not destined to last for more than a few decades. A contemporary book launch is more often the prelude to a sinking than to a safe journey.

Three years have passed since this column first discussed the issue of permanent paper and reported on the development of an American standard for its production. Progress has been slow and fragmentary but a number of important advances have occurred — such as the campaign recently begun in America's National Library of Medicine to encourage medical publishers to use permanent paper, and the creation by the *Library Journal* of the 'Permanent Paper Honor Roll', as a means of recognising bodies that have adopted permanent paper in their publications and as a form of incentive to others.

Perhaps the key breakthrough, however, has been the resolution adopted in January this year by the Council of the American Library Association (ALA) urging all publishers to use permanent paper 'for publications of enduring value'. This resolution is not

only of practical significance, in that it intensifies the pressure on publishers and paper manufacturers to play their part in preserving the printed record, it is also of symbolic importance for it adds to the credibility of the efforts being made by individual libraries and librarians to respond to the preservation challenge.

A further example of the ALA's support in this area is the production of most of its own publications on durable paper. Once again, this decision is of symbolic as well as practical value for it would be difficult for a professional library association to advocate the use of permanent paper by other publishers if it did not adopt it.

For its part, the LAA has demonstrated an awareness of the problem. In May 1987, it co-sponsored a seminar on permanent paper, which brought together paper manufacturers, publishers and librarians. This forum provided a catalyst for the development — now in a draft stage — of an Australian standard for permanent paper.

In 1984, the LAA's Publications Board passed a resolution that 'where appropriate, LAA publications should be printed on acid-free paper and bound in acid-free covers'. The implementation of this resolution has been hampered by the unavailability of permanent paper in small quantities at a competitive price. Such paper does exist in Australia and can be fairly readily procured so long as a substantial order is placed. However, given the relatively small print runs of most Australian books, it may be necessary for publishers to co-ordinate their purchasing of paper — perhaps in the form of a consortium

— in order to achieve the necessary economies of scale. The LAA could well take the lead in encouraging Australian publishers in this direction, particularly after an Australian standard is promulgated.

The LAA has recently published a valuable handbook on the conservation of historical records. *Stopping the Rot: a handbook of preventive conservation for local studies collections* by Helen Price, the LAA Bicentennial Conservator associated with the Conservation on the Move project, provides guidance on the care and storage of a wide variety of materials, and will greatly assist those who are conscious of conservation needs and require professional advice on techniques.

Apart from the intrinsic importance of library preservation, the debate about permanent paper highlights another dimension of the issue, namely, its potential for raising the public profile of libraries. Preservation has a greater potential than many other issues for placing libraries on the political agenda. It affords an opportunity for the library community to make new contact with cultural leaders and arouse their concern about the destruction of our cultural and intellectual heritage — in the same way as concern has been effectively generated in recent decades about the destruction of our natural environment and architectural heritage. Preservation is, therefore, not simply a matter of professional importance but one of political promise which extends beyond the bounds of a single issue. This dual dimension is worth emphasising in the context of the upcoming Australian Libraries Summit.

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