

# Prison Libraries in Australia '88

by Phil Roberts

Australia has been a latecomer in the field of library services to prisoners. Prison libraries have been a backwater within our profession, and there are probably many of us who are not aware of their existence or their condition. Yet approximately 90 percent of our 76 prisons have libraries and the daily average inmate population across Australia is in the vicinity of 12,000. This population has needs often greater than those in the community at large, and its usage of libraries is commonly very high.

## Historical background

Probably the first organised prison library service in this country was in New South Wales, started around 1950 by the State Library. Unfortunately this initiative did not start a trend. As late as 1966, it was reported by John Balnaves in his *Australian libraries* that, although public libraries in some states were beginning to extend their services in this direction, prison libraries were generally provided by local voluntary effort. Collections were developed in a haphazard way, largely through donations (ie discards) from well-wishers. The so-called prison libraries were simply conglomerations of books without benefit of professional attention.

Criticisms of this state of affairs were made by Des Pickering and Helen Modra in their *Library services to the disadvantaged: a report to the nation* (1973) and subsequently by the Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries in their report — the Horton Report. Both reports pointed to the inadequacy of government funding for prison libraries. Ultimately, however, it was through the involvement of State libraries that improvements began to take place. In Western Australia for example, the Library Board contracted to provide books to prisons in the same way as to public libraries, with the Prison Department taking responsibility for accommodation, staffing and services. Similar arrangements have been made in a majority of the state and territories.

## Administration

The tendency amongst major Western countries today is for prison authorities to turn to 'outside' experts for provision of specialist services 'inside'. So it is with libraries. As the most obvi-

ous reading needs of prisoners are recreational and educational, it is to public libraries (or the public library arm of State libraries) and academic libraries of one kind or another that prison authorities turn. Prison budgets are generally so tight that they do not permit the development and staffing of substantial libraries of their own. Whatever resources they already have, are, therefore, eked out by circulating collections from fully established libraries, or in certain cases by granting prisoners special access rights to such libraries.

Only one prison authority in Australia today, that of New South Wales, provides virtually the entire library service from its own resources. Elsewhere, though the trend is toward increasing use of state libraries, other types such as TAFE libraries are used for certain prisons. The use of educational libraries is most apparent in Victoria and South Australia. On the whole, public libraries play a relatively minor role.

Whilst New South Wales has shown that a prison authority can provide quite a credible service from its own resources, it appears that the best model for Australia is one in which the major element is a general circulating stock from a state library, complemented by a permanent 'inside' collection which reflects the special needs of prisoners. Obviously, however, this model cannot succeed without adequate funding by government, an adequate supply of trained staff, and reasonable accommodation. In all of those respects our prison libraries are still a long way behind.

## Finance, accommodation and staffing

While the availability of large backup resources such as those of State libraries is a substantial aid, financial provision for prison libraries is generally considered inadequate. In 1986 for example, a survey found that annual funding for collections varied from \$1.00 per head of inmate population to over \$20.00, with less than \$10.00 being allocated in the majority of states. A similar variance could be found in the standard of accommodation, but in the majority of cases it is unsuitable for a good library service.

Staffing of prison libraries is generally by education or welfare officers (who play a supervi-

sory role), prison officers or selected inmates. Selection of staff is by prison administrators rather than librarians, and the grounds for selection often have little to do with the practice of librarianship. In general, professional input to staffing is very low. While in most states there is a fully qualified librarian overseeing services, this is not uniformly the case. Limited training programs for prison officers and inmate staff are carried out, but again not in every state.

With qualified librarians in such a minority, standards of service are inevitably low. Professional library supervision in no way matches the supervision by prison officers who maintain security. Undeniably some very good work is done by untrained or ill-trained staff, but the problems and needs in this area are still enormous. Library service to prisoners frequently suffers from the negative attitudes of custodial staff. Des Pickering and Helen Modra in their 1973 report said that 'the potential role of effective prison library service in education and rehabilitation has not yet been explored in this country'. The fact that this is still the case is, in no small measure, due to the continued lack of qualified staffing aware of what libraries can achieve.

## Collections

The quality of book collections has improved considerably in recent years, at least in those states which have centralised services under professional supervision. The bulk exchange schemes run by the state libraries ensure that prisoners have access to a reasonably good stock of popular material. Old and tired books still remain, however, and the number of books per inmate varies greatly. Periodical stocks are small — in some cases next to no subscriptions at all — and in only a few states has any attempt been made to provide audiovisual resources.

Textbooks and basic education materials are provided for inmate students though not always through the prison libraries, and there are some drastic shortages in this area. Other special needs, eg materials for the print-handicapped and ethnic minorities, are generally not well met, though a few states have made advances in this direction. New South Wales in

continued page 8

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particular has benefited from additional funding to boost its collections in the area of drug education, and special attention has also been paid to the needs of Aboriginal and women prisoners.

**Services**

Prison libraries, in the case of five states, benefit from centralised cataloguing, and are reasonably well organised, though prisoners do not always have access to a full catalogue of the resources available. Access to the library itself is normally limited, varying from two to seven or eight hours a week. Special arrangements are made for those prisoners who, for security or other reasons, cannot visit. Photocopiers are available but access to them is restricted. Loans facilities are heavily used, and interlibrary loans are for the most part available, though the involvement of non-professional staff in placing requests makes the effectiveness of this service open to question. Similarly, while reference services are provided, there is an obvious problem in the process of an inquiry being referred by an education officer, prison officer or inmate clerk.

**Standards**

The condition of prison libraries is improving

gradually but improvement is not uniform. A significant factor has been the absence of official national standards. Correctional authorities have had nothing to follow other than their own document, the *Minimum standard guidelines for Australian prisons*, ed. C.R. Bevan (Australian Institute of Criminology, 1978). These state only that:

*All categories of prisoners shall have access to a library adequately stocked with both recreational and instructional books, and prisoners shall be encouraged to make full use of it.*

Corrective services librarians have recognized for several years the need for something better, but only recently, with encouragement from the Australian Institute of Criminology, have they acted. In 1987, following a survey, the National Corrective Services Librarians' Group approached LAA General Council with a report, *Standards in Australian prison libraries*, drawing attention to the needs of these libraries and seeking support for the development of official standards. The upshot was the formation of a working party which is now well advanced in its task. A draft version of the standards has already been used by the LAA Queensland Branch in an approach to the Kennedy Commission on Corrective Services in Queensland.

The adoption of standards by the LAA will be the first formal recognition of prison libraries in Australia, and it should be a useful tool for practitioners. However, the crunch will come when these standards are submitted to state governments.

The improvements needed in our prison libraries are immense, in terms of organisation, funding and attitudes. To achieve them will demand solid support from the library profession.



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position he is responsible for library services to staff of the Prisons Department. He is a member of the LAA Working Party on Prison Library Standards and was author of the 1987 survey report on prison libraries. Currently the LAA Queensland Branch President, he has also served on the AACOBS National Council and is a member of the ACLIS State Committee.

**The permanent paper chase**

Alkaline buffered — I said loudly into the phone b-u-f-f-e-r-e-d. Oh! 'buffered', the sales representative blankly repeated back at me. It's the process whereby your company makes non-acidic or permanent paper.

A wave of *deja vu* swept over me; it was only two or three months ago I had the same conversation with a representative from a different paper manufacturer. That time I had to convince him his company made a particular paper called Perpetuum (I had to spell that one out too).

The LAA has a special interest in using and promoting permanent paper but it seems to be an uphill battle. Last year the LAA sponsored a seminar on permanent paper which brought together, paper manufacturers, printers, publishers and librarians. This meeting was the catalyst for work to begin on drawing up a standard similar to the American standard for paper permanence. Since this meeting the LAA has published *Stopping the Rot* on alkaline processed paper, the LAA's encyclopaedia is being printed on alkaline paper with a high cotton content and the Publications Board will be considering the use for permanent paper for all relevant LAA publications.

So where's the problem? The rub is the amount of time it takes to access Australian-made permanent paper. Had the LAA printed volume one of ALIAS on imported paper, the paper cost alone would have been around \$6,000. The LAA knows of Perpetuum-Wove, Challenge Hi-Bulk, Show Offset, SendRight and PrintRight and Bookprint. Can any of the above be accessed quickly and easily — no! These papers are not stock items for paper merchants so they have

to be ordered in which takes five or six weeks. Fine for larger publishers who can plan their schedules well in advance but for most small publishers and library publishers, longer-term planning is a luxury and a six weeks wait before printing can begin is unacceptable. (Especially when 'acid' paper can be accessed in a matter of days).

As far as I know Challenge Hi-Bulk is made in a size only suitable for A4 size publications and the sizes and grammages of the other papers are restrictive making economical printing difficult. Most manufacturers do not claim that their papers meet the American standard for permanence and for the ones that do a minimum amount for purchase is likely to be 15 tonnes and set you back around \$50,000.

Because of lack of promotion these papers are not well known within paper manufacturing and publishing circles and in turn because of the low volume of sales, prices stay high; printers, paper merchants and the representatives from paper manufacturers remain ignorant of the importance and necessity of this product and libraries look towards a future of spending large amounts of money on preservation.

There is some light at the end of tunnel. In my mail came a flyer 'Paper: here today... gone tomorrow' produced by the Archival Paper Action Committee of AICCM, (Australian Institute for the Conservation of Cultural Materials) explaining the need for widespread use of permanent paper. The leaflet sets out what individuals and institutions can do — that is, understand that acidic paper causes serious preservation problems for any institution which creates and/or has the custody of paper-based

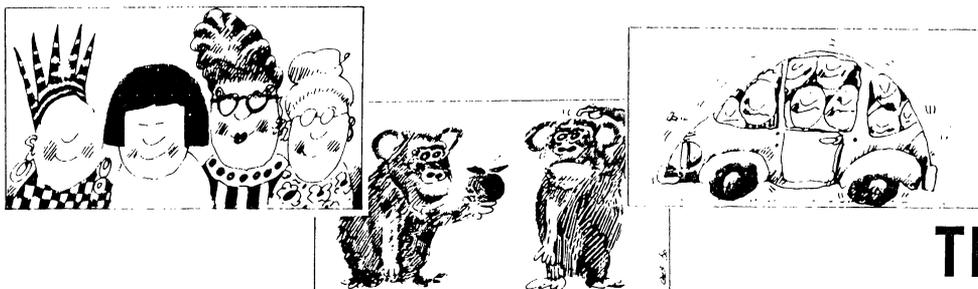
documents; educate others to appreciate the significance of the problem; specify a standard for the use of archival paper for documentation thereby establishing a demand for which manufacturers can cater; lobby governments to use archival paper to create their records; and lobby publishers to specify the use of archival papers for all scholarly and non-ephemeral commercial publications.

One further note of dismay is, however, that neither the AICCM leaflet nor the accompanying letter nor questionnaire are printed on *Australian* permanent paper. Perhaps the AICCM ran into the same problems as I did.

Here is a golden opportunity for Australian paper manufacturers to produce a value-added product and supplant an area dominated by overseas imports. Now is the time for all those who use and need permanent paper to make their need known and to prove to producers their demand is considerable.

Bouquets go to publishers like Melbourne University Press. They have begun a range of high quality books which will be published on an Australian permanent paper, (Perpetuum-Wove). Librarians should patronise such publishers who put permanency before profits. The Australian standard for permanence will make it easier for those wanting to use permanent paper to be sure of the product they buy. However, before its arrival those interested should acquire a copy of 'Paper here today ... gone tomorrow' which is available from the LAA or by writing to the Archival Action Paper Committee, AICCM, GPO Box 1638, Canberra ACT 2601.

*Kathy Husselbee*  
Publications Manager



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