

Turning over a new page

NT volunteer librarian *Rosemary Harbridge* has sent us this story by *Denise Heywood*

Among the many old buildings of Phnom Penh the National Library on 92 Street is one of the finest. Now UNTAC's Rehabilitation Component is renovating the facade of the pale yellow art-deco edifice, a masterpiece of elegant simplicity.

Although it harks back to a gracious era, it also withstood a

Perusing the shelves, you find historic leather-bound French tomes, acres of Soviet-donated technical books ('No one ever reads them!' admits He Hin) and suddenly, Trevelyan's *Social History of England* and other worthy and surprising items.

Rebuilding the collection and cataloguing its treasures—includ-

Fine Arts is restoring the ornate mural which depicts, on either side of the main door, a book with a wise owl scowling above. On one side a French proverb, whose origin is unknown, proclaims 'La Force lie un temps/L'idée enchaîne pour toujours.' (Force binds for a while/Ideas chain forever).

The building, set in overgrown gardens, was designed by the architect Chauchon and constructed by the Lamorte company at a time when French town planners experimented with colonial cities as 'social and aesthetic laboratories.'

The Bibliothèque opened its doors for the first time on 24 December, 1924 with 2 879 items 'at the disposition of [France's] protégés for their personal intellectual work.'

The collection grew, archivists were trained and staff employed, although some, noted a 1930s report, were 'undesirables and female personnel.'

After independence in 1953, hundreds of volumes disappeared when French readers left hurriedly 'without taking the time to return their borrowed books'. Bitter disputes attended the division of the archives and cultural collections after the French departed.

Now the Bibliothèque is administered by the Ministry of Culture. Phnom Penh has 12 libraries, including the National Archives which comes under the Council of Ministers, but the municipal library, says He Him, was mysteriously sold.

La Bibliothèque, which receives 150 to 200 visitors daily, is for reference while the lending library is next door. If you cannot find the book you come for, just stay and admire the building.

The story was first published in the Phnom Penh Post, 22 October – 4 November 1993. It provides a happier sequel to the dismal picture painted in inCite 19, 1990. The photograph of the motto over the door is, like the cover picture, by Neil Manton who returned from Cambodia just before inCite went to press.



horrific one. Built in 1924, when Cambodia was a French protectorate, the Bibliothèque suffered heavily under the Khmer Rouge between 1975 and 1979.

The building was used as a pigsty by Pol Pot's Chinese advisers garrisoned in Le Royal Hotel next door; the books used to light fires and the shelves bowed under the weight of cooking pots. Nearly 80 percent of library's 65 000 volumes were destroyed and the rest scattered.

The library's director, Um Neang, and his deputy, He Hin, are the only survivors from 40 staff who originally ran the building. For the past 13 years, they have been repairing the damage and reinstating what libraries need most—books.

Lack of funds impedes progress but there are now 100 000 volumes, donated by Russia, Vietnam, France and the United States.

ing 305 17th century palm-leaf manuscripts—has been aided by Cornell University and by the University of New South Wales, which trained He Hin and two of the 24 staff in librarianship.

Australian volunteers Eric Marsh and Joanne Cheah (see Eric's letter in *inCite* 11, 1993) are now creating a database of material published in Cambodia, which they call the 'Cambodiana Collection', but they urgently need donations. In a low-tech environment without a photocopier or telephone, their high-tech computer, given by AIDAB, stands alone.

The usual calm of this colonial edifice is currently being disrupted by extensive repair work, including the laying of new waterpipes, and these renovations will continue until the beginning of December.

A student from the School of