

100 years of library conferences



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It is an oft told fact amongst librarians in England and America that their position is looked upon as rather a pleasant sinecure, a nice occupation for a man of some education with a taste for literature, but a disinclination for any kind of hard work. That is to say if a man has failed in his professional career, or if as a literary man he has made neither name nor money in the world of letters, it is considered a good thing to make him a librarian.'

From a paper 'The librarian and his work', delivered by E L Armstrong LLB, acting librarian, Public Library of Victoria, at the Library Association of Australasia conference, held in Melbourne in 1896.

The eighty or so worthy gentlemen (of course they were all gentlemen) attending the conference also heard papers on cataloguing, library buildings, and 'The equipment of the smaller libraries for the assistance on industrial pursuits'. The enlightened organising committee, with the Governor as patron and the Chief Justice of Victoria as president, had arranged for papers on both the 'Sunday opening of libraries' and 'Libraries from the reader's point of view'.

A constitution was adopted establishing a Library Association of Australasia which had as its object: 'To unite all persons engaged in or interested in library work, in order to obtain their co-operation in all matters connected with library management, legislation and improvement.'

An annual subscription of five shillings per annum was set and an executive board was established, with a president, six vice-presidents, a secretary, treasurer, the chief librarian of each capital city, and an additional representative elected by each branch (colony).

Such was the standard of hospitality at the conference that the eighty delegates were joined by 600 guests for a *Conversazione* given by the Trustees of the Public Library of Victoria with all the picture galleries and the new technological museum 'thrown open for the occasion'. Tours visited a wide range of libraries, even getting as far afield as a mayoral breakfast in Ballarat.

While the 1996 conference does not boast a mayoral breakfast, we know that delegates will be most welcome at the splendid new public library in Ballarat. The Great Hall, rather than the Picture galleries of the National Gallery of Victoria will provide a marvellous Melbourne setting for the conference dinner. Tours will extend from a Mornington Peninsula vineyard to a university research park, and a wide range of libraries will open their doors to visiting delegates.

From the CSIRO's Biomolecular Engineering Library online information systems, to the first

Mechanics Institute (1834) still operating as the Atheneum Library. First Place — Business Directions assists small businesses while the Industry Productivity Commission crosses the spectrum. The Joint Theological Library at Ormond College will share Australia's largest theological collection. The Law Institute will demonstrate its dial-a-law information referral service. A range of medical libraries will show this strength of Melbourne holdings. Public libraries will demonstrate internet and CD-ROM use as well as conventional services and the State Library will be on display, both at the library itself and at the conference venue. I am sure visiting colleagues will find the interest as great and the welcome just as warm as in 1896. A very special aspect of Melbourne's cultural life will be linked with the conference as delegates join in the Fringe Festival with a 'Librarians at the Fringe' breakfast.

One thing not mentioned in the 1896 proceedings was anything that sounds remotely like a trade exhibition. Trade exhibitions have become an integral and important part of our conferences, representing the many partnerships — with publishers, booksellers, equipment suppliers and in particular with the suppliers of services related to database access and specialist software, which are essential in the increasingly complicated world of library and information service delivery.

It was noted in the summary of the 1897 proceedings that 'at present the world was so deluged with literature of all kinds that the management and organisation hitherto applied to libraries seemed likely be overwhelmed'. Perhaps our trade exhibitors in 1996 will save us. 1896 offered no internet, no LANs, WANs, web browsers, or even OPACs. It is not just impossible to conceive of what the 2096 conference will focus on, it is even difficult to foresee 2006. Or is it? Aren't we just focusing on the same aims and principles using different tools? Will it be an aim of the 2096 librarian to echo his (or her!) 1896 predecessor:

'What a pleasure to the true librarian if, by a timely hint in the right direction, or by handing down a volume, or recommending the best authority, he can help the humble student or man of letters. What a satisfaction lies in the ability to afford assistance to some horny-handed son of toil who may be seeking to master some knotty problem in his craft over which his brain has been wrestling in a vain endeavour to find a solution sought for. One is well-rewarded for such attention by the grateful acknowledgment that beams in the faces of those who have been so assisted just at the critical moment when help is most needed.' *Alfred J Taylor, FLS, librarian, Tasmanian public Library (1896 proceedings)*. Welcome to Melbourne to join *Reading the future*. ■

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