

# The Olympic collection at the State Library of Victoria

Tim Hogan, Australian History and Literature Team

An Olympic Torch, Olympic medals, official identity passes, minutes of official meetings of the organising committee, a menu from a restaurant attended by Olympic officials, a visitors guestbook signed by the Duke of Edinburgh and other official guests, all are part of in the State Library of Victoria's collection of 1956 Olympic material. Other items include official publications, programs, tickets, photos, brochures and guide-books.

To make this material more accessible and to make people more aware of what material on the 1956 Olympics the library holds, a website was created. The 1956 Melbourne Olympics [<http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/slv/exhibitions/olympics>] displays some of the material held by the library. It also provides a short history of the Games, facts and figures, anecdotes, statistics, results, a bibliography of all material held by the library on the 1956 Olympics, and numerous images from the library's picture collection, and photographs from contemporary newspaper reports.

One of the highlights of the Olympic collection is the official invitation sent to VIPs. This is a lamb's wool covered book, extolling the virtues of Melbourne's credentials as an Olympic host city. Another interesting item is the menu from a luncheon at the Menzies Hotel for Olympic officials in November 1956. On the menu were such delights as Canape's Riche, Cream of Asparagus Soup, Fillet of Sole Meuniere, Chicken Maryland, Bombe Henri and Welsh Rarebit.

The programs, of which there are many, make interesting reading. The main entertainment for the opening ceremony was a display by marching military bands, a choral performance and the release of four thousand pigeons into the air. To this was added the traditional elements of the arrival of the Olympic torch, and the rendition of the Olympic oath. Included in the 1956 program, but unlikely to feature in the Sydney program, was a blessing from the Anglican Archbishop of Melbourne. The closing ceremony program was brief by contemporary standards but did contain an interesting rendition of Waltzing Matilda, with new lyrics, including some Aboriginal words.

Much of the atmosphere of the 1956 Olympics is captured in the photographs of the time. The library holds many Olympic photographs. Many of these have been used in the website. Some of these will soon be available as E-Cards which can be easily downloaded from the website and e-mailed to a friend with a short message attached. Famous scenes such as Ron Clarke carrying the Olympic torch into the Olympic Stadium or Betty Cuthbert, mouth characteristically wide open bursting ahead of her rivals in the sprint events can be revisited. Of interest too are the many casual pictures of the athletes enjoying themselves at the Olympic Village.

There are many pictures of athletes displaying some aspect of their culture which 1956 Melbournians considered extraordinarily exotic. The manner in which these pictures



were taken and presented in the press tells us as much about how Australians interpreted the world in 1956. Other pictures document the impact the Olympics had upon the city and its people; from the vast crowds which thronged the city on the eve of the Games to the numerous pictures of the Olympic decorations which adorned the city. The most notable of these was perhaps the twenty metre illuminated Olympic Torch which was suspended above the intersection of Flinders and Swanston Streets.

From the library's extensive collection of newspapers the saturation coverage of Olympic news in an Olympic City can be perused. Along with all the coverage of the highlights of the Games, are such gems as the story of the seizure by customs officials, of imported Swiss starting guns which were intended for use in the Games. The guns were in breach of Victorian fire-arms legislation which prohibited the use of guns capable of firing live ammunition in athletics events.

Nothing can compare to the experience of being in an Olympic City during the Games but by visiting repositories of Olympic material and websites which make that material more widely available we can all have a little taste of an Olympic experience. ■