

## Libraries, here for the long run...

A comment in support of Australian Library Week 2000  
from ALIA president, Mairéad Browne



**W**e have all heard the claim that librarianship is the world's 'second oldest profession'. While some dispute this claim, there is no debate about the antiquity and durability of the institutions we call libraries which can be traced back to ancient Babylon and the early Egyptian temples. Libraries have been a key component in the maintenance of civilised societies which have depended on keeping records of their activities.

And what an extraordinary range of roles have been played by libraries. While many of the libraries in medieval times were set up to control information for an elite ruling class, most modern libraries strive for the opposite goal — making information freely available to anyone who seeks it. Libraries have dealt with a wide range of materials through the centuries — clay tablets, scrolls, books and more recently information in non-print forms such as photos. But libraries and librarians have taken this in their stride and have adapted their role to the circumstances and needs of the societies of their time.

Some say that the biggest challenge we have ever faced is the new Information Age where digital information is ubiquitous and is the very basis of transactions in all aspects of our lives. This is certainly a challenge especially when we also have to maintain the records of our culture and provide the intellectual glue for the effective functioning of society.

Our profession has shown itself to be extraordinarily resilient in the face of major technological advances. And now in the Digital Age we are taking the lead through

our institutions and ALIA in harnessing IT to maximise access to information. Importantly, libraries and librarians are dealing with the issues of principle which are emerging from the Information Society — the 'Digital Agenda', copyright, intellectual property and so on.

A continuation of these efforts to influence directions and legislation is critical. We are among the few who have held the interests of information users at the core of our professional values. We must continue to act in accordance with our values as a counterpart to commercial and political agendas.

In addition, we must be prepared to make some radical shifts in what comes to mind when we hear the word 'library'. Up to now, we have mostly associated the word with a physical place where people can come to use materials. We hope the libraries of our future will include such places but we must be prepared also to embrace the idea of the library as simply an abstract concept.

Libraries of the future are more likely to be virtual and composed of collections of digital information. But this does not make them any the less a library. What will distinguish these libraries will be the continued application of our professional expertise in constructing useful configurations of information which meet individual and societal need. The lack of physical form of the documents will not detract from the legitimacy of labelling these collections 'libraries' nor will it diminish the need for our continuing professional role in evaluating and collecting information. ■

### Reminder...

The Association has produced a wide range of promotional material to help you raise awareness of Australian Library Week in your organisation or community. There are posters, bookmarks, post cards, balloons, and for something different this year we have created temporary tattoos. All are available from ALIA National Office, PO Box E441, Kingston 2604. A full catalogue of material was included in the March issue of *inCite*, or check ALIANet [<http://www.alia.org.au/alw/2000/catalogue.html>] for full details — use the faxable order form.

#### ALW2000 events

Don't forget to publicise your Australian Library Week events in the 'events' column of *inCite*. Australian Library Week listings are free of charge. Please contact ALIA National Office, phone 02 6285 1877, fax 02 6282 2249, or e-mail the details to [events@alia.org.au](mailto:events@alia.org.au). ■