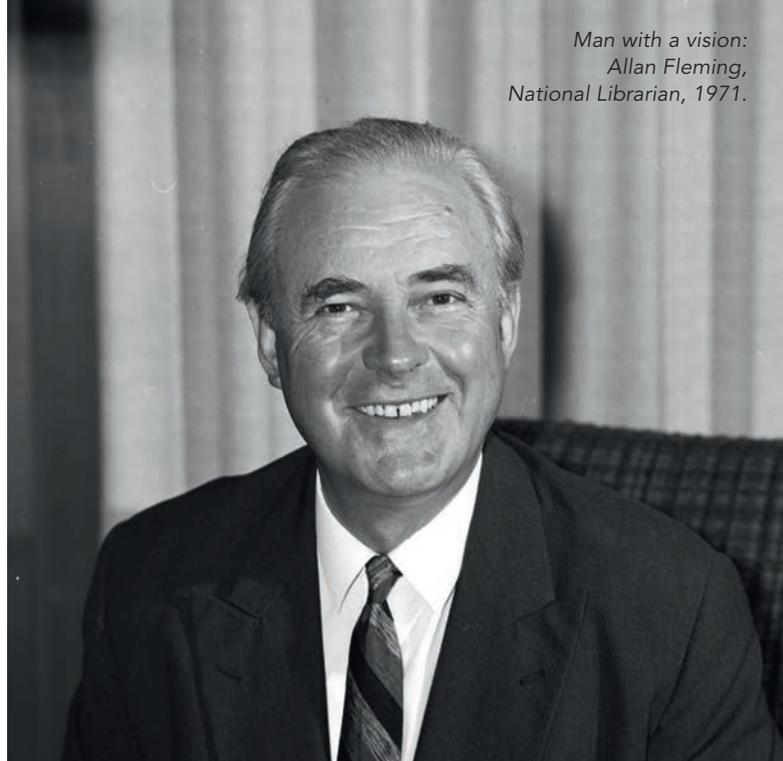


# FLEMING'S VISION: THE FIRST COMPUTER FOR AUSTRALIAN LIBRARIES



Peter Golding has written a fascinating account of the life of Allan Fleming: teacher, journalist, decorated soldier, defence intelligence expert, trade commissioner, Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian, Director-General of the National Library, then from out of retirement, head of a new organisation responsible for the security of Australian public figures – just at the time of the Hilton bombing in 1978.

That's a lot for one man and one lifetime, but it's Fleming the library administrator that interests us most. As we debate the digital future, let's take a moment to look back in time to 1970, when Fleming, tapped on the shoulder by then Prime Minister John Gorton, succeeded Sir Harold White as National Librarian.

Despite petulant opposition by senior librarians to the appointment of a 'non-librarian', Fleming's contribution to Australian librarianship in the three years he was in the top job was remarkable. In his book, *An Unqualified Success: The Extraordinary Life Of Allan Percy Fleming*, published this year by Rosenberg Publishing, Peter Golding tells the story of a man on a mission, with a clear sense of purpose about the National Library's mandate to be a library for all libraries and a determination to lead the way in the development of information services delivery.

Inevitably he stepped on some toes. The 'elders of the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographic Services( AACOBS)' were wary of this newcomer with his

*The National Library  
of Australia's first  
computer, c. 1976.*



background in management as the art of the possible rather than collection development and bibliography, and they denied him the personal friendships that might have made him even more effective. But Fleming, who as Parliamentary Librarian had developed and promoted a comprehensive research service to government and opposition, had support where it really mattered: in the parliament and in the senior ranks of the federal bureaucracy.

Sometime in the 1950's, when working in the Defence Department, Fleming recalled in a letter to Warren Horton (who himself became Director General of the National Library in 1985) that he had "bought a huge computer for the department in London, probably the first in the Commonwealth public service". Not surprising then that the National Library acquired its first computer during Fleming's stewardship.

**THIS WAS THE FIRST COMPUTER INSTALLATION IN ANY AUSTRALIAN LIBRARY. IT TRIGGERED THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE AUSTRALIAN MARC FORMAT AND THE AUTOMATION OF THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL BIBLIOGRAPHY. AND THE REST, AS THEY SAY, IS HISTORY.**

Allan Fleming had a clear sense of purpose about the National Library's mandate to be a library for all libraries and a determination to lead the way in the development of information services delivery.

What a superb irony! The cold-shouldered 'non-librarian' shifted the National Library, and by example, other major libraries, into the red-hot world of information technology. Fleming's understanding of technology in the future of libraries was much more professionally acute than the views of the 'concerned librarians'. Fleming was a distinguished, selfless Australian, doing what it took to get the job done.

I knew Fleming. I was at the National Library when he was in charge. He was a charming man, an inspiration to those around him – and now we can see him as one of the giants of our profession. Peter has done him proud in a tale that needed to be told.

Photos courtesy of the National Library of Australia.

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