



PASSING THE BATON

Marie-Louise Ayres (left) and Anne-Marie Schwirtlich

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES, National Library of Australia Director-General and Executive Member, spent 14 years working in senior roles at the National Library of Australia. But the last five have been something of an apprenticeship. She has had the opportunity to watch and learn from her predecessor, ANNE-MARIE SCHWIRTLICH, who retired in March 2017 after six years in the top job. Here are some reflections from both of them on the opportunities, challenges and what lies ahead.

ANNE-MARIE SCHWIRTLICH

When you first started in the position of Director-General you said to *INCITE*, 'The allure of the National Library is the opportunity to play a role in reimagining libraries from a different perspective.' Looking back, how has your perspective influenced the National Library over the last six years?

My perspective is straightforward. The library is entrusted to serve Australians by preserving and sharing a stunning national collection and by making the best possible use of an annual allocation of funding. How can the library reach Australians, wherever they are, so that they know that the National Library is there for them, today and into the future? What will make it easy for Australians to discover and engage with collections? Stepping back and asking questions is really important.

What are your proudest moments as Director-General?

The National Library is, and has long been, a quiet, purposeful achiever. It plans cleverly and works systematically. My proudest moments have been when people who didn't know of my association with the library have talked about the impact of their interaction with the library and with library colleagues. It's invaluable to hear about how a personal, professional, creative or academic quest has been solved; how curiosity, interest and delight have been sparked; or how engaging with the library has been a comfort. I am also enormously proud of the intelligence, grace and humour that colleagues across the institution brought to some confronting times.

Have you left any parting advice to your successor, Dr Marie-Louise Ayres?

Given Oscar Wilde's wry observation – 'The only thing to do with good advice is to pass it on. It is never of any use to oneself' – I am wary of dispensing advice! My hope for Marie-Louise is that she enjoys the exhilaration, collaboration and companionship of the role because it's a real joy to be one of many stewards of the National Library.

What do the next five years of your life look like?

In five years' time I hope to have finished a considerable piece of research on an aspect of British women in India between 1850 and 1900; to not have driven my husband Stephen mad, given my organisational tendencies; to have added to my travelling adventures; to be a much more communicative friend; to be one of those cyclists who whizzes past with nary a wobble and to have read, read, read!

MARIE-LOUISE AYRES

You've held senior roles at the National Library since 2002. What first drew you to the library and what has held you there for the last 15 years?

I had a great eight years at ADFA at UNSW and wasn't actively looking for a new opportunity. But when the chance came, I leapt at it. During my PhD, I spent many months immersed in the National Library's collections, and in the first part of my career I met wonderful library staff through collaborative activities. I was very attracted by the library's vision, its leaders and its big national scale.

What have been the National Library's greatest achievements in your time?

Many achievements are the slow, cumulative and essential ones of building and documenting magnificent collections and ensuring that our building, on-site services and public programs welcome and inspire the broadest possible cross-section of our community.

Others are more visible and have been true breakthroughs. Our Treasures Gallery inspires and delights visitors almost every day of the year. Our reading rooms are places of beauty, in which readers from all over Australia and every walk of life say that they do their very best work. And our digital services – Trove now, but before that, many predecessor services, and beneath it, sophisticated digital library systems – let us connect more Australians with their documentary heritage than ever before.

You spoke of problem-solving and inspiration at the Unfurl that Frame symposium in 2014. Are there any words of advice or sentences from literature you will take with you into the Director-General role to keep you inspired?

On my office windowsill I have a quote from the 2016 book *The Art of Time Travel: Historians and their craft* by Tom Griffiths: 'Libraries and museums link people and things to the world of storytelling and scholarship.'

What will your core priorities be now you have assumed the reins from Anne-Marie Schwirtlich?

So much of the National Library's work is about continuation: we must continue to build outstanding collections that document the broadest possible Australia, we must continue to improve the access for Australians to their nation's memory, and we must collaborate with others.

Those things do not change – but how we do them does. And that's where our passion for innovation comes in.

So these are my priorities and focus: retain the best of our long traditions, enliven those with our passion for innovation, build on a fabulous workplace and service culture – and mix those ingredients with whatever dashes of good luck or magic come our way to deliver maximum benefit to as many people as possible. 

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