

CELEBRATING 50 YEARS

in the National Library of Australia building



Director General of the National Library of Australia, Dr MARIE-LOUISE AYRES, examines the wonderful successes that the institution has achieved for Australians in the past and will continue to provide into the future.

On 15 August 1968 in the nation's capital, Parliamentary Question Time was adjourned for the grand opening of the sparkling new National Library of Australia building. Prime Minister John Gorton officiated at the opening but recognised that the splendid new building owed its existence to the vision of former Prime Minister Robert Menzies, who had retired from politics in January 1966, and to the persistence of Sir Harold White, Parliamentary Librarian from 1947, who from 1960-1970 was the Director-General of the National Library. Sir Harold's passion and advocacy for a grand national library building matched his passion for building a magnificent national collection. Tenacity runs deep in the veins of librarians.

The timeless exterior of the building, designed by Walter Bunning of Bunning and Madden, uses traditional materials – marble, granite, bronze, slate, and copper – which remind us that so much of the National Library's work is continuing, building long-term value for Australia. Our collections continue to grow, and those of us who work in this beautiful building can delight every day in seeing the flow of people in and out of the building, its reading rooms and its public spaces. We can almost hear the new knowledge being created within our walls.

But those traditional materials also belie the ever-changing, ever-expanding and living collection housed within the walls, and the enormous changes in how we connect Australian communities with their national collection. And indeed in who we are serving, and how we can add value to their lives.

In thinking about how to celebrate the building's 50th birthday, these changes were very much in our minds. Our *1968: Changing Times* exhibition, which ran from March to August in 2018, situated the building of the library within its

international, national and national capital context. More than 30,000 visitors enjoyed the exhibition – including me! I started school in Canberra in February 1968, so the exhibition spoke very directly to my own sense of personal and spatial history.

Fast forward to 2018, and for every person who comes into our building, there are 60 people using our digital collections and services. So as well as knowing that our building is filled to the brim with our magnificent physical collections that are used daily, we also know that Australia's digital heritage is streaming out from our server room, 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. We used digital channels to reach Australians throughout this anniversary year – not so much to commemorate 50 years in the building, but to communicate what we offer in 2018, how, and to whom. We know those digital collections are reaching Australians in every city, town, and outback property, giving us the opportunity to serve Australians who may never be able to visit in us in person. Australia, after all, has a small population scattered across a very, very large continent.



Visitors at the National Library of Australia Open Day in August 2018. Photos by Craig Mackenzie.

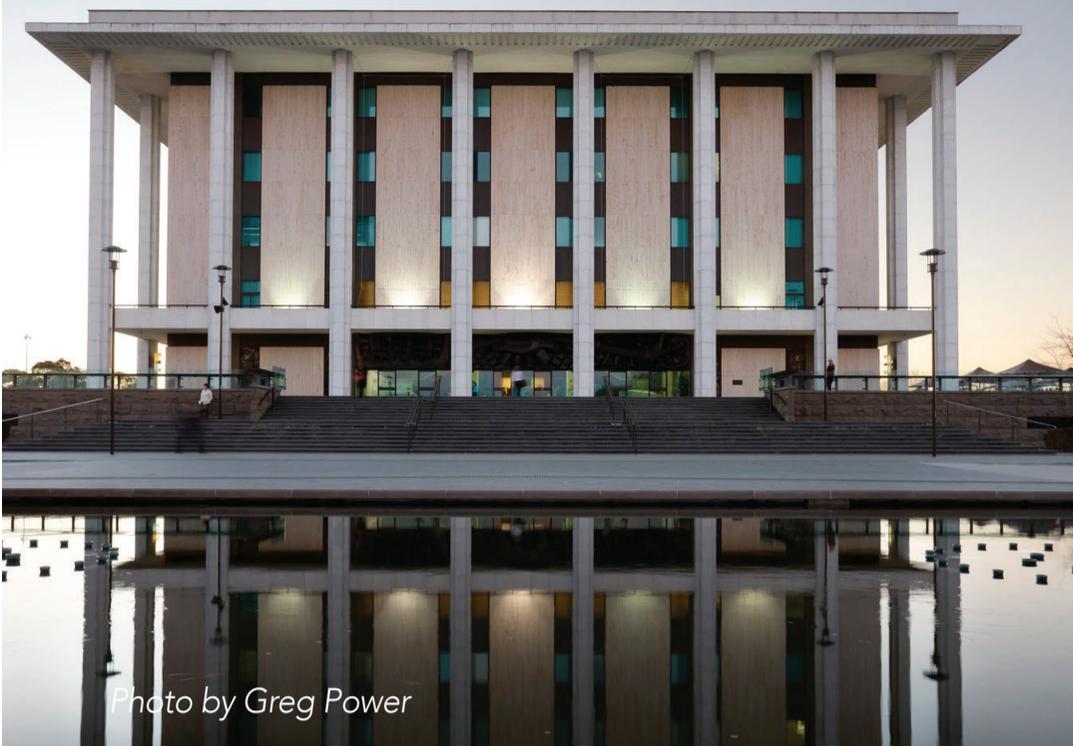


Photo by Greg Power



Photo by Max Dupain

We are also serving a much more diverse community than was the case in 1968. A few examples show how profound this change has been. In 1968, for example, could we have foreseen that Australia's first inscription on UNESCO's 2019 [International Year of Indigenous Languages website](#) would be a book published by the National Library, for children, in the Kurna language – the language of the people of Adelaide and the Adelaide Plains? That our *Cook and the Pacific* exhibition – running from September 2018 to February 2019 – would begin with welcomes to country by the traditional custodians of the land on which the library stands, and continue with welcomes from the many First Nations peoples whose cultures and communities were forever changed after Cook's three Pacific voyages?

Who could have foreseen that Trove Newspapers would be delivering digitised newspapers in numerous community languages and scripts? Or the *Papua New Guinea Post-Courier*? Or the *Fiji Times*? Or the (forthcoming) *A voz de Timor*?

Some 8,500 people of every age and every one of Australia's glorious plethora of cultural backgrounds streamed through our doors for our 12 August 2018 Open Day, hungry to know more about their national library and their national collections.

The National Library has gone on to become the backbone of research infrastructure in humanities and the social sciences, from the development of the National Bibliographic Database in 1981 to Trove, which – in 2018 – is nearing its 10th birthday and is poised for major transformation to serve Australians for the next decade.

Well, hindsight is a wonderful thing, not least because it tells us that we cannot predict what will happen in the future. But we can focus today on the things that endure, the things we have always done. And for the National Library, those three things are clear in our minds. We collect today what will be important tomorrow. We connect with communities and connect communities with collections. And we collaborate with others to maximise the national impact of cultural collections.

For further reading, see [Dream library takes shape: Sir Robert Menzies and the building of the National Library of Australia](#) by Robyn Holmes.

Here's to the National Library of Australia of 2068. 🌱

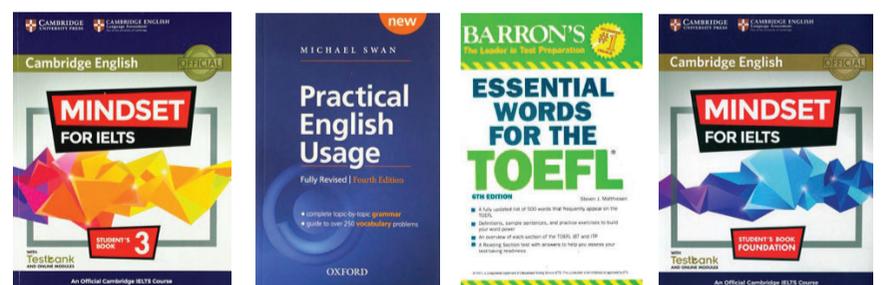
DR MARIE-LOUISE AYRES
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James Bennett
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