

The Fisher Library

Binns, Kenneth

University of Sydney Library

Sydney, Australia

2002



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Source Text:

Prepared from the article printed in The Lone Hand October 1 1909

All quotation marks are retained as data.

First Published: 1909

setis australian etexts prose nonfiction 1890-1909

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OF public libraries, schools-of-art libraries and Carnegie libraries everyone knows something; but few of the general public realise that a library is as indispensable to a University as are professors. The founders of Alma Mater Sydneiensis, at any rate, were well aware of this, and, before they appointed any professors or teachers, devoted a part of the funds at their disposal to the purchase of books, to form the nucleus of a University library. This was in the year 1851; and it was a year later before the actual teaching in the University began.

To judge by the nature of these first purchases, the selection committee consisted of scholars who held the wisdom of the ancients in profound reverence. Sanskrit and Hebrew grammars, texts of the classics, with Ulfilas' *Veteris et Novi Testamenti versionis Gothicoe Fragmenta*, comprised the greater part of their first selection. Owing to lack of nourishment, however, the auspicious birth and sturdy infancy of the library were followed by a stunted youth. Then at one bound it attained a robust manhood. In 1878 Mr. Thomas Walker purchased and presented to the University the rich library of Nicol D. Stenhouse. He was a profound scholar and thorough student; and, since he bought his books to read, and not for the mere pleasure of collecting, their absolute value remains unchangeable.

But the two men to whom the library is most indebted are Sir Charles Nicholson and Thomas Fisher. The former was a member of the library foundation committee, and devoted half a century of his life and a very large part of his fortune to furthering the interests of the University. He was a genuine antiquarian, collecting rare books, old manuscripts and archaeological remains with the energy of unfading youth and the passion of a lover.

Mr. Thomas Fisher, in almost every respect, was the opposite of Sir Charles. A native of Sydney, without any special educational advantages or attainments, he opened a small boot and shoe shop on Brickfield Hill. To the development of this humble venture he gave his whole attention and energy. Though a sternly practical, business-like man, he possessed a childlike reverence for learning and all that stood for it; and, as he lived most of his life at Darlington, he loved to walk in the University grounds and feel the solemnising influence of that Gothic shrine to Pallas Athene. He was so

devoted to the University that he regularly attended its commemorations; and so practical was his interest that when he died, in 1885, he bequeathed his fortune of £30,000 to the foundation and endowment of a library to be known as the Fisher Library. (I wonder if he ever chuckled at the incongruity of devoting to the furnishing of men's minds the fortune he had amassed by attention to their feet?)

Fortunately the Government relieved the authorities of the necessity for expending a large part of the bequest on the erection of a building; so the library secured a permanent, if small, revenue, and the University a building harmonious and complementary to the architecture of the grand main building. It took eight years to build; and only recently have the ring of the hammer and the grinding of the chisel given place to the "strict silence" of the reading-room. Externally, it is a continuation of the architectural style of the main building, but more ornate in character and richer in detail, symbolising its special character. No other building in Sydney has such wealth of carving and grotesquerie, for, continuing the Gothic tradition, the gargoyles grin in stony ecstasy from every cornice.

The room of special interest is the reading room, 122ft. long, 50ft. wide, and with seating accommodation for 150 readers. The walls, which are clean, chiselled stone, are panelled to a height of 7ft. The open-timbered roof, inwardly of fourteenth century pattern, is constructed of cedar, covered externally with Muntz metal. So huge are many of the beams, and so great was the quantity of cedar required, that the contractors found it necessary to purchase a forest in Northern Queensland. It is interesting to note that only one other roof in the world is of larger span than this, Westminster Hall being 68ft. wide, and the Guild Hall 48ft.

The book-stack, which stands at right-angles to the reading-room, is treated as a separate building, with only one door of communication; and as this door is fireproof the whole of the books are safeguarded against the possibility of fire. The book-stack is a new introduction to Australia. It resembles a steel scaffolding inside four stone walls, supporting six plate-glass floors, with parallel rows of shelving, which consist of steel cases 7ft. 6in. high, placed 4ft. apart, and traversing the building from east to west. When these are filled each floor will consist of narrow lanes between opposing walls of books.

The dust nuisance, regarded as inseparable from libraries, has been greatly mitigated by the introduction of artificial ventilation; for open-air treatment is not healthy for books. Indeed, the care of the books seems to have taken precedence of all else; for they have had two electric lifts provided to carry them up and down the stack, while the unfortunate attendant plods wearily up six flights of stairs.

But from the book-lover's point of view, the most interesting innovation is the use of tinted glass for the windows, in order to preserve the color and durability of the bindings. After careful experiment with numerous plates of glass of widely varying color and density, it was found that a pale olive color fulfilled the necessary conditions of protecting the leather and admitting a reasonable light.

In all, the collection amounts to approximately 86,000 volumes. Of these, the most rapidly increasing, if not as yet the largest, section is the periodicals, dealing particularly with the physical and natural sciences. And the proportion of fiction to solid, I will not say heavy, literature, is in inverse ratio to that in public and schools-of-art libraries.

As regards the scope of subjects represented, it would be a good generalisation to say that they include all the subjects at present taught in the University, and not much beside.

The system of dividing the revenue for the purchase of books in equal shares between the various faculties, and giving the professors the control of the expenditure, while it has very great advantages, has this against it, that there is no provision for subjects lying outside the beaten track of University study. This objection has been recognised, though hardly met, by the creation of a small general fund, controlled by a library committee; yet even with this assistance such an important subject as art is but scantily represented.

But books alone do not comprise a library any more than a horde of people makes a society. They are but the raw material from which the cataloguer must build his palace of learning. How much the reader owes to the librarian only a librarian knows. From the reader's standpoint, better a few books scientifically catalogued than a British Museum without a catalogue. But buildings need plans, and libraries must have a system. In this respect the staff of the Fisher Library deserve great credit, for the late assistant-librarian, Mr. Caleb Hardy, was the first to introduce the Dewey system of decimal classification into Australia. The greatest disadvantages of the Dewey classification are its extravagant demands upon shelf-space and the energy of the library staff, and the unavoidable wear and tear involved in constant re-arrangement; for the position of every book is exactly determined by the subject upon which the book deals, no matter whether that space be empty or crowded.

In literary treasures and rarities the Fisher Library is particularly rich—the result in no small degree of Sir Charles Nicholson's rummagings in Europe. Among them are three Hebrew scrolls, laboriously written on goatskin and vellum, by scribes whose dust has long been blown abroad in waste and forgotten wildernesses. In those days the size of books was evidently

determined by the yard, and not by the number of pages. The largest of the three, a book of Genesis, on vellum, is 56ft. in length; so that the smallest of them, the book of Esther, which is only 7ft. long, was evidently a mere pocket edition.

Our University, while strictly non-theological in character, nevertheless possesses a very fine collection of the writings of the early Fathers of the Church, seldom read but heavily impressive, encased in wooden boards, with pigskin or vellum covers—a collection which once graced the walls of a Spanish monastery. Some of these books originally had silver clasps; but these have long since disappeared. Probably the monastery fell upon evil days; or perhaps even a monastery is not immune from the ravages of the book vandal.

Widely different again is the small, neatly written manuscript standing beside it, and protected from the light by a plush cover. This is a stanza of the poem called “Will,” written by Tennyson, and presented by his son, our second Governor-General. The difference between this and the published version is both striking and suggestive, as illustrating the careful way in which Tennyson revised his work until each poem became a polished gem. The sole stipulation which Lord Tennyson made when he presented this manuscript was that it should never become the property of an American.

Then there is Sir Henry Parkes' marvellous collection of autographs, mounted in three large folios; two of them containing the signatures of royalties, the third those of literary and miscellaneous fame. Some are written on large State documents with ponderous seals attached; others are in the form of private letters, and some even on tailors' bills. The styles of caligraphy are as varied as the persons who wrote them, though nearly all are consistent in the matter of illegibility.

Probably the oldest printed book in the library is a black-letter copy of the “Passionael Delft” (1489). Though published at the time William Caxton was establishing the first printing press in England, it is as legible to-day as when it came from between the great wooden jaws of that old Dutch press, and is far more easily read than last year's files of our daily papers.

It may be asked: What purpose does this library fulfil, and what claim has it upon the Government and the public? Primarily, it is for students and members of the University; but not exclusively, as is often supposed. Any genuine student exploring some special field of knowledge may gain access; and to such searchers it not only offers the fullest store of scientific and periodical literature in the State, but also extends that most important condition of thorough study—the privilege of taking books away.

But the public has been slow to recognise its academic friend, and cold in the bestowal of practical sympathy. Neither can the Government of N.S.W.

altogether repair its past neglect by one munificent gift. Why has the Fisher Library never had conferred upon it the benefit enjoyed by every school of arts? These receive £ for £ from the Government to assist them to purchase large quantities of purely ephemeral books, which the cheap sensation-hunting public may devour in return for their quarterly half-a-crown; while the Fisher Library voluntarily assists the heavily handicapped Australian research student, and has to do it without any Government subsidy. And why, since the privilege is accorded to other libraries, should the postal authorities not grant the concession of half book-rates on library exchanges to the country graduate and school-teacher who make use of the Fisher Library to prepare for further University examinations?

The public of New South Wales has shrieked itself hoarse about University development, and never noticed the financial wall which effectually blocks its progress. And Australians have yet to learn that efficient libraries are as necessary to the development of this young land as systems of water-conservation and irrigation.