

**Fisher Library Centenary Celebration
MacLaurin Hall
The University of Sydney
Sunday, 20 September 2009**

Thank you John for your warm welcome and for your welcome to country. I would also like to record my respect.

It is a great pleasure to join you all in celebrating the Centenary of Fisher Library and may I also extend the warmest of welcomes to our visitors, especially those librarians who have come from so many of the great universities of Australia to share this commemoration with us.

Certainly, the Fisher Library is one of the great libraries of Australia and is testimony to the generosity of one man – Thomas Fisher. Without his bequest, it would have taken the University much longer to achieve a purpose-built library. Although he had little formal education, Thomas Fisher recognised the importance of learning and libraries.

In 1879, he was moved by a plea by the then Chancellor, Sir William Manning, for ‘... one of our men of great wealth and equal public spirit’ to erect a library for the University.

Thomas Fisher was not a conspicuously wealthy man. He had been a bootmaker and lived quietly in a house where the Biochemistry building now stands on the Darlington campus. Living so close, he often walked around the University and undoubtedly talked with many of the students and academics. When he died in 1884, Mr Fisher left the bulk of his estate to establish and maintain a library.

The thirty two thousand pound windfall caused much debate within the University. Some wanted to spend the money entirely on a building while others preferred to use it to purchase books. In the end, compromise was achieved. Two thirds was devoted to the building, with the state government contributing the remainder.

The residue of Mr Fisher’s bequest was set aside to fund not only the purchase of books but also the salaries of library staff.

Planning for the building was protracted and it was not until 1909 that this magnificent hall, in which we are now gathered, was ready for use. The final cost was around seventy two thousand pounds but it was worth every penny. When it opened, the Fisher Library was run by an assistant librarian, the poet John Le Gay Brereton. He was later appointed Librarian and later still became Professor of English. He described the new library as matching the main building but with ‘more grinning and goggle-eyed monsters glowering from every coign of vantage, and suggesting symbolically the results of overstudy or the horrors of examination.’

So this hall served as the reading room of the Library until the present Fisher Library was opened in 1963. It is truly an inspiring and beautiful space that would be almost impossible to replicate today. The hammer-beam roof is similar to that of Westminster Hall in London

although slightly smaller. I feel somewhat awkward in telling you that an entire cedar forest in Queensland was logged to provide the timber. The book stacks had glass floors and an electric lift which were the very latest in design and copied in other libraries.

The Library was opened on this very day in 1909 along with the splendid Nicholson Museum on the floor below. That day also saw the opening of a new engineering building. So today is indeed a celebratory occasion in the history of this University.

My predecessor as Governor of New South Wales, Lord Chelmsford presided over the festivities which attracted two thousand people all resplendent in academic dress or other finery. The student magazine, *Hermes*, noted that the Library was a 'monument to noble culture' while at the same time commenting on the confused fashion sense of some of the people attending.

The Fisher Library served the University well for more than fifty years. Over time it became more crowded as enrolments grew but it retained an allure that modern buildings rarely achieve. Perhaps sentiment intensifies over time but standing here today it is easy to appreciate how the architect's vision inspired generations of scholars. Later in today's program we will hear Les Murray recite *Incunabular*. Les was a frequent habitué of the Fisher Library during his time as a student.

This hall holds special memories for many of us who worked or studied here. Probably no-one remembers John Le Gay Brereton during his time as librarian but there will be some who recall Henry Mackenzie Green who presided over this place from 1921 to 1946. It was a time during which the Fisher Bequest sustained the collection to a large degree.

Other gifts and donations have been received since Thomas Fisher made his bequest. The former Chancellor, Sir Charles Nicholson, made substantial gifts which are jewels of the Rare Book collection. The brief history of the Library which you have received today includes details of many of the important gifts. I'd like to acknowledge some of the most recent which include the science fiction collection donated by Mr Colin Steele who is in the audience; the Windeyer Family who presented the Library with a magnificent collection of legal books; and Mr Malcolm Broun who is gifting his extensive history collection.

These gifts of outstanding collections are deeply appreciated as are the wonderful financial donations and bequests. The Library has indeed been fortunate to receive many legacies, the latest of which came from Mr Tony Gilbert. Tony was a long time supporter of the Library and of the Bell Shakespeare Company. I know that many of you contribute through the Annual Appeal and I thank you for your generosity. Your help is greatly appreciated and enables the acquisition of items that could not otherwise be afforded.

I would particularly like to thank members of the Friends of the Library for their continuing support. Over the years, the Friends have provided funding for the purchase of the first, second and third millionth books for the collection. They have also supported the purchase of a number of other expensive works. Individual members of the Friends have been generous including Mr Neil Burns who gives a significant donation each year to support Japanese Studies. The Library is indebted also to Sally and Bill Nelson for their generosity and continuing support.

There are many here today who worked with Mr Ted Steel when he was the Librarian. Some of you may have been students at that time and may recall his periodic calls for silence in the reading room.

The last Librarian of old Fisher was Dr Andrew Osborn. He was a consummate bibliophile and responsible for rapid growth in the collection. Dr Osborn was also responsible for working with the architects designing the current Fisher Library. Mr Ken Woolley who was the design architect is with us today.

The move to the new building was greatly anticipated. Dr Neil Radford will talk about working in both libraries and the changes that occurred. The new Fisher Library continued the great tradition begun in 1909 but in a different way. It too evokes fond memories especially among former students who spent time in the music listening area. For many, the book stacks are particularly evocative for their sense of undiscovered treasures as much as for the unusual smell.

Dr Osborn left before the building was completed. He was succeeded by Mr Harrison Bryan who later became Director-General of the National Library. Harry Bryan was often to be found in a grey dustcoat on an upper floor of the book stack sorting books ready for cataloguing. Harry brought a sense of order to the Library and a greater balance between collections and services to readers.

When Harry retired, Dr Neil Radford became the University Librarian. During Neil's tenure, the Library expanded rapidly. It was during his time that several colleges of advanced education joined the University and their libraries had to be accommodated. Neil also saw a number of departmental libraries become part of the University Library.

Following Neil's retirement in mid 1996, Ms Kate Sexton and Mrs Judy Campbell were acting University Librarians until the appointment of Mr John Shipp in late 1997, whose leadership has been in the finest tradition of his predecessors. His appointment coincided with changes in the way scholars published. The past decade has been a time of continuous change. Certainly, online access to journals, and now books, has made the walls of the Library transparent.

Nevertheless, these changes haven't reduced the need for libraries. In the past two years, the University has built new libraries for Science and Technology and for Law. Both are very popular places with students. Plans are well underway to renovate the current Fisher Library in time for its fiftieth anniversary in 2013.

The Library is as much the heart of the University today as it was in 1909. The heart may pump at a different rate and some of the arteries may be more virtual than physical, but it serves the same purpose – to support high quality research and outstanding learning.

So, on behalf of the many thousands of students and colleagues, **and visitors**, who have spent countless hours of intellectual growth for 100 years in Fisher, I say, a most sincere thank you. And may the second century be as illustrious as the first!

*Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir AC CVO
Chancellor
University of Sydney*