

LAYING FOUNDATION STONE OF NEW FISHER LIBRARY BUILDING

UNIVERSITY OF SYDNEY, 12TH MAY, 1961

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. H.G. Menzies, C.H.

I want to say, Sir, that I am very grateful to you for what you have said about me, and about my Government. I think it proper that I should also remind all of you here today that what has been done could not have been done without the most extensive financial co-operation on the part of the State Government, because the new era, as I like to think it is, in university life which began with the Murray Report, and the adoption of the Murray Report, imposed great burdens, if we accepted them, on the Commonwealth and on the State; and I think it is a very remarkable thing, worth remembering, that all the Governments in Australia concerned, and indeed all parties concerned, accepted these responsibilities, which of course, as you know, are not growing less. As a result of the Murray Commission we found ourselves called upon to find a sum of money which was staggering to me and, I can only assume, catastrophic to the Treasury. But we swallowed three times and in a small voice said "Yes" - and my State colleagues, I have no doubt, swallowed five times and in a small voice said "Yes" - and then we appointed a Universities' Commission, under as mild-mannered a collection of bandits as I have ever come across in my life. When they made their recommendations for the next triennium ( I see one of the bandits here!) when they made their recommendations for the next triennium well, they were roughly twice what they had been when we swallowed three times and said "Yes" - so this time we swallowed six times and said "Yes".

But these are, of course, light-hearted remarks about a very, very remarkable period of development. The development in the university's field has been, and is of course going to be, so phenomenal that one would almost have expected it to satisfy the demand. But of course it won't; it won't because circumstances in Australia are such that the demand for tertiary education is growing much more rapidly than the population itself. But all this is a good thing, though it poses the most tremendous problems not only in terms of money but in terms of trained and adequate teachers and enquirers. There is a tremendous challenge to education in Australia.

Now when one thinks of a University one, of course, thinks of a variety of methods, but for myself I would like to say that I think that not only is a fine library the heart of a university, but in a real sense it is the University. One cannot imagine a university without a library of such quality and of such extent that the eager students in their thousands will not be prepared to find sustenance in it and encouragement in it. A library is a marvellous thing, and books are marvellous things. Carlyle, you know, said: "In books lie the soul of the whole past time, the articulate audible voice of the past when the body and material substance of it has altogether vanished like a dream". Now that was, I think, a remarkable observation, in "Heroes and Hero-worship". He was thinking of books primarily as the repository of the mind and experience of men in past days. He was speaking as an historian, and I am very glad that he was, because a university that loses its sense of history, a student who has no sense of history, is only half a university or half a student. And so, if a library is to be the repository of the past forms and experience of men, it must be an adequate one.

I know that in my days at the University of Melbourne - if I may refer to so humble a foundation in your presence - a University that was once decorated by the Vice-Chancellor himself, in our time a library was a small affair, rather dark. I remember it so well: a bit dingy, a few students coming in and peering at the book-shelves and getting as near as possible to the window to get a little light, and a magnificent person called Edward Hippius Bromby, who wore a beard, presiding at a desk and being greatly shocked every time someone dropped a volume of the Law reports on to the floor, an art which I acquired then and which turned out later on to be extraordinarily useful when appearing before a somewhat somnolent High Court.

Now, Sir, it is said, and one can quite understand it, "Aren't we putting up too many libraries; aren't we setting up too many of these great places?" And the comment is a comment not to be surprised at because I believe in recent times, almost in the last few years, there has been a greater burgeoning of library building and equipment in Australia than at any other time in our history. I doubt whether it can be matched in any other country of our population. Therefore people of economical minds, which distinguishes them, of course, very sharply from economists - the word is quite different - but people of economical minds will say to us: "Well, why spend all this money on a university library when only over there you have a National Library?" Just as I said at Canberra University, people say "Why spend all this money on a University Library when you are already devoting your attention to the preliminary planning of a great National Library in Canberra?"

The answer is that no University can do its work, and above all a University so tremendously over-crowded as this is in terms of numbers, no University can do its work if it does its library work, its study of books, at a distance. The book must be with the student, the facilities for work must be, in my opinion, instant facilities because, unless students have improved a great deal since my time, it doesn't take more than a mile and a half for enthusiasm to evaporate. You want the Library on the spot and, of course, if you have it on the spot, it must be the best kind of collection of books and of documents that you can possibly achieve; if it isn't, then the great student, then the great research scholar, the man or woman full of ambition to probe more and more into the knowledge of some matter will find himself or herself leaving Australia and going to where all these resources are available. We will tend to lose some of our best students. Whereas on the other hand, if we have here on the spot a library of extensiveness and significance and value, selectivity, then we will not only maintain our own students and keep them, but we will gather students from other places and that is very important for Australia because for somebody in Australia to come to a library that has great resources from some other part of Australia involves a relatively small journey, but for Australian students to have to go to the great repositories in the world involves not only large sums of money, but many, many thousands of miles of travel. This is one of those things in which we ought to aim at being as self-contained in resources as we possibly can be.

There is, of course, one aspect of that matter that perhaps I ought to refer to. I do not think, myself, for the reasons I have given you, that there is any inconsistency between having a great library here and another one three miles away, a public library. Not at all. But there will be great trouble for us in getting what we ought to get for our resources if our libraries are allowed to be unduly competitive for scarce resources.

We get the idea occasionally, don't we, looking at the book-shops, that the flood of books now pouring out over the world

is phenomenal. Your reference, Sir, to the statement in Ecclesiasticus is very much appropriate, because even then they thought that writings published, in the sense in which they were published then, were pretty plentiful and rather exceeded the scope of one man's work or life; but today we get the idea that books and records are flooding out on the world, and no doubt they are, but of the books we need as students, of the publications we need as students, there will always be in our time a supply smaller than the demand, because as all the new countries come to life, as all their intellectual processes begin to deliver, so will they more and more be demanding these precious resources in the world. If we, therefore, are going to do our best for the nation, as apart from one university, we will need to have the closest co-operation between all the universities and other libraries in Australia so that we may do the best that we can for the resources that we have.

Now, Sir, the only other thing that I want to say is this: This library is named after one of the great original far-seeing benefactors in this State. I venture to say that New South Wales and, in particular, Sydney, has been very fortunate in having had in the past men who had imagination and foresight and who began things of this kind. And what they have, I think, shown to us is that every man's collection of books and papers may itself, though private today, have something to contribute to a great library in the future, and that goes particularly for documents.

Now I want to make a confession to you: I am more addicted to the waste-paper basket than I ought to be; and I have no doubt that many times I have thrown things into the waste-paper basket which would have made screams of rage come from Mr. Harold White, the Commonwealth Librarian, if he had seen me engaged in it.

When one looks back and thinks of all the pamphlets that have been published, the various occasional documents that have been published in Australia - what would an ordinary private citizen, interested in political history, for example, what would he give to have on his shelves a complete set of all the pamphlets that were published in the nineties, in the great period of the campaigns for Federation - well I wasn't engaged in political affairs in those days, but if I had been I am sure that I would have read them and said "Rubbish!", and put it in the waste-paper basket; or if it suited my book, "That's splendid!" I must lend it to my neighbour" - from whom it would never return. And so both ways they have gone. I want to say that I believe that it is the duty of all people engaged in affairs to try to contribute, not some boring autobiography, because that would be mostly false anyhow, mostly self-justifying anyhow, but to contribute something of contemporary observation on the events of the country and the events that people themselves have witnessed, because a great library is the one that contains masses, almost myriads, of documents of profound interest to the scholar, and not only to the scholar of the humanities but to the scientist, to the man who, as a scientist must, not only proceed on his own experimental work in the laboratory but who also must reach out and gather from all round the world the written product of the work of others.

So, Sir, it is a good thing that this is the Fisher Library, because he set us an example in that field. It is a good thing for this University to have this great library, which will provide facilities for, I hope, eager students in their thousands for many, many years to come. It is a good thing for the State of New South Wales that this should happen, but above all, I venture to say, it is a good thing for Australia, because it will be one more contribution to making Australia more and more a centre in civilised life, of intelligent research, of cultivated understanding and of eagerness for greater knowledge.