

OPENING OF
THE NATIONAL LIBRARY
CANBERRA, A. C. T.

Speech by the Prime Minister, the Rt. Hon. John Gorton, MP

15 AUGUST 1968

Mr Chairman, Distinguished Guests, Ladies and Gentlemen :

You, Sir Grenfell, have told us something of the history of libraries, and in particular of the history of this building in which we today find ourselves. While you were telling us about it, I could not but think how fortunate you were to have been driven out by the ferrets of the Treasury from the burrow in which you once found yourself, if the end result of that was that you find yourself in this - if I may so describe it - warren.

I know that at one stage, you described - or Sir Robert Menzies described the storage places in which the books of the National Library were placed as "elegant igloos", those being those Nissen huts scattered around the place. No-one, Sir, would have the temerity to describe this as an "elegant igloo". Rather, I think, the proper name for it might be Xanadu, because you will remember it was in Xanadu that Kubla Khan "a stately pleasure dome decreed", and this perhaps might be a fair description of what ought to be a stately building, a national library.

Many hearts and hands and minds have worked effectively and devotedly over the years to bring to completion this building in which we now find ourselves. Only on the rarest occasions does some accomplishment such as this result from anything other than the devotion of many people, and the contributions of many thoughts and of many minds.

I think that as the years go by, and the decades go by in our nation, and as they go by give more growth, give more colour, give more depth to our national story, this building having already gained the recognition that it has, will be counted in the world as one of the world's great libraries.

You have given thanks, Sir, to those who have worked so effectively to bring to fruition this project, but what you have not done and what I propose to do is to say how much credit is due to you and to your enthusiastic work as Chairman of the Council of the National Library of Australia. I have some knowledge of this, having worked with you in other directions, and know how much devotion you have given to this task, even if, if I may say so, the standard of poetry of which you gave us an example has not got quite the finish of the building in which it is stored.

The early libraries of the world, Mr Chairman, as I understand, tended to be temples in which holy books were kept and where the priests were the guardians of the books, and no doubt, like most librarians, refused to allow the books to leave, on the very good grounds that if they did leave, it was unlikely they would be brought back.

We here have passed on from that, but there still is in the concept of a library, something of that original assessment in that in a building there are stored books which are not merely dogma, but books which in the sense in which they encompass the thoughts and wisdoms of the past could be regarded as having some great significance, if not some holy significance, in the present.

I have spoken of you, Mr Chairman, and those who have worked with you in bringing this to completion, but I also want to speak a little of those who make it operate, of those who will see that it will work for the end for which it is designed. This is where we rely on the staff of libraries - not the directors of libraries - but the staff of libraries who catalogue the books, who index the subject matter, who supply a research service and give easy access to any area of study which is required by somebody who comes to a library. It is these people, working quietly and devotedly in their chosen tasks who alone make a building such as this, and the books in a building such as this, fulfil a proper, effective and efficient task. Without them, there would be so many books here that not only could the mind of a would-be scholar not encompass them, but the hands of a would-be scholar could not find them. This is the task of those who run this library

I think, Sir, that in its practical application, the Library here serves and will serve the nation through a central government, the Australian Government, the most important government, working in conjunction with State Libraries of State Governments throughout the length and breadth of this nation.

It will serve our Territories. It will serve our Missions abroad, and it will provide one main strand in the network of library services which covers the whole of the world.

I think the nations of the world will draw closer and have drawn closer as communications have improved. No longer is it enough, as it once was, to live in a closed community of ideas. It is necessary that there should be an exchange of ideas to the greatest possible extent among the greatest possible number of people, and libraries such as this in various countries are the best means by which this can take place.

Just over one hundred years ago, another man opening another library said: "A great library contains the diary of the human race". This library, as part of a world-wide library service, will keep that diary up to date for us to study the world's Todays, as well as its Yesterdays, and by being able to study its Todays and its Yesterdays, perhaps enable us to be the more wise in seeking to shape the world's Tomorrows.

The insistent pressures of growth and the enlarging executive functions of the national library made its separation from the Parliamentary Library sensible and necessary and part of the orderly progression of events. Here today, we mark that final act of separation.

But it hasn't created two separate worlds of scholarship, this separation. There will still be the closest and most intimate relationship between the two libraries, and that will in each case give strength to the other.

We are keeping before us, as sixty years ago the Joint Library Committee established by Sir Edmund Barton kept before it as an ideal, that such a library as this shall be worthy of the Australian nation, shall be the home of literature, a part of the world and a part of all time.

Eight years ago, Sir Robert Menzies, the seventeenth Prime Minister, presented the National Library Bill which supported the Paton Committee's recommendation for this library. Less than six years later, Sir Robert laid the foundation stone of this library, this relatively inexpensive library, I think you said, Sir, costing no more than \$8 million - without books!

Now, on the 15th August, 1968, there is given to me, the nineteenth Prime Minister, the great and enduring honour of being asked to open that Library for which so many other people have worked for so long, and which those of you who have eyes to see will agree with me, is what I have sought to describe it as today.

With just one more quotation, Sir, I propose soon to declare this Library open, but I did want to say something about books, or rather to say what some other great man had said about books -- or rather, some great man had said about books! That is Joseph Conrad, whom I quote :

"Of all inanimate objects, of all man's creations, books are the nearest to us, for they contain our very thoughts, our ambitions, our indignations, our illusions, our fidelity to truth, and our persistent leaning toward error, But most of all they resemble us in their precarious hold on life".

This building, and those who attend these books will see that the hold on life is not precarious and that the influence on life is that which those who read these books choose that it shall be. That is one of the great achievements of today and one reason why I have such pleasure in declaring this National Library open.
