

*Library as Sanctuary, Librarian as Saviour*  
**National Library of Australia Patrons' Dinner**  
**Rupert Myer AO, President, The Myer Foundation.**  
**Friday April 19, 2024**

Thank you, Alison Dellit, for your warm introduction.

National Library Chair, Brett Mason, Director-General, Marie-Louise Ayres, Council members and staff, Patrons of the National Library of Australia, distinguished guests all.

I begin by acknowledging the traditional custodians of this region, the Ngunnawal and Ngambri people. I acknowledge other Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people joining today. Always, and even more so in the context of tonight's topic, I am deeply grateful for your encyclopaedic cultural knowledge passed down generation by generation over tens of thousands of years, for your conception of recording and preserving that cultural inheritance and for your remarkable continuing contributions to the creative life of Australia.

Thank you, Marie-Louise and Brett for the invitation to speak. I am honoured to do so and especially so on this occasion, the Patrons' Dinner, at which the National Library thanks and recognises supporters, donors and grant-makers, both individuals and organisations, whose acts have extended the ability of this library to serve the nation.

As someone who has been and is involved in various parts of the nation's cultural infrastructure and philanthropic sector, I want to acknowledge what those in this room and elsewhere have done with their time, treasure and talent along with those other vital components of the philanthropic act, voice and influence. I salute the ongoing funding over decades by the Friends of the National Library that has reached all parts of the institution. I also salute the gifts that have enabled various parts of the collections to be digitised. Illustrative of the diversity of that support, I note particularly the collections relating to performing arts, regional Victorian newspapers, women leaders, visual arts and music, handwritten manuscripts, migrant diaries and First Nations material. I am also thrilled to hear this evening's announcement about the new program funded by Catherine Law and the Opalgate Foundation.

Thank you to all of you. It is a real pleasure to be in your company.

With occasions such as this, the thanks are of course for what you have done, as well as for what it is hoped you will continue to do, along with the encouragement you will give to others. We all need to make the case wherever we can for libraries and for the National Library in particular. I hope that from the title of my speech this evening, *Library as Sanctuary, Librarian as Saviour*, you will detect my recognition of the criticality of all your endeavours, and that my remarks will be relevant and interesting for you. For the avoidance of doubt, the title of the speech is posed not as a question but as an assertion. If an outcome of this evening is that you are all driven into a renewed philanthropic frenzy, that would be very pleasing!

Why have I chosen this topic? Marie-Louise kindly gave me freedom to roam in my choice of subject. I cobbled together the title from a painting by Imants Tillers titled *Sanctuary* and a book written by Robert Skidelsky on Maynard Keynes titled *Economist as Saviour*. I like in all his paintings how Tillers combines language with visual imagery and in this painting the word *Sanctuary* is beckoning and welcoming. And I like in *Economist as Saviour* the fearlessness, hopefulness and promise of that phrase.

The words appealed to me, and the two ideas collided. I thought that I would integrate both *sanctuary* and *saviour* into a talk about libraries and librarians, incorporating some general remarks about libraries and some particular remarks about the National Library, drawing on some personal experiences along the way.

In the house where I grew up, in other houses I have known and, in the house, where Annabel and I have brought up our own family, there have been rooms that have been referred to as libraries. I love that library is a word that is scalable. A library of books can be on a single shelf or consume a room of a house or be spread over several. It can occasionally be an entire wing. A library can be subsumed into rooms with other names like study, office or den. A personal library is both defining of a person and, sometimes, defining of what a person aspires to be. Institutionally, they exist in just about every educational, religious and cultural context and throughout a myriad of specialist fields, across geographies and communities. Libraries also hide out in places with names like resource facilities, information hubs, centres for learning and leadership or the exotic sounding médiathèques. They are ever present in our lives and in the lives of our communities in a multitude of ways.

Inevitably I suppose, our formative ideas about institutional libraries are bound to our geography. For me, that was Melbourne. The libraries that I came to know and the cultural institutions that I came to visit over time played an important role in my upbringing. I have enjoyed learning about how they came into being and know that their existence can be traced back to some of the earliest plans following colonial settlement. The benefits of that planned cultural inheritance have been felt not just in Victoria of course but across the entire nation.

Former President of the State Library of Victoria, John Wylie, spoke about libraries as being a *core pillar of a free, democratic and informed society*. I like that this idea is so central to Australia's version of libraries across the whole country. On this, we all seem to agree. In work by arts and culture think tank, A New approach, the views about arts and culture amongst middle Australians across the country confirmed that libraries were valued places of connection and creativity as well as learning and knowledge. In its journey from Commonwealth Parliamentary Library in the early years after Australian Federation in 1901 to today, the National Library was clearly guided by the ideal that *we should have an educated society, a civilised society, a society that values knowledge and learning*. Indeed, these traits and attributes are enshrined in the National Library's Parliamentary Act and Service Charter.

And, in a multitude of ways, the National Library spectacularly succeeds in what it does and how it does it. We can read about all the *whats* and *hows* in documents that pile high, but it's so often the personal stories that give absolute clarity to the traits. Earlier this month, our daughter-in-law, Suzie Wnukowska-Mtonga told me that stepping in to the National Library for the first time as a student in Canberra a decade ago ordering a book and having it delivered made her feel like a VIP.

Glyn Davis's remarks at his recent Kenneth Myer Lecture also echoed some of these traits. He said:

*Like so many others, I first encountered the National Library of Australia as a student. It is a wonderful place — it sits at the heart of Canberra and offers a place to read, reflect and learn.*

Glyn then added:

*In his history of the NLA, Peter Cochrane argues that we weave narratives not just from the books, papers and objects in the collection, but from the wider stories and associations which permeate them... the true purpose [of a national library] is to take us on a perpetual round trip, from the collections ever growing, ever deepening, to the collective wisdom, ever contending, ever changing. And back again.*

My late uncle Ken, after whom the lecture is named, was associated with the National Library for more than 25 years including as Chair. He was most certainly on that *perpetual round trip*. He loved the library, and he devoted a good part of his life in public service to imagining what it could be, to the construction of the building, to its governance and to its traits and attributes. He would have loved the powerful democracy in everything that Trove is, and that the library has a digital place in every home across the country. But the physical structure of the National Library would have continued to matter hugely to him.

At heart, he was a *Library as Sanctuary* person recognising how libraries offer sanctuary both for people and for objects. From his classical education, he would have known that, above the bookshelves of the fabled Great Library of Alexandria was an inscription that translated from ancient Greek read, *this is the place that will cure your soul*.

In various places and at various times, libraries have been thought of not just as lodging houses or storerooms but as refuges, places of solitude where readers are alone but also in the company of generations of poets and philosophers, historians and astronomers, orators and theologians and mathematicians to name just a few of a library's living ghosts. Building a library has been likened to building *an ark to save learning from deluge*. They are places for gathering, for contemplation and joy, discovery, leisure and wonderment. They are places of authority, disquiet, curiosity and serenity, dissent, reform and battle. They are also amongst the few remaining truly *public* buildings, in a world where urban spaces feel highly privatised or secularised, and where most establishments only welcome you in if you're willing to buy something. The library is a space which doesn't impose any expectations on you or your wallet and, in that sense, it feels like the purest form of public benefit, which is almost revolutionary in the contemporary epoch.

Whenever a library is in the media today, its presence confers some deep gravitas to the issue at hand especially those that are complex or divisive. Through their collections of books and objects, they are capable of telling all sides of truth avoiding the pitfalls of disinformation and alternative facts. And those books and objects can project their relevance in the sanctuary provided by a library. Of course, a library is not a sanctuary in a religious sense, but it serves to remind us of, and empowers us to respect, the political and cultural values we consider vital to our survival.

For the National Library, it is quite startling to review the extent of the collections that it holds in trust for the nation, along with items that have only recently been gifted or acquired. Two recent examples of the latter that caught my eye were the thumbnail sized dictionary from 1890 and the first grammar book of old English written. Along with the entire collection, these whimsical objects are in a safe place to be enjoyed and valued in incalculable ways.

The power of a library's sanctuary is so beautifully captured in a powerful 1997 sculpture by Rachel Whiteread of empty library shelves where the casting reveals the:

*...imprints of the violence with which the books and manuscripts were ripped away from them. Each twisted and hashed marking represents the act of removal of knowledge, suppression of memory and the elimination of cultural inheritance.*

In that work, it is the absence of the library's sanctuary that becomes the focus along with the void that replaces it. There is perhaps no stronger evidence of the importance of libraries to our humanity and democratic ideals than the shocking actions taken by those who would seek to dominate and suppress other communities and civilizations. Libraries are early and primary targets for destruction and looting by those who fear the retention of cultural memory and knowledge.

In my personal experience, *Library as Sanctuary* has been central to the role it has performed. As a school student, the library offered me a place of retreat especially on sports days. Although I never considered myself to be a ‘library boy’, whatever that meant, another former student of my school, Barry Humphries, was happy to be described that way and he most certainly brought lustre and gravitas to the title. Throughout my student years especially, I enjoyed seeking out libraries and finding my favourite places to sit, which differed according to the time of day, the patterns of daylight and the nature of the study I was undertaking. From the constant good advice that I received from the Baillieu Library and Giblin Libraries at the University of Melbourne to the encounters with senior clergy and kindly folk at the Trinity College library next door, and then onto the gloriously reclusive University Library at Cambridge and the friendliness of the Pembroke College Library, I discovered that I could find the environment that I needed. And when solitude got a bit much, I found that a convivial and social version of sanctuary was available too.

Years later and cross-generationally, the toddler story time sessions at our local East Melbourne library made books a focus for our children and, in that space, hearing stories being read by someone else opened their ears and eyes to a version of life beyond our kitchen table, still familiar but alluringly different. Annabel reminded me that when we once returned a book fifteen years late to the library of our children’s primary school, rather than being chastised, she was told that *books always come back eventually*. Whilst libraries have many facets, their role as sanctuaries, as safe places, even as forgiving ones, is what I choose to cherish most.

For every library that I can think of, I can also think of a librarian. If the building and collection are the hardware, the people have always been the software. They have defined the experience of the place and have humanised the vast collections, long corridors, study spaces and high ceilings. They have helped to reveal the contents and have been guides for library users for generations.

At the outset, I do not wish to seem naïve and ignore the impact of search engines, IT and the multitude of knowledge navigation aids. These are forces that have redefined access to knowledge for billions of people and form part of the mega narrative of the era through which we are living. Life without Trove is already unimaginable, and we are all constantly told that we are just at the early stages of what these technologies will do. The stakes are high, very high. The battle lines are being drawn. The past may not be a great guide to what will happen next.

I have no insight at all into the ultimate impact of these technologies but can make one small observation. When Amazon recommends a book to you based on an algorithm, it is motivated to do so not by care or interest in you but by a desire to sell it to you. Naturally, we are dazzled by its predictive power. But it doesn’t resonate in the way in which powerful advice and encouragement can be given by a caring and interested person exercising full command of their knowledge and authority. Care and interest are the domain of librarians, and my observations and experiences have been that the impact is limitless.

In considering *Librarian as Saviour*, I acknowledge the remarkable stories of individual librarians in the service of their chosen profession. There are legendary tales of how books and manuscripts, entire collections and whole institutions have literally been saved by the devoted and timely actions of key individuals and collectives. Rather than recount those epic tales, I thought that I would share how I consider that I have been a beneficiary of that care and interest and how I consider I have been fortunate to have had life changing experiences at the hands of librarians and bibliophiles. Four short personal stories will have to suffice.

My school librarian, Betty Elliott, made the library a really cool place to be. She was forthright but never intimidating, encouraging but never preaching, sociable but never demanding of your time. Under her leadership, the library was most certainly a refuge, and she found a way to cajole students of different abilities to be imaginative and progress their intellectual curiosity. I remember her with great affection and admiration and am thankful for the personal interest she took in me and in the cohort of which I was part. It wasn’t until

years after leaving school that I became aware of her life outside the school occupying influential positions in organisations devoted to raising the professional status of librarians and library design. She seems perfectly suited to the description that the American writer Ta-Nehisi Coates made just recently of himself:

*I was made for the library, not the classroom. The classroom was a jail of other people's interests. The library is open, unending, free.*

The librarian at Pembroke College, Cambridge, Gilbert Stephenson, was perceptive, personable and welcoming to me, recognising that, as a foreign student there, I was a long way from home and feeling it. He was keen to let me know all about the treasures in the collection which included multiple first editions of books that I had long admired. Shortly after arriving, he and his wife Eleanor insisted that I join them for a Sunday lunch at their house not far away in Great Chesterford with a group of other current students whom they had befriended. That small gesture of kindness meant a lot. I was fortunate to have encountered someone who went out of his way to make wonderful suggestions. He also 'checked up on me' in that splendidly British way as I got on with my studies. That he had worked and lived in Africa for years and spoke proudly of his daughter who danced at the Lido in Paris added to the zestfulness and buoyancy with which he led his life. He made that library a safe and comfortable place for me to be. As a footnote, Clive James chose that library in which to give that remarkable and lengthy interview to Kerry O'Brien not long before his death.

Some of you may have known of Major William Spowers, a nephew of the artist Ethel Spowers, and a director of Christies who ran their books and manuscripts department for over 25 years until the early 1980s. While not strictly a librarian, he was a committed bibliophile who worked in libraries and with librarians for most of his working life. He was also a serious collector of books which he housed in one of those purpose-built wings. He catalogued some of the major private libraries in the UK. I was fortunate to have been invited by him to assist in work he was doing for the Duke of Devonshire in cataloguing part of the library at Chatsworth. The respectful and careful examination of each object was delightfully offset by the use indoors of a garden wheelbarrow to move some of the volumes about. Forty years later, I recall with fondness the serious intent of the assignment, the good humour of those involved and the purposeful way in which everyone involved went about their tasks. I observed a harmonious and heartfelt appreciation for being there working together. And being in that library for an extended period of time was a completely dazzling experience.

The final story features a librarian at the State Library of Victoria whose name I never knew. I was writing my honours thesis and had decided that it might help if I went to the reading room and channel the many others who had been there before me. I had come the point of rereading the notes that I had compiled over months and was carefully highlighting with a highlighter pen what I determined to be the most important paragraphs and sentences that I had written. After working for several hours, I went back to check something from earlier in my editing and discovered to my complete horror that the highlighting had somehow caused the ink to blur. Rather than highlighting the passages, it had obscured them and was causing the words to disappear from sight. Let's just say that it was a highly distressing moment. I was panicking and I rushed to one of the librarians to explain what had happened. I was greeted with a smile and with calmness. She walked me back to the desk and insisted that I take her ball point pen, return to my notes and begin carefully tracing the words where I could decipher them. And that is what I did. It was pretty simple really and may not seem like much but, to this day, I am grateful that in that moment, I was given practical advice delivered with care and concern. It saved the day and quite a bit more.

By evoking the word *saviour*, I am not implying that the actions of librarians can somehow remedy the problems of the larger society—poverty, homelessness, inequality, disadvantage to name a few. But I choose to think both from my personal experience and from those of others that when, in the face of technological transcendence, librarians serve communities by sharing insight, knowledge and information, those acts of service raise opportunities for everyone.

Sharing is at the heart of what a librarian does, and it is noticed and appreciated. Through my membership of the Council for the Order of Australia, I am pleased to be able to read the nominations for librarians and I know for certain that their skills are valued by many in the community. The manner in which librarians undertake their daily job - pooling resources, acting equitably, extending imaginations, checking in on people, being heartfelt and practical - all validate for me how *saviour* can be an appropriate descriptor.

I want to conclude with a further comment about the National Library specifically. During my term at the Australia Council, I attended the presentation of the Prime Minister's Literary Awards that was being hosted at the National Library. It was one of those too rare occasions when the most senior person in the government of the day, in whose name the awards were named, was in attendance at the National Library amongst writers, readers, publishers, distributors and retailers, along with parliamentary colleagues, members of the press, departmental officers and other observers. The feeling that night was of all parts of the cultural ecology well in balance each appreciating the other, government celebrating Australian authors and their prodigious talents along with the industry that surrounds and supports them. With the plethora of book clubs around the nation, a broader universe was in on it too. It was one of those occasions when the unabashed celebration of arts and culture was utterly central to its purpose. Of course there was controversy in the choices of award winners, the shortlists, the categories, the panellists, the acceptance speeches and who wasn't there, but it was overwhelmingly a glorious moment in which this institution played its defining role with consummate skill and bearing.

That is what a National Library is, and it is a role so beautifully played again and again by our National Library. It does so alongside so many other libraries as well: beckoning and welcoming to each of us, and acting with fearlessness, hopefulness and promise.

*Library as Sanctuary, Librarian as Saviour.*