

"BOOKS IN A LAND OF PARADOX"

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BOOKS IN A LAND OF PARADOX

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The Hon. Justice Michael Kirby

THE CHIEF Justice of New Zealand opened his recent judgement on the attempts to suppress the book *Spycatcher* by Peter Wright with the comment that it was 'probably the most litigated book in all of history'. That may be correct, although I suspect that the Bible may yet have a slight edge.

The Bible was probably the first book carried from the ships of the First Fleet when they anchored in Sydney Cove in January 1788. From reading the catalogue which accompanies this Exhibition, I get the impression that the Rev Richard Johnson — sent to this country by an organization with the engaging name of the Eclectic Society — was rather like those annoying people who nowadays clamber aboard a jumbo jet struggling remorselessly on with the entirety of their worldly possessions. Johnson was just such a man. He carried with him no less than 100 Bibles, 350 New Testaments, 500 Psalters, 100 Prayer Books and 200 Catechisms — all made available to him by the Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge. Amongst his most precious possessions were twelve copies of Bishop Thomas Wilson's *An Essay towards an Instruction for the Indians*. Sadly, guns and hangings all too soon quickly replaced words and books in the relationship between the newcomers and the indigenous inhabitants of the Great South Land.

Many of Johnson's books were lost when his church was burnt down in 1793. However, his King James bible survived. I was present a few weeks ago, in St Andrew's Cathedral, Sydney, on the 200th anniversary of the first Christian service, when that Bible was brought out and its familiar, comfortable words were read in a service of reconciliation and remembrance.

In his first sermon, happily recorded, Richard Johnson spoke to the entire assembled colony of the First Fleet. Even Mr Christopher Skase with his ever-burgeoning network, could never hope to reach 100% of the literate population of the Australian continent, as Johnson did that day. Johnson's message was remarkable for such a time. 'I speak to you', he said 'not as Anglicans; nor as Baptists. Not as Roman Catholics, nor Methodists. Not as Jews, nor as Gentiles. But as mortals; and yet immortals.'

It is one of the tragedies of Australia — recorded in the books that trace our history in this Exhibition — that Richard Johnson's unseasonable spirit of ecumenicism and reconciliatory harmonism faded away as his flock scurried from his sermon to their arduous tasks. Perhaps the sun was just too strong. Perhaps anger at the clearing of the bullock tracks fostered intemperance. Perhaps, as Sir Mark Oliphant once suggested, the genetic pool of the founding guards and convicts doomed us inescapably to a discouraging start. Whatever the reason, the history of Australia after the arrival and the first sermon was all too often the opposite of the message of love contained in the 350 New Testaments carried by the Reverend Richard.

And yet Johnson's assertion of immortality suggested, from the start, that even in trying, rustic and seemingly daunting circumstances, the new settlers (or some of them) lifted their sights from the necessities of worldliness to the world of the spirit. It is this world — of poetry, of history, of descriptions of the new land and of its exceptional flora and fauna and remarkable indigenes that dominate the collection brought together in this important Exhibition.

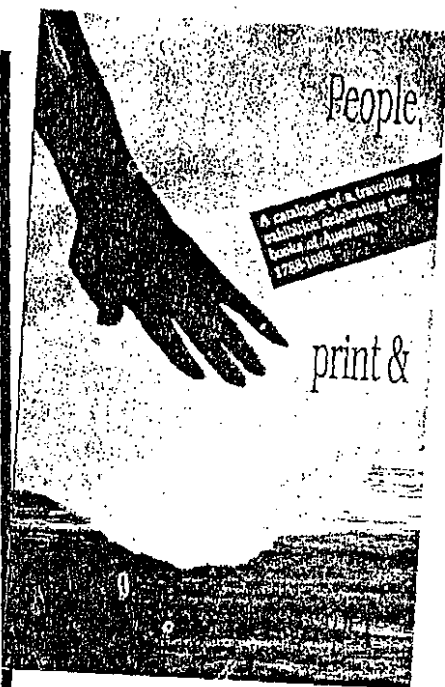
John Milton, whose words open the catalogue of

the Exhibition, once declared that:

A good book is the life blood of a master spirit — embalmed and treasured up to a life beyond life.

This is a collection of the good books of some of the master spirits who have enlivened the soul of Australia during the last 200 years. What does it matter if we have the biggest flagpole in the world, but have no soul? What does it matter if we enjoy a high standard of material life but surround ourselves with a crass, imitative and derivative culture? Surely after 200 years we could boast of more than this. Well, this Exhibition allows the observer — the jury of local and visiting examiners — to scrutinize the works of the master spirits of Australia. They are not all here. Necessarily, the medium being books, the great spirits of the Aboriginal people who preceded us are not fully represented. Nor are there here those private spirits of family and loved ones, unsung in history, but vital in the development of the inner being of every one of us. Nor are the notes of music captured or the daubs of paint, the drawing of great buildings or the flights of an advocate's fancy before an open mouthed and captive court. These works either perish or must be found elsewhere. Yet the sample is representative. It stretches back to the First Fleet. It takes us up to our own time. A thoughtful reflection upon the books collected here will evoke the proper response to the Bicentenary — a mixture of pride and shame; of disappointment and yet of hope.

The Exhibition will demonstrate the many paradoxes of Australia. Paradoxes were inevitable in the very notion of founding a colony transplanted from the windswept islands to the north of Europe to the perimeter of a great desert land on the opposite side of the globe. As the catalogue points out, we have more records of the doings of the First Fleet and of the early explorers — many represented here — than we have an understanding of what actually motivated the sending out of those lonely vessels. Of course, the externalities are known. The loss of the American plantations. The overcrowded prisons. Cook's reports. The fears of French expansionism. We also know that from the start we were second best — Australia being the second choice after West Africa was abandoned. I suppose some early Humphrey Appleby is really responsible for us being here tonight. There was the usual talk up and down Whitehall. There were the interminable meetings of interdepartmental committees, rounded always with the finest sherry. Doubtless, there were the politicians necessarily



Exhibition Catalogue
Title page from Song of the Wheat



calling for more law and order. And the judges, reaching for their nosebags to fend off the odours of the courtroom, sentencing more and more to hanging and to prison. It was then, no doubt, that Sir Humphrey dealt his trump card. New South Wales it was. The ships were packed off with their human cargo and the 300 Bibles. Sir Humphrey could turn to other, more pressing things. So are the great decisions made in Canberra. So were they made in Whitehall in 1787.

Just imagine the depressing prospect, if you were a person of books, stepping into the mud at Farm Cove in Sydney 200 years ago. The Bible is a treasure house. So is the Prayer Book. But the inquisitive spirit seeks other literature, poetry, adventure and science beyond those pages. There were no printing presses for the publication of books. The handwritten journals became the early record of our history. Many of those famous books are collected here. Baxland's journal; Oxley's journal; the records of Hovell and Hume and the other explorers who slowly and with pain opened up the continent. These records were soon in great demand in England and Europe. They began a tradition of books on the exotic and unique features of this continent which continues today. The books of the birds by Lewin and Gould gave way in due course to the descriptive books, such as those of Ion Idriess with his vivid tales of the Inland. A number of theses run through the collection displayed here. The first is the overwhelming influence of, and resistance to, the Englishness of early Australia. For much more than a century, there was very little multiculturalism here. When John O'Grady wrote *They're a Wierd Mob* in 1957, he tried to look at Australia through the eyes of Nino Culotta. He and other pensmiths pushed an often inward looking, even xenophobic, nation towards the ideal of diversity and respect for difference.

From the start there was the paradoxical relationship of transplanted language, culture and values living beside a stream of nationalism and even republicanism which accompanied the many loyal books such as the *Empire Annual for Girls*.

Overwhelmingly the authors of the early days were men. And yet, there are books here that demonstrate that we were early participants in the great movement of feminism. Some of our finest authors, who are featured here, were women. But few can be seen in the earliest days. The comment is made that James Charles Bancks, who devised *Ginger Meggs*, portrayed the 'safe middle class familial world' of Australia in the 1930s and 40s — a world that knew little of multiculturalism and

nothing of the women's movement. Both tides were still to come.

Much of the early material is prose description of the remarkable new land. This should not surprise us. A voyage to Australia was the then equivalent of interplanetary travel — the human mind thirsting after adventure and the opening up of new knowledge. But even in the earliest time there were poets. Remarkably enough, one of them was Baron Field whose book in 1819 *First Fruits of Australian Poetry* started the tradition that led on to Henry Lawson, A. B. Paterson, Mary Gilmore, Christopher Brennan and Judith Wright — all exhibited here. Field was not only remarkable for his very early publication. It was the more remarkable because he was a judge — sadly wordsmiths rarely given to lyrical poetry.

I have said that the early Aboriginals left no books. And some of the early books here talk of them in terms which now appear dated and prejudiced. But we also see the evidence of 'black voices': the descriptive works; the novels and ultimately black Australians speaking for themselves.

We are called a tolerant, easy-going 'she'll be right, mate' society. Yet there are books here which show the harsh actuality of stereotyping prejudice and of censorship which was a feature of publication in colonial and much later times. Frank Hardy's *Power without Glory* is here — a book courageous because published during the rising hysteria of anti-communism that threatened our liberties thirty years ago. We should remember that time.

Here too is the paradox of a country whose originality and spirit can so often be found in the bush, where May Gibbs discovered it with Snugglepot and Cuddlepie; yet a metropolitan land of a few big cities clinging to the coast around the great inland lake which turned out to be a desert.

And amidst all the banality, prejudice and derivative culture is the redeeming spirit of Australian egalitarianism. This was described in 1951 by Shakuntala Paranjpye — the daughter of the first Indian High Commissioner in Canberra. She found white Australian prejudice and indifference to the Aboriginals, suffocating. Only our informal egalitarianism, in contrast to the 'class-ridden attitudes of the old world', partially redeemed us. May it continue to do so.

This paper was delivered at the opening of the National Library's Bicentennial Exhibition, 'People, Print and Paper; a celebration of the books of Australia 1788-1988', in Canberra.