# ‘The Library at War: 1939 – 1943.’

**Address to the Australian Library History Forum Dinner 18 November 2014**

Reflecting on the seventy-fifth anniversary of the Library Act, I couldn’t get past the fact that this landmark legislation was passed by the NSW Parliament on 3 November 1939.

While agitation had been going on for some years, it said a lot about the parliamentarians and ministers of the day that, two months after the start of World War II, they made time to debate and to enact far reaching changes to the delivery of library services across the State.

There were, however, severe limitations. As the State Library’s 1940 Annual Report put it:

Owing to the outbreak of war the proclamation of the financial provisions under which the Government would liberally subsidise free municipal and shire libraries was postponed; moreover the Board to be set up was not fully constituted.[[1]](#endnote-1)

If the timing of the passage of the Library Act was unusual, then even more so was the fact that the magnificent Mitchell Reading Room opened its doors the public for the first time, just a couple of weeks after Sydney had been fired upon by the Japanese navy.

Back on 3 March 1938, when the Library’s trustees had ‘interviewed’ the premier, they were told that ‘it was not possible to undertake s large expenditure of loan funds when the government was uncertain from year to year what amount would be available’.[[2]](#endnote-2)

But the trustees must have had an impact, because just four days later, the premier made the following public announcement:

I have authorised the calling of tenders immediately for a substantial portion of a new building for the State Public Library, to be added to the Mitchell Library Building in Macquarie Street. The whole of the new building was estimated to cost 230,000 pounds.[[3]](#endnote-3)

‘Striking features’ were said to include a replica of the Tasman Map in the form of the largest marble mosaic floor put down in any building in Australia and a stained glass window to mark the five-hundredth anniversary of printing.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Noteworthy too, would be the installation of air conditioning to prevent ‘the deterioration by atmospheric action’, of the Library’s historical records and newspaper files valued at 300,000 pounds.[[5]](#endnote-5)

So carried away by all this was the NSW minister for works and local government Mr Spooner that he began referring to the State Library as the ‘National Library’.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Across the continent, however, there was confusion; after rhetorically asking ‘where and what is the Mitchell Library?’, a roving reporter with Perth’s *Daily News* wrote ‘its existence is due to the enterprise and foresight of Thomas Mitchell … a book collector of some importance’.[[7]](#endnote-7)

In fact, Thomas Mitchell had been an explorer and surveyor of some importance, the book collector behind the Library’s collection being of course David Scott Mitchell.

Although during 1940, the Nazis had conquered Western Europe and threatened Britain’s very existence, the State Library continued on much as it had before the war, the only major hiccup being the departure of some staff to join up. Indeed, some very significant additions were made to its collection.

In March 1940, William Charles Wentworth’s great- grandson, William Charles Wentworth III announced the donation of a deed of indenture by which his ancestor had purchased the South Island of New Zealand from its Maori owners, for one hundred pounds.

This deed had been discovered in the strongroom of the Wentworth family’s solicitors where it had been lying for one hundred years ‘in a parcel of old sealed papers’. And W.C. Wentworth III duly announced that he would present this deed to the Mitchell Library ‘after his relatives had seen it’.[[8]](#endnote-8)

That same year, the descendants of W.C. Wentworth’s great rival, John Macarthur, announced what the Library’s trustees described as ‘probably the most important collection of family papers relating to the early history of Australia’: the letters and papers of John Macarthur and his wife, Elizabeth. These included a letter written by John to Elizabeth on the evening of the day of Governor Bligh’s arrest by the Rum Corps, on 26 January 1808.[[9]](#endnote-9)

It wasn’t until the middle of 1941 that war news, from the other side of the world, first hit home with the Library staff. On 21 May that year, a group of destroyers, covering the Allied withdrawal from Crete, were attacked by a swarm of German and Italian bombers.

For some three hours, *HMS Juno* held off these enemy aircraft until, at around 1 pm, she was hit by 3 bombs. Two hit the aft boiler room and a third detonated the ship’s aft magazine splitting her in two. And 90 sailors, approximately half her company were lost.[[10]](#endnote-10)

On 23 June 1941, Mr William Ifould, the Mitchell’s Principal Librarian, wrote to the trustees:

I regret to have to report that the mother of Ronald Furness, Library Attendant in the Newspaper Reading Room, Mitchell Library building, has informed me that she has received from the Minister for the Navy a notification that her son is missing at the front. It is believed that he was lost when the destroyer *Juno* was sunk in operations off Crete. I recommend the Trustees to instruct me to express their regret on the loss of this exceedingly satisfactory young officer. [[11]](#endnote-11)

All the while, Japan had been waging a particularly cruel and vicious invasion of China since 1937. And by November 1941, the likelihood of Japan joining Germany and Italy in their war against the Allies was growing every day. Gravely concerned that a conflict with Japan would bring death and destruction to the Australian mainland, the Mitchell Committee wrote to the trustees about the threat now posed to the Library’s collection.

And on 17 November 1941, the Library’s trustees resolved:

1. That the most important of the original material in the Mitchell Library be removed to a safe repository in the country at once;
2. That the Government be informed of the action of the Trustees and be asked to supply funds for the necessary expenditure;
3. That watchmen be provided at the site of storage;
4. That the principal Librarian be authorised to pay for immediate expenditure out of the Mitchell Endowment Funds for the costs of removing and caring for the Mitchell Collection, pending a recoup from the Government.[[12]](#endnote-12)

The very next day, William Ifould issued the following memo with instructions for packing manuscripts:

The cases must be numbered from 1 on and we will put the number on the end of the case with stencilled numbers. Each case must be lined with Hesheen, each item to be wrapped in Duckback paper. On the outside of the wrapping of each item must be the box number and underneath it the item number, and this will be on the top side of the package so as to be readily seen.

The material to be packed straightaway will be the most valuable and important, such as very valuable bound manuscripts, starting from the safe. A card will be written for each package, that is a very brief entry like “Banks.- Manuscript diary” and the number of the package and the number of the case. We will start with the Country Circulation boxes and we won’t put into them things that won’t fit. We will use T. & H. cases for larger things.[[13]](#endnote-13)

So by 7 December 1941, when the Japanese launched their surprise aerial attack on Pearl Harbour, Hawaii, the State Library’s plans to protect its collection from enemy bombardment were well advanced.

Just over a week later, Ifould was able to report to the trustees that two hundred and fifty cases of Mitchell manuscripts and some very rare books had been sent away ‘on a truck attached to a passenger train’, which was heading for Armidale. This cargo, containing ‘the most valuable material in the Mitchell collection’, was accompanied to the Northern Tablelands by the Deputy Principal Librarian Mr Metcalfe, by the Library’s carpenter, and by a junior Library attendant Mr Cullen.

 Pending Treasury approval for two night watchmen, Metcalfe left Cullen to watch over the collection, which was deposited in the basement of the Armidale Teachers’ College. ‘I think that he [Cullen] can be supplied with a bed and can sleep in such a position that nobody could get into the basement’, Ifould told the trustees, ‘without his knowing it’. In all four hundred and eighty cases of manuscripts and rare books were ultimately transferred to Armidale.[[14]](#endnote-14)

However the H. L. White stamp collection was dispatched to the strong room of the Barmedman Branch of the Bank of New South Wales. Located 325 miles from Sydney, on a line which ran from Cootamundra to Temora and thence to Wyalong and Lake Cargellico, Barmedman was the junction of the line to Rankin Springs and was thus considered safe from enemy bombardment.

The Bishop of Goulburn, Dr Burgmann was also approached. But his reply was that ‘such storage space as they had in churches and other religious institutions round about Goulburn was already taken up’. And a senior geological surveyor, Dr Kenny advised against using the limestone caves at Wombeyan because they ‘could not be relied on for dryness or certainty of freedom from flooding through earth faults’. However Berrima Gaol was proposed as a repository for departmental ‘frozen records’.[[15]](#endnote-15)

Meanwhile back at the Public Library, arrangements for roof spotting and fire watching were complicated by the absence of younger staff, who had enlisted. So Ifould fell back on older men for the roof spotting and women for the fire watching. To cover the 11.30 pm to 6 am shift, bunk beds were installed for the women, who did not need to be on constant watch and could be roused by the sound of an air raid warning. Ifould advised the trustees:

Officers have had demonstrations of bomb fighting and firefighting by officers of the Fire Brigades Board…A reasonable amount of A.R.P. paraphernalia has already been procured – sand, sand buckets, shovels, rakes, etc.

For staff generally, an air raid shelter was constructed in one of the Mitchell Library’s basement rooms. This was strengthened by extra beams; an external window, which was below ground level, was strengthened by sand bags. And the Library was now closed to the public at night.[[16]](#endnote-16)

Over the next few weeks, further protective work was carried out. On the advice of the Fire Brigades Chief, Mr Richardson, the external windows were varnished and had mosquito and wire netting placed over them to minimise the possibility of shattering and damage from glass shards. And the glass roof of the Public Library Reading Room was similarly protected.

The most valuable pictures in the Mitchell and Dixson Galleries were removed from their frames by a specialist carpenter from Anthony Hordern’s Department Store. They were then placed in a basement room in the new building which had three five-inch floors above it. This, it was generally agreed, was the safest part of the whole Public Library complex. [[17]](#endnote-17)

More generally, these wartime preparations gave Ifould an excuse to push for completion of the new building. ‘I have had conferences with the…contractors and Public Works’ officers’, Ifould said, ‘and stirred them all up to finish…as quickly as possible’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

The Mitchell Librarian Miss Leeson, the head of research Miss Kibble, and the head of country circulation Miss Bertles, were also stirred up by the Principal Librarian:

I notice that some of our women officers are coming on duty without stockings. Whilst I am not unaware of changing customs and perhaps higher costs of hosiery and greater comfort in diminished clothing in the hot weather, I am not yet prepared to recognise the propriety of bare legs for our officers when they are on duty. I should be glad therefore if you would with as little publicity as possible… read this memorandum [to the junior staff].[[19]](#endnote-19)

 And Miss Leeson was further targeted, in this case by the Deputy Principal Librarian, John Metcalfe:

We have been asked to make a special effort to conserve string and cordage of all kinds…Would you make a special effort and have a box established and instruct officers in your department to put in it, rather than the waste paper basket, all pieces of string which they cannot use again. When these boxes are full the string can be sent for re-making.[[20]](#endnote-20)

However not all the Library’s security concerns related to the threat Japan posed. On 6 February 1942, the Mitchell Librarian sought information from police about a Mr J. C. Edwards. Concerned that Edwards might not be a fit and proper person to hold a reader’s ticket, Miss Leeson wanted to know whether this man had received a sentence of three months, four or five years earlier, for stealing stamps from a stamp dealer in the Royal Arcade.[[21]](#endnote-21)

Despite the extra administrative stresses generated by the war, the Mitchell Librarian still had time for more traditional duties. And during March 1942, Leeson wrote to the publisher of *Waterless Horizons*, a book about the explorer Edward John Eyre:

Deficiencies in the author’s composition were, perhaps, not within the publisher’s power to alter, though even here, I think the author would have been open to suggestion. But there are far too many literal errors, and the punctuation is very bad.[[22]](#endnote-22)

After the duly mortified publisher wrote back admitting that he personally was responsible for the proof reading errors, Miss Leeson offered further advice:

The author must have written very rapidly or he would not have repeated words and phrases so frequently. For instance, at the bottom of page 71, he repeats the phrases ‘a few days later’ and ‘at the end of their journey’ in successive lines. There are numerous instance of this kind of thing.[[23]](#endnote-23)

If the Library staff were beginning to wonder whether all their war time preparations had been necessary, their doubts must surely have vanished on the night of 31 May 1942 when three Japanese midget submarines entered Sydney Harbour. Before long all hell broke loose as navy patrol boats dropped depth charges, which shook houses and broke windows.

One of the submarines aimed a torpedo at the American cruiser *USS Chicago* which returned fire with massive five inch shells. Some of these skipped off the water; one hit Fort Denison while fragments from others were located in Cremorne and Mosman. Meanwhile the torpedo, which had been aimed at the *Chicago*, exploded under the *Kuttabul,* an old ferry which was being used to house naval ratings. And many of these young sailors were killed, less than a mile from the new Public Library building. Almost as dangerous as the five inch shells and torpedoes, were intense bursts of machine gun and tracer fire, spitting out red hot bullets which bounced off the surface of the harbour ending up all over the place.[[24]](#endnote-24)

However the very next morning, 1 June, the Mitchell Librarian was at her desk. It was business as usual as Ida Leeson wrote to a Mrs E. K. Pazzi of Bundaberg, Queensland:

In reply to your letter of May 25th I regret to say that the Trustees of the Mitchell Library are not interested in books such as you describe. We are only concerned with Australiana, New Zealand and the islands of the South-west Pacific. With regard to their value generally, the History of Scotland would be worthless commercially as you only have the 5th volume.[[25]](#endnote-25)

Then, just over a week later, the midgets’ mother submarine, which lay off the coast about nine miles south-south-east of the Macquarie Light House, began shelling Sydney; its target was the Sydney Harbour Bridge. In all, ten shells were fired, with most of them landing in the Eastern Suburbs.[[26]](#endnote-26)

In light of these ‘war conditions’, the trustees resolved to defer an official opening of the new Library building. Even so, readers and researchers were allowed to use it on and from 23 June 1942, just over two weeks after Sydney had been shelled. One of the first visitors was the President of the Board of Trustees who was also Australia’s minister for external affairs. Stopping by on his way to Canberra for a cabinet meeting, Dr Evatt said ‘I would not have missed seeing this for anything’.[[27]](#endnote-27)

By September 1942, it was clear that the worst of the Japanese threat had passed. And so, after receiving representations from the Royal Australian Historical Society on behalf of ‘not more than a dozen students’, the Library was reopened on Wednesday and Friday nights.[[28]](#endnote-28)

By far the largest number of visitors (almost 4,000) turned up on Saturdays, among them Australian servicemen from all over the country, and many American soldiers too. One of the chief drawcards was the marble replica of Abel Tasman’s 1644 map, on the floor in the vestibule. ‘There is always an admiring crowd around it’, the *Cairns Post* reported.[[29]](#endnote-29)

However it wasn’t until 24 November 1943, that the new Library building was opened by the NSW governor, Lord Wakehurst. And at the opening ceremony the premier, William McKell announced the proclamation of the financial provisions of the Library Act of 1939 – to take effect from 1 January 1944, with the Library Board finally constituted seven weeks later.[[30]](#endnote-30)

Of all the speeches at the official opening, it was what Dr Evatt had to say, which put what had been achieved in its proper context:

When this war came upon us, it seemed possible for a time that our building operations would have to be suspended. Fortunately for Australia it was decided to carry on despite the war. This was a statesmanlike decision. Indeed, it symbolised a fundamental issue of the war itself. Hitler had destroyed books. We went on building so that the books should remain our eternal heritage. Our state thus showed its special faith in the very freedom which our enemies openly suppressed.

Great public libraries are essential to freedom and to free men. They must always be free. Free to collect, to house, to make available to all, books by men and women of every shade of opinion. And so, there is no religion, no philosophy, no political system, no science, no useful art, no profession, no mechanism of production or distribution, no proposal for social well-being, which cannot be freely studied in this public library. Is not this indeed one of the rights for the preservation of which this war is being fought?[[31]](#endnote-31)

Andrew Tink

18 November 2014.

1. State Library of NSW Annual Report 1940, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. State Library of NSW Annual Report 1938, p. 4. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. State Library of NSW Annual Report 1938, p. 5. [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 14 October 1940. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. *Barrier Miner*, 16 August 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga) 20 April 1939. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. *The Daily News* (Perth) 29 February 1940. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. *Daily Advertiser*, (Wagga Wagga) 13 March 1940. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. State Library of NSW Annual Report 1940, p. 3. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. [www.my-crete-site.co.uk/juno.htm](http://www.my-crete-site.co.uk/juno.htm) accessed 16 November 2014. [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. Letter dated 23 June 1941 from the Principal Librarian to the Trustees of the Public Library of NSW. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Minutes of the meeting, on 17 November 1941, of the Trustees of the Public Library of NSW. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. ‘Packing Manuscripts’, Memo dated 18 November 1941, from the Principal Librarian. [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Memo with no subject heading but dated 15 December 1941, from the Principal Librarian to the Trustees. [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Report dated 10 March 1942 from the Deputy Principal Librarian to the Committee appointed to act in the matter of the further safeguarding of Mitchell and General Reference Library material against war risk. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Memo headed ‘General Report on A.R.P. arrangements’ and dated 15 December 1941 from the Principal Librarian to the Trustees. [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. Minutes of the meeting, on 6 January 1942, of the Trustees of the Public Library of NSW. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. Memo with no subject heading but dated 19 January 1942, from the Principal Librarian to the Trustees. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Memo dated 20 January 1942 to Miss Leeson, Miss Kibble and Miss Bertles from the Principal Librarian. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Memo dated 10 February 1942 to Miss Leeson from the Deputy Principal Librarian. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Letter dated 6 February 1942 from the Mitchell Librarian to the Police Department. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Letter dated 6 March 1942 from the Mitchell Librarian to Captain J.H. Peters. [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Letter dated 13 March 1942 from the Mitchell Librarian to Captain J.H. Peters. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 2 June 1942; *The Courier Mail* (Brisbane) 3 June 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. Letter dated 1 June 1942 from the Mitchell Librarian to Mrs E.K. Pazzi. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. *Sydney Morning Herald*, 9 June 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. *The Daily News* (Perth) 23 June 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Memo with no subject dated 21 September 1942 from the Principal Librarian to the Trustees. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. *Cairns Post*, 22 September 1942. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. *Daily Advertiser* (Wagga Wagga) 25 November 1943; *Sydney Morning Herald* 24 February 1944. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. State Library of NSW Annual Report 1944, p. 13. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)