History of the Foundation

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Our story

The State Library of NSW Foundation began as early as 1987 with the constitution being signed in June 1989. 2014 marks the 25th Anniversary of the signing the State Library of NSW constitution.

The past 25 years have seen a rich and sustained record of support with over 30 million dollars being raised during this period. The Foundation’s greatest legacy has been in acquiring, conserving and digitising some of the Library’s most significant collections. Without Foundation support the Library’s — and indeed the nation’s — historical record would be immeasurably poorer. To learn more about the history of our Foundation, see the SL Magazine article State Library 1989–2014: 25 Years On.

We sincerely thank our Foundation members, State Library Circle, Custodians, State Library Visionaries, Friends, partners, sponsors, staff and volunteers. Your loyalty and generosity has been critical to our success. See our photo gallery of past events and supporters from the last 25 years.

Twenty-five years on

The history of the State Library of NSW Foundation is defined by passionate individuals, families and civic-minded corporations who have given generously of both their time and money. The Foundation has been fortunate to have inspiring leaders and committed board members who appreciate the significance of libraries in our culture and society. We have seen extraordinary gestures of personal generosity and innovative public–private partnerships,
which have produced results previously thought unattainable. Above all, the history of philanthropy at the State Library is grounded in respect and love for our collections and the important role they hold as the nation’s intellectual capital for future generations.

Our 25th anniversary is an important opportunity to reflect on the history of our Foundation which has raised over $30 million for the Library. While this figure is impressive in itself, it is also important to acknowledge the tremendous contribution the Foundation has made to the profile of the State Library as a landmark cultural institution, nationally and internationally.

The constitution of the State Library of NSW Foundation was signed in June 1989. This was a critical time in the history of the nation, and of the Library. It was the era of the bicentenary of European settlement, and the new Macquarie Street wing had been opened by Her Majesty Queen Elizabeth II in May 1988. The Library’s unique national collections held a special place in the bicentennial celebrations and were featured in the major exhibition The Coming of the Strangers.

Led by the energetic inaugural chairman Jim Bain AM (1989–1994), newly appointed State Librarian Alison Crook AO, and President of the State Library Council Dr Mark Hertzberg AO (1986–1989), a distinguished group of Foundation directors — among them Rowena Danziger AM, David Gonski AC and David Sherbon — set the ambitious aim of raising a capital sum of $10 million over five years. By the end of 1989, the first year of the campaign, over $2 million had been raised with major contributions from Esso Australia, McDonald’s, Coles Myer, Wattyl, NCR Australia, Dalgety Holdings and the Bruce and Joy Reid Foundation.

So began one of the most vibrant and successful Foundation models of business and private partnerships in the NSW cultural sector. The Foundation contributed to making the State Library more outward-looking and socially aware. It also transformed its potential for acquiring new material. This model was successfully continued by subsequent chairs: the late Ian Angus OAM (1996–1998), Belinda Hutchinson AM (1998–2006), Rob Thomas AM (2007–2011) and currently Peter Crossing.

Over the past 25 years, the Foundation’s greatest legacy has been in acquiring, conserving, exhibiting and digitising the significant collections of the State Library. Extraordinary acquisitions...
James Hardie Industries, John Fairfax & Sons, Rivkin James Capel Ltd and Readers Digest — was early testimony to the power of private sector support.

The 1990s saw key acquisitions such as the 1795 letter from George Caley to Joseph Banks, the First Fleet Journal of Jacob Nagle and 19th century watercolours by Conrad Martens. The Bass and Waterhouse papers — purchased in 1998 for nearly $1 million — were a particular coup, made possible by corporate donations and private benefactors including the late Mrs EPT (Caroline) Simpson OAM, Mr James Fairfax AO and Mr and Mrs Hugh Dixson.

In 1999, with Foundation backing, the State Library purchased the Blackburn family papers (1779–1796). This collection included rare letters from David Blackburn, Master of First Fleet ship HMS Supply. Another highlight was the Seton album of drawings, purchased in 2000, comprising watercolours by Robert Seton (ensign in the NSW Corps) copied from Governor John Hunter’s sketchbook, c. 1800.

In 2010 the State Library made its most significant acquisition of early Australian colonial material since the 1930s. The Derby collection of 745 exquisite late-18th century natural history drawings and watercolours represents one of only two surviving comprehensive natural history collections from the early years of European settlement in Australia (see Artist Colony, p. 10). TAL and its parent company Dai-ichi Life of Japan, together with the NSW Government and the Foundation, contributed over $7 million to purchase what is now known as the TAL & Dai-ichi Life Derby Collection. Without this partnership, these rare items could not have been acquired for the State Library and for the people of New South Wales.

Another outstanding acquisition, contributed to by corporate partner Noble Resources, was the Captain James Wallis album, c. 1818. This previously unknown album — purchased in Canada for $2 million at the end of 2011 — contains landscapes, natural history sketches and rare portraits of Aboriginal people of the Newcastle region. The album was a basis for Treasures of Newcastle from the Macquarie Era, an important exhibition featuring artworks from Newcastle’s early history.

Also in 2011, the Foundation contributed over $600,000 to acquire all shares in Max Dupain and Associates and Dupain’s commercial archive. These 155,000 black-and-white negatives and 2500 prints, by one of Australia’s most important 20th century photographers, provide a record of the built environment of Sydney between 1946 and 1992.

Preserving our heritage

As well as building our collections, the Foundation has a proud history of supporting our expert conservators to preserve the collection. As early as 1990, major improvements to the Collection Preservation laboratories were made possible by the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation with a lead grant of $250,000.

In 1998 the bequest of the entire estate of the late Jean Garling, then valued at $3.8 million, specifically directed income from the endowment towards the conservation of the collection. A founding member of the State Library Society in 1983, Jean Garling’s bequest was the third largest benefaction in the Library’s history, following in the footsteps of the great benefactors David Scott Mitchell and Sir William Dixson. This funding has enabled a program of conservation work to be carried out each year.

More recently, the Mitchell State Library Centenary appeal of 2010 contributed over $300,000 to preserve key items from the Mitchell Library’s collection: sketchbooks by Tom Roberts, the Foster glass plate photography collection, the album of sketches from the voyage of HMS Rattlesnake by Captain Owen Stanley, and part of the Macarthur family papers.

Amazing Exhibitions
The Foundation has been an important source of funds for exhibitions. In the 1990s, in particular, it played a key role in realising a broad range of exhibitions including Australians and Sport: The State of Play, Right Time Right Place: Lewis Morley Photographs 1960–1992, Hearts and Minds: Australian Political Posters of the 1970s and 1980s, Journeys through Landscapes: Conrad Martens’ Life and Art, Sydney Exposures, Antarctic Journeys, Max Dupain and Dare to Know: The Art and Science of Pacific Voyages.

One of the most successful exhibition appeals was ‘Crewing for Flinders’, established to support the 2001 landmark exhibition Matthew Flinders: The Ultimate Voyage. This project provided over $100,000 for digitising items from the Flinders archive and enabled the show to travel to many parts of Australia.

In 2002, a gift from the Nelson Meers Foundation of over $1 million (over 10 years) established the Nelson Meers Foundation Heritage Collection. The gallery created with this extraordinary gift marked a turning point for the State Library by encouraging internal staff curatorial expertise and showcasing material from our vast collection.

More recently, the Foundation has supported landmark natural history exhibitions Lewin: Wild Art in 2012 and, showing now in our galleries, Artist Colony: Drawing Sydney’s Nature. The research behind these exhibitions,
which significantly extend our understanding of early depictions of our Sydney environment, was made possible by the extraordinary generosity of the Belalberi Foundation.

An endowment from Michael Crouch AO funded a new gallery for the Library’s permanent collections, Amaze: the Michael Crouch Gallery. This contemporary exhibition space showcases iconic, beautiful and unusual items from our collection which tell the history of our nation. Its first display, supported by the Dixson family, revealed 60 intriguing artefacts to celebrate the 60th anniversary of the Sir William Dixson bequest.

Innovative access

Providing greater access to the collections and being a trusted repository of historical material has always been an important goal for the Library. As early as 2003 the Foundation provided significant private funds for online access to our collections. The Mitchell Bequest project, in particular, provided $1.43 million invested over four years for the David Scott Mitchell bequest collection to be listed, conserved and electronic records created.

This was followed by the atmitchell.com campaign, the most financially successful campaign in the Foundation’s history. Led by Foundation Board and State Library Council member Graham Bradley AM, this 10-year campaign, beginning in 2004, raised almost $10 million (cash and in-kind). Through a network of high-profile partnerships — such as Qantas, the Australia–Israel Chamber of Commerce, the Bruce and Joy Reid Foundation, Rio Tinto, the Vincent Fairfax Family Foundation, Macquarie Bank and the John T Reid Charitable Trust — the campaign created an innovative online portal now known as Discover Collections, which provides free community access to 35 curated stories about our collections and Australia’s development as a nation. Discover Collections, supplemented by the State Library Visionaries program, provides resources for teachers and students which are critical to the History syllabus of the Australian Curriculum.

Of particular significance has been Rio Tinto’s contribution to Indigenous history with the Discover Collections Indigenous stories. The Foundation was delighted that Rio Tinto continued with its sponsorship of the Rediscovering Indigenous Languages project to uncover Indigenous wordlists in the Library’s collection.

From 2009 to 2011 the Holtermann photographic project digitised 3500 wet plate negatives to preserve one of Australia’s most internationally significant 19th century photographic archives. State-of-the-art photographic equipment, purchased with private funds, was used to produce high-resolution images of Australian life in and around the goldfields. This cultural asset was inscribed in May 2013 on the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World register.

At the same time, the Sir William Dixson map collection project saw over 1000 rare maps digitised with private sector support and made available online.

Fostering Education and Research
Education outreach was an early strength for the Foundation in the 1990s with James Hardie and Nestlé Australia partnerships for primary school programs. More recently there have been new opportunities in this area. Recent Foundation initiatives include the bus subsidy program to assist underprivileged schools to transport their students to the State Library and the HSC Word Express writing program.

A great success has been the pilot for Far OUT! Treasures to the Bush, a 2010 partnership with the Caledonia Foundation to take significant original material on tour to regional and remote NSW schools. To date, the continuing program has been delivered to 5000 primary students at 80 schools.

National literary awards and fellowships are other important areas for the Foundation. Our involvement with awards started in 1996 with the National Biography Award established by Dr Geoffrey Cains and later Michael Crouch AO, followed in 2003 by the Blake Dawson Waldron (now Ashurst) Prize for Business Literature and the Milt Luger Fellowship in 2004.

The Foundation funds three perpetual fellowships at the Library. Before his death in 2008, Mr EJ (John) Merewether generously established the annual Merewether Scholarship and the David Scott Mitchell Fellowship. In 2010 these were followed by the Religious History Fellowship, funded by an anonymous benefactor.
Transforming an icon

As we celebrate our 25th anniversary, I hope you will join us for the next phase in the history of the State Library of NSW Foundation. In 2014 this will be marked by our support for activities commemorating the centenary of World War I, and the first stages of the significant transformation of our heritage spaces in the historic Mitchell wing. Through the Mitchell Campaign the Foundation will assist with this vital refurbishment. Specialist galleries and innovative education spaces to interpret and share more of our world-class collections will meet the educational needs of our scholars, visitors, friends and volunteers.

The Foundation is fortunate to have State Librarian Dr Alex Byrne, Chairman of the Foundation Board Peter Crossing, and President of the State Library Council Rob Thomas AM, who provide inspirational leadership for our future work.

I sincerely thank our Foundation members, State Library Circle, Custodians, State Library Visionaries, Friends, partners, sponsors, staff and volunteers. Your loyalty and generosity has been critical to our success. While the State Library of NSW is a government institution, there will always be a need for additional private sector support to make special things happen.

Susan Hunt
*Director State Library of NSW Foundation*
& *Executive Manager, Advancement*

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