

## 175 years of the Melbourne Athenaeum Library - where to from here?

Paper presented at the Library History Forum, State Library of NSW, November 2014.  
Rose Blustein, Honorary Librarian



Melbourne Athenaeum photographed by Vicki Petheridge, 2010



Athena was installed when an extra storey was added in 1886

This year, the Melbourne Athenaeum Library, Victoria's oldest subscription library is celebrating its 175<sup>th</sup> birthday. Established in 1839 the Melbourne Athenaeum has operated in its current building for almost 175 years. The fact that the Melbourne Athenaeum continues operating to this day can be

attributed to its ability to integrate itself into the social, cultural and at times, political life of Melbourne society. Critical to its survival is that the building at 188 Collins is owned administered by a Committee of Management which not only provides sound financial management but also ensures that the library has a permanent and stable home.

Today in Melbourne and surrounding areas, there is a vast network of public libraries providing most services without charge. With a reputation for an excellent crime fiction collection our library still attracts a membership of around 1000, with readers enjoying the ambience of the physical space.

But let us go back to the beginning

The First Fleet not only brought convicts, soldiers, plants and animals from Britain to the new colony, it also brought New South Wales' first printing press and first books.

The first, albeit unsuccessful, attempt to establish a public library in the new colony of New South Wales was an appeal to the British public by the Reverend Samuel Marsden, begun in 1809, for books and money for a library of 'carefully selected books suited to the settlers employed in agriculture, the soldiers and the convicts'.

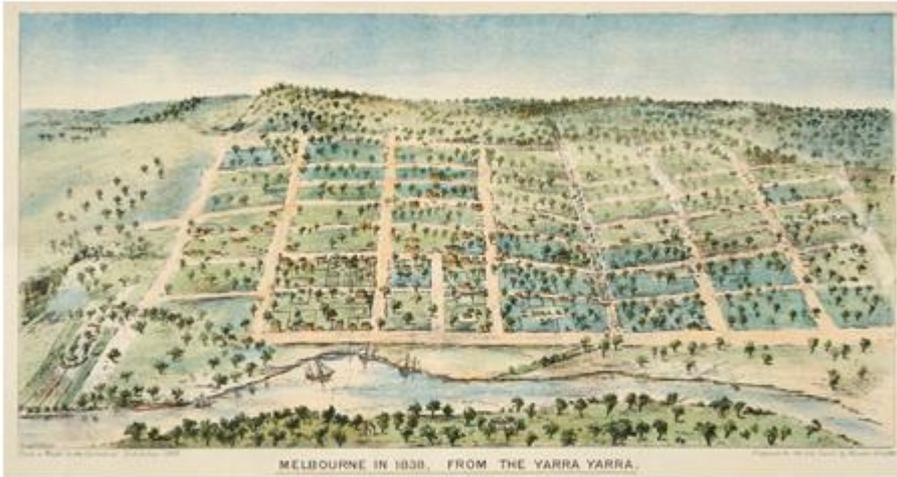
In 1821, a catalogue of the libraries held by private citizens in the colony was compiled, and from these private collections a number of libraries began to emerge. The 1820s saw the establishment of subscription libraries, and by the 1830s the introduction of schools of arts, mechanics' institutes, and literary institutes added to the number of libraries available to the people of the colony.

The Melbourne Mechanics Institution began humbly. The first thing the committee did was start a library in a rented house in Bourke Street. They had a vision and wanted their own building as physical evidence.

In 1840 Crown land in Collins Street was put up for sale. The Mechanics Institute Secretary told the other bidders 'not to bid on this site' and a site was duly purchased for 285 pounds. Part of the site was later put up for sale using the proceeds to finance the new building.

The institution was modelled on a successful British organization designed to use existing educational resources to provide further education for the

growing industrial class. Thus the institution provided lectures, adult education classes, a museum as well as a library. However, from the outset it was more a middle class cultural centre than an organisation for working men.



Melbourne 1838 - Lithograph by Clarence Woodhouse  
PicturesCollection State Library of Victoria H24502

In 1842 the building on Collins Street was completed.



Melbourne Mechanics' Institution completed in 1842.  
Drawing by ST Gill Glass slide held by RHSV

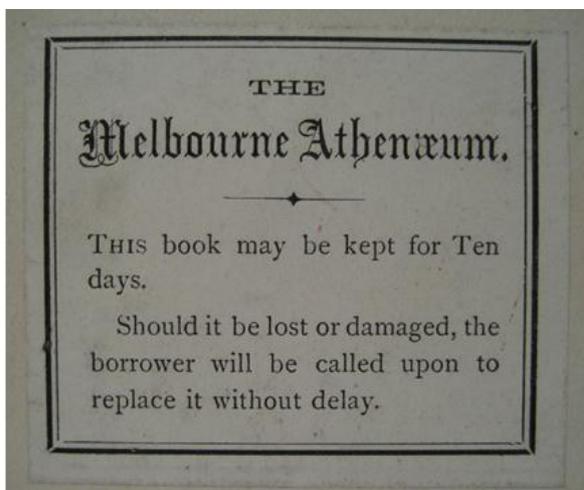
Lack of further money meant that the original book stock of the Library was for the most part donated by subscribers, including most of the library of young Henry Fyshe Gisborne when he left the colony. The *1848 Melbourne Mechanics Institute Annual*

*Report* shows that 50 pounds sent to London the previous year had helped add 131 new novels and romances as well as 67 non-fiction titles.

An annual subscription of one pound enabled members to become part of this educational and cultural hub.

The Melbourne Mechanics' Institution name was expanded in 1846 to become the Melbourne Mechanics' Institution and School of Arts. In 1872 the name changed once again – this time to the Melbourne Athenaeum.

The Melbourne Athenaeum played a role in the establishment of other Mechanics' Institutes in Victoria by sending withdrawn books from its library to help support regional library services.



From the 1850s, Mechanics' Institutes quickly spread throughout Victoria wherever a hall, library or school was needed. Over 1200 Mechanics' Institutes were built in Victoria but just over 500 remain today, and only six still operate with Library lending services.

In the absence of a Town Hall, the Melbourne Athenaeum became the hub of Melbourne, with audiences attending in large numbers to learn of news that may affect their lives.

After the discovery of gold, the Melbourne population and wealth grew dramatically with a consequent increase in the size of the Institution and its library. According to the *1856 Annual report* there were now 590 members

The Melbourne Athenaeum also became a regular meeting place to plan activities:

In 1850, hearing the news of gold being found in NSW and reluctant to have the population desert the new colony, a meeting was convened to offer a substantial reward for the discovery of the first profitable gold mine in Victoria.

A year later gold was discovered at Warrandyte, and other places and the gold rushes began in earnest.

Again, in 1854 following on from the Eureka Rebellion at Ballarat and the Red Ribbon Rebellions at Bendigo and Chewton, a meeting was held at the Athenaeum to plan the defence of Melbourne with the result that 1500 special constables being sworn in.

In 1858 the Institute committee placed an advertisement in *The Argus* with the heading "Exploration of Australia". This was the beginning of raising a subscription for what was to become the Burke and Wills Expedition.

The Melbourne City Council was the Melbourne Athenaeum's first tenant and held meetings in the building until 1852 when the Melbourne Town Hall was built.

It was also during these years that the **I**nstitution was joined by other libraries: first came the Melbourne Public Library (now the State Library of Victoria) in 1854; followed by Mullen's commercial lending library and bookshop in 1859. While Mullen's catered mainly for the taste of society ladies, the Melbourne Public Library provided on a larger scale and for adult residents a similar library service already available to Mechanic's Institutes subscribers.

Mullen's business continued on in Collins Street until 1922, when it merged with George Robertson and Company to become Robertson and Mullen's Ltd.



Collins Street c. 1880 – Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria

The competition of the Public Library and of the Mullen's Library challenged the Committee to actively seek new subscribers.

Around this time the Melbourne Athenaeum's educative role was taken over by the Workingman's College (now known as RMIT University) and the Literary Institute at the Trades Hall.

During the next 30 years as the growing population looked for entertainment outlets, seven large theatres were built, some holding more than 3000 people, as well as several smaller music halls.

During this time Melbourne became one of the richest cities in the world and the largest after London in the British Empire.

In 1872, when the extensively renovated Melbourne Athenaeum opened its doors; it had much to offer the public. The renovated building included a splendid new hall with a capacity of 1000; a smaller hall as well as refurbished library and reading room.



IAN 5 / 12 / 1872 P.246  
THE MELBOURNE ATHENAEUM—1872. Page 125.  
Wood engraving published by David Syme in  
The Illustrated Australian news, 5 Dec 1872  
Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria, IAN05/12/72/240

A vigorous advertising campaign increased membership from 640 in 1872 to 1129 the following year.

At that time, as now, a focal point was the library and reading room where books and newspapers from all around Australia and overseas were available. By 1877, membership had risen to 1681 and in 1879 more than 30,000 library visits were recorded



From Library brochure c 1913 - 1918

The Melbourne Athenaeum, like so many other organisations in Victoria, suffered during the economic slump of the 1890s. Yet it had become almost a way of life for many Melburnians, opening from 8.00 am to 10.00 pm so that members working in the city could use the facilities before and after work for both recreation and networking.



Photograph 1895 – banner is advertising lecture by Haskett Smith  
SLV Pictures Collection

In 1886 a third storey was added onto the building, making it “a lofty substantial structure’ and bringing the façade forward in line with other adjacent buildings in Collins Street.

In 1923, the Large Hall was transformed into an "intimate theatre" by Frank Talbot, working with architect Henry White. Tons of clay were removed to lower the floor and

the new theatre was built inside the old one. The floor level of the current dress circle was once the floor level of the old hall.

In 1924 an ultra-modern theatre with tiered seating, a balcony and a dress circle is built within the hall. It was fitted with Automatic Sprinklers.

Much of Melbourne's standing today as arguably Australia's cultural capital can be traced back to the Athenaeum, the building and the role it played in the early promotion and development of music, visual arts, literature, science and theatre.

In 1906 The first feature film in the world, The Story of the Kelly Gang, by the Tait brothers premiered in the Athenaeum Hall.



Poster for the 1906 version of "The Story of the Kelly Gang" – image from Public Records Office of Victoria

The Melbourne Athenaeum also became the first in Melbourne that was wired for sound and became the first theatre in Australia to screen "talkies", starting with a year-long season of The Jazz Singer, from 2 February 1929.

The hall hosted everything from fiery abstinence meetings to billiards tournaments to recitals by Nellie Melba to public lectures by Mark Twain. When the hall was in need of upgrading in the 1930s a fellow called John Wren contributed the funds.

Frank Talbot the Athenaeum theatre from the early 1920's until January 1955, when it was leased to Hoyts Theatres. It then became know was known as the 'home of British films' in Melbourne.

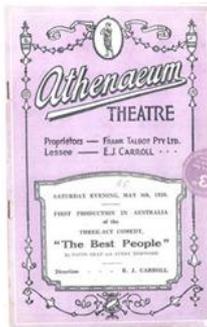
It was closed as a full time cinema on 4th April 1970.

The Melbourne Theatre Company (MTC) leased the theatre from 1976 to 1985 and on 17 March 1977, live' theatre once again returned to the Athenaeum Theatre with 'Sheridan's School for Scandal'.

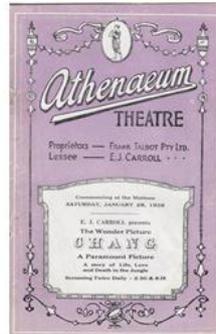
Our current tenant, AT Management has been resident for over 25 years using the venue as a live theatre.

The theatres have been graced by some of the finest Australian and international performers and are today venues for Melbourne’s International Comedy Festival and the Melbourne Opera city performances.

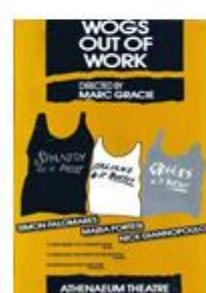
The Theatre was restored in 2010 when new seating and a large orchestra pit was installed. It was listed on the National Trust Register in that year.



3-act comedy 1926



"Chang" the last silent film before "The Jazz Singer" 1928



Programs in the archives collection 1980-1990

Today, The Melbourne Athenaeum Incorporated still owns the entire building and operates serving its original purpose as a meeting place, library and venue for special occasions, exhibitions and performances.

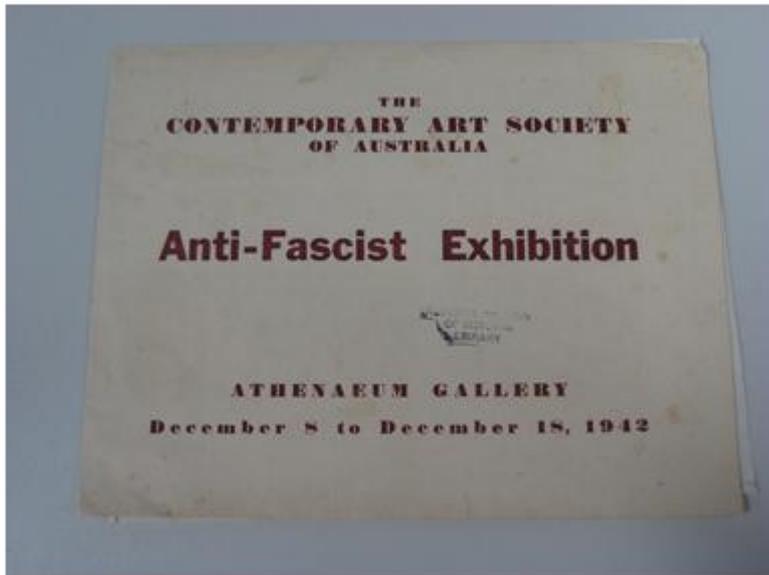
The Melbourne Athenaeum also operated an art gallery. Although it closed its doors in 1971 after many years of declining patronage, the gallery offered significant exhibiting opportunities to emerging contemporary artists. It showed paintings by famous Australian artists including Hans Heysen, Sir Arthur Streeton, Tom Roberts, John Rowell, Rupert Bunny and Albert Namatjira. Exhibitions were designed to promote young and emerging artists as well as providing a venue for established ones.



Charles Wheeler exhibition at the Athenaeum Gallery March 1920  
Pictures Collection State Library of Victoria H2007.28/1

Frederick McCubbin's famous painting 'The Pioneer' was first exhibited there in 1904.

In 1942, a number of significant Australian artists including Sidney Nolan, Albert Tucker, Joy Hester, Yosli Bergner and John Perceval displayed their work as part of the Anti-fascist exhibition – in protest against the oppressive regime of Nazi Germany. Kathe Kollwicz, herself a victim of the Nazis also exhibited in this exhibition.



1942 Anti-Fascist Exhibition – from Library of the National Gallery of Victoria

Catalogue

<p><b>JOHN BARRINGTON</b></p> <p>1. <i>Golden Lilies</i> 2. <i>Red and Blue</i> 3. <i>Red and Blue</i> 4. <i>Red and Blue</i></p> <p><b>LADIMIR BERNARDI</b></p> <p>5. <i>Portrait of a Woman and Child</i> 6. <i>Portrait of a Woman and Child</i></p> <p><b>JOHN BURNETT</b></p> <p>7. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 8. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 9. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 10. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 11. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 12. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 13. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 14. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 15. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 16. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i></p> <p><b>ALAN BRUCE</b></p> <p>17. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 18. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 19. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 20. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i></p> <p><b>RAYMOND HUGHES</b></p> <p>21. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 22. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 23. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 24. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i></p> <p><b>HOWARD HAYWARD</b></p> <p>25. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 26. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 27. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 28. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i></p> <p><b>EDMUND HILLMAN</b></p> <p>29. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 30. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 31. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i> 32. <i>Portrait of a Woman</i></p>	<p><b>F. 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M. M. Lithographs and Engravings by  
**KATHY BULLIVANT**

Photographs of paintings by Contemporary English War Artists, and Russian posters, loaned to the Department of Information.  
Management: Cecilia Jones.



In 1930 a lift, was installed. The lift is still operational and is one of only two of its vintage in Melbourne. It is loved by many library patrons for its decorative and stylish interior.



The lift was installed in 1930 – photo by Peter Ittak, 2014



During World War 2, conscription meetings were held at the Melbourne Athenaeum and some of the Library staff, both male and female joined the armed forces. The Board of the Athenaeum agreed to make up any difference in pay to those who volunteered and also held their employment open to them

on their return.

By 1950 the Library had reached its heyday when membership peaked at 7,579 with around 1600 country subscribers. Subscribers living in rural areas had no access to

libraries, so staff at the Melbourne Athenaeum bagged the books and sent them by rail all over the state. Interestingly, today 15 country subscribers remain.



Library c 1950s

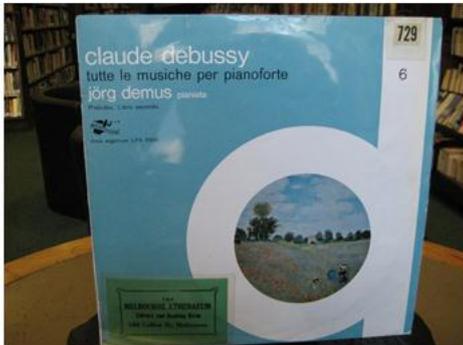


Library c.1950s - note green lino

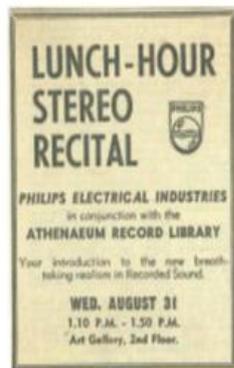
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But the times were changing. Radio, television and ultimately the development of public libraries created other entertainment outlets for potential members.

In an attempt to remain relevant the Melbourne Athenaeum developed a gramophone record library in 1959 and for some time this proved popular with lunchtime recitals.



A record library operated from 1959 to 1987



Today the Melbourne Athenaeum has less than 1000 subscribers and a collection of over 30,000 volumes mainly in the crime fiction genre and an excellent selection of newspapers and magazines. The Library also hosts monthly events such as featured talks, book and screen clubs and special new member nights.

Today's challenge is to retain the current membership and seek new ways of attracting potential members. We can only do this if the Library remains relevant in people's lives and that library's subscription fee offers them good value for money.

Promoting the library's heritage is a pivotal point of difference between the Melbourne Athenaeum and the public library network. But is this enough? It is interesting to observe that a high percentage of our members also belong to public libraries.

We are all aware of how prolific public libraries are with more than one third of them open more than 45 hours each week. In relative terms they also have access to greater financial support from local and state governments. According to Alan Bundy in his address to a public meeting convened by the Friends of Mt Barker Community Library, South Australia in November 2007, libraries are seen as community destinations and 'hangouts at the heart of the community'. Most, he states, are centrally located, preferably where people meet or shop; are spacious, welcoming to all ages and have generous lounge areas and meeting rooms.

They are also about helping readers and many libraries have now developed strategies to ensure that their staff have the education, knowledge and resources to advise users on their reading choices and options.

So how does our small library service compete with this scale of engagement and financial support, and how can we remain relevant to current and potential members?

There is no doubt that the building, both exterior and interior is significant in historical and architectural terms is appealing to our members. Anecdotally we know that the library and its reading room is considered a haven from the busy central business district with convenient tea and coffee making facilities.

Members feel privileged being able to 'escape' to their little corner of the city.

There is also a strong comradery amongst members, many meeting for the first time at the library and developing new and lasting friendships.



The Library – photo by Peter Ittak, 2014



The Library – photo by Peter Ittak, 2014

Our recent research has shown that more than 10% of our members live in the 3000 postcode – that is, in the CBD and surrounding streets. These potential members are, in the main older, usually retired, ‘empty nesters’ that are looking for ways to reconnect with the community post retirement.

In more recent times, the Melbourne Athenaeum Library has sought external partnerships to raise awareness and further promote its activities. Currently we participate in the Readers’ Walk Project which partners with The Reader’s Feast Bookstore and the Antiquarian Bookseller to promote literature in the Collins Street precinct. The Walk, initially launched in 2012, also coincides with the Crime and Justice Festival hosted by Reader’s Feast.

The Library also opens its doors for *Open House Melbourne*, an annual event which showcases many of the city’s beautiful old buildings to the public.

In 2014, 104 buildings attracted over 30,000 visitors. The Melbourne Athenaeum welcomed over 3,000 visitors over this week-end. As part of the weeklong celebrations the Library also hosts an *Artist-in-Residence program*’ which, this year, attracted over 200 member visits.

*Melbourne Rare Book Week* is another partnership initiative with the University of Melbourne and 8 other literary institutions. This year over 40 free events were held in public libraries, literary and historical societies and bookshops around Melbourne.

Over the past three years the Melbourne Athenaeum Library has also participated in the annual *Sisters in Crime* ‘Scarlet Stiletto Awards’ which offers prize money for the best short story with the words ‘body in the library’. *Sisters in Crime* is an organisation dedicated to promoting greater recognition for crime, thriller and mystery writing in Australia and organises the annual *Ned Kelly Awards* to celebrate the very best in Australian crime writing.

A newer event that has emerged over the past year is Nite Art showcasing Melbourne as an international city of artistic innovation.

But is all this enough?

At a time when debates continues on the definition and use of libraries, institutions such as ours are making greater impact on visitors, readers and researchers. Their survival and strength has always depended on the dedication, skills and resourcefulness of committees, staff and supporters.

In a recent survey conducted by the Mechanics Institute of Victoria in 2013 respondents saw the Mechanics Institutes as the “custodian of Mechanics Institutes history.” Members noted that critical to its survival is a strong Committee of Management.

In order to successfully continue into its third century as a vibrant cultural Melbourne institution, The Melbourne Athenaeum’s Committee of Management has developed a strategic vision - to increase library membership by 10% each year for the next 5 years; expand its income stream by seeking grant income; upgrade technology to improve the library’s service and facilities; increase the institution’s profile within the CBD and inner city

community, particularly residents and those working in the city.

In 2014 The Athenaeum celebrated 175 years.

Will our efforts be enough to take us into the third century?

Only time will tell.



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