

THE YORK GATE GEOGRAPHICAL & COLONIAL LIBRARY

*The emerging rift between tangible and intangible cultural heritage
– a South Australian case study*

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Abstract. In the founding of South Australia planning and education were considered of paramount importance. Adelaide's library has always been a place of special significance to the community. A century ago the celebrated York Gate Geographical and Colonial Library, acquired from London, was opened to the public and lauded as the 'Fountain of Knowledge'. Collected by William Silver, aided by bibliographer E. A. Petherick (whose collection subsequently founded the National Library of Australia), and entrusted to the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia, the York Gate Library has been housed by the Public (now State) Library since 1908. Examination of the fortunes of the York Gate Library reveals the spirit of the place, and the nature of threats, tangible and intangible, to its survival.

1. Invisible Foes

'...we do need to be sensible about how we use valuable space on North Terrace, and a collection of books ... is not a major part of the library's services these days, and it would be good if ... that space could be used for purposes which might have a bit more relevance to the community of South Australia.' (Minister John Hill M.P., Minister Assisting the Premier in the Arts. South Australian Parliament, Budget Estimates. October, 2006)

Throughout history 'enemies of books' have been evident: fire; water; gas and heat; dust and neglect; ignorance and bigotry; vermin; bookbinders; collectors; servants and children (Blades 1888).

Polastron (2004) also includes 'firefighter's water', mudslides, earthquake, shipwreck, theft, vandalism, ideological advancement, de-

accession (for pulping or sale), personal enrichment, punishment, ‘genocide of the genius of a people’ and, in the case of the private collection, ‘*the invisible foe of its integrity is the death of the owner*’ (emphasis added). The repertoire of destruction does not mention cocktail parties or epicurean feasts, though perhaps it should.

2. Bound for South Australia

South Australia’s first library had its beginnings in London before the state was established (Langham 1989, Bridge 1986). When England’s philosophic radicals set out to establish a practical test of proposed reforms at the Antipodes, they first created a research library. Robert Gouger collected accounts of Australian colonies, British Canada and America. R. D. Hanson sought the Royal Charters of Pennsylvania and Georgia, and E. G. Wakefield gleaned lessons from Galt’s *Statistical Account of Upper Canada*, amongst others.

The doctrine of ‘epicurism’ (that pleasure was the highest good), it was said, ‘was always the doctrine of the most corrupt men’ (Bentham 1843). Philosopher Jeremy Bentham’s principle of ‘the greatest good for the greatest number’ would be applied instead. Colonial, electoral and municipal reform, universal education, democracy, free religion, press and ports were all thrown into the melting pot of desiderata for a settlement where ‘the promotion of individual happiness was indissolubly bound up with the happiness of society’ (Hanson 1834).

In 1834, in London, the South Australian Literary Society was formed. Such ‘enlightened planning’ had never before been attempted for the ‘cultivation and diffusion of knowledge in a new country’. Under its auspices the library continued to grow. On 20 July 1836 the library sailed from St Katherine’s Docks, arriving on 26 November (Wilson and Borrow 1973). Of Gouger’s original 117 volumes (Hailes 1857), a current State Library caption claims 20 books are ‘all that remain’ and records their arrival thus:

‘In 1836 the books, supplemented by donations from G F Angas and the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, were brought to Holdfast Bay in the *Tam O’Shanter*. The trunk containing 200 books was dropped in the Port River during unloading, but was fortunately retrieved without damage’ (Mortlock Wing display, 2008).

Adelaide’s library gained a permanent home on North Terrace in 1860, in a newly erected Institute Building, and then expanded into the new Jervois (now Mortlock) Building.

Meanwhile, on London's Docks, ships and exotic cargoes arriving from around the world inspired the merchant Stephen William Silver (1819-1905) to collect a library of Exploration, Geography and Travel. In years to come news of Silver's death would flash to Adelaide along an undersea and Overland Telegraph – the means of saving his York Gate Library from being broken on a London auction block, and setting it *'en bloc'* upon the high seas, bound for Adelaide.

3. Silver's 'Fountain of Knowledge – The York Gate Library'

Over more than 60 years Silver gathered 'a unique collection of works on voyages, travels, geography and history of all countries' 'particularly relating to British colonies' (*Adelaide Observer* 1905). Open to visitors and researchers, the Library, at Silver's townhouse at 3 York Gate, Regent's Park, also served as a basis for publishing a catalogue. The success of the 1882 *Catalogue* prompted Silver to enlarge his collection, with further assistance from friend and bibliographer E. A. Petherick. In 1886 a greatly expanded catalogue was published – *An index to the Literature of Geography, Maritime and Inland Discovery, Commerce and Colonisation* (Petherick 1882, 1886). These seem to be the foundation documents of Australian bibliography (Hankel 2005, 2008), and were distributed to libraries around the world, even to Adelaide.

Following Silver's death on 7 March 1905 there was concern about his Library, and the alarm was raised in England and Australia. Petherick details the York Gate Library's escape from destruction in correspondence now held in the National Library of Australia (Petherick Collection). Although family sentiment weighed strongly toward keeping Silver's Library as a whole it was feared it might be broken up at auction. An initial offer of Silver's Library 'en bloc' to Adelaide's Public Library failed to secure it a home. Adelaide's Public (now State) Library began a double game, appointing a London agent to await the sale and scavenge items.

Fortunately the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (South Australian Branch) came forward, and gave a formal guarantee via the State's Agent General that the Library would 'not be broken'. The offer was accepted and London's *Times* (1905) jubilantly announced:

[the Library] will be at once shipped to Adelaide, where it will remain for all time a permanent and homogeneous tribute to the Collector's memory ... [its] handsome catalogue forms one of the most useful and

frequently consulted books of reference on geographical and colonial subjects ... the City of Adelaide has become the possessor of a Library at once unique and of the highest interest and importance to all students of Greater Britain. It was feared at Mr Silver's death, that the collection would be dispersed under the hammer, but the enterprise of the Australasian Geographical Society has prevented this, to its honour and credit.' (Figure 1)



Figure 1: Exterior detail (left) of Mortlock (Jervois) Building (author's photo). Interior (right) Royal Geographical Society of SA Inc. Rooms & Council table, southern mezzanine, State Library of SA. S. W. Silver's portrait hangs with his original Angas watercolours. (Author's photograph).

On 8 December 1905 the Society's Council dedicated Silver's Library for the use of the public in perpetuity and 'for better or for worse' (Peake-Jones 1984) the knot was tied.

3.1 THE *GENIUS LOCI* OF THE YORK GATE LIBRARY

The resilience of libraries varies. Many have perished, some persist.

'... they who know the world but a little, and have seen the fate of some libraries, will reckon the utmost protection we can use little enough to prevent what otherwise will be unavoidable. It is a work of no small difficulty to purchase a parcel of good books for the public advantage, nor is it less difficult to preserve and secure them for posterity when they are purchased.' (Edinburgh tract 1702)

As books were gathered from Silver's Oxfordshire country-house and places of business, and with more difficulty from borrowers, the integrity of the collection was threatened. A precious manuscript of Sir Joseph Banks's 1766 Voyage to Newfoundland was placed under

requisition to join a series of Banksian material, and the Bible Society desired to retain Borrow's manuscript. These signature elements were not lost, thanks to the widely distributed Catalogue. As they were listed therein, it was thought they 'had better be returned'. Time and again 'the catalogue' was invoked to preserve Silver's Library. When Mrs Silver gifted the large permanent vignette of her husband she trusted it would be hung 'in the same room' and the Library 'kept together as a whole, and not scattered'.

Along with the York Gate Library itself, the essence of Silver and of Petherick seems distilled into that protective talisman – the Catalogue. William Silver, Edward A. Petherick, and their Catalogues are the *genii loci* of the York Gate Geographical and Colonial Library – like Milton's good books 'the precious life-blood of master-spirits, embalmed and treasured up on purpose to a life beyond life'.

4. The Whips and Scorns of Time

In 1906 an Affiliation between the Society and the Board was signed by the Board's President, Sir Samuel Way, one of the architects of the York Gate Library acquisition, and the State Government extended the Institute Building to house the York Gate Library and the State's learned societies on North Terrace. Subsequent redevelopments saw the Society and its Library move into the Jervois Building. Both buildings are listed on the State Heritage Register and Australia's Register of the National Estate.

After acquiring the York Gate Library the Society had a representative on the Board for many years, but is no longer represented. The societies were promised an entire floor, but this has not materialised, and in 1934 a survey of Australian libraries found South Australia was backward in library services (Munn and Pitt 1934). In 1961 worsened circumstances were reported (Horner 1961).

'... the (State) Library is quite inadequately financed ... for many years the Library has been grossly overtaxed for space ... [historically important] material ... has been shockingly neglected ... subjected to the depredations of dust, mould, cockroaches and (but this will hardly be credited) in some of the windy tin sheds to which newspapers have been relegated, rats, mice and opossums.'

Refrains of 'starved finances', lack of space and needs 'which must arise in the near future' would recur. The Society and its Library did not receive a long overdue allocation of 50% increase in floor space until 1967. In 2003, when the dust had settled on the latest

redevelopment, it became obvious another ill wind had blown the Society and its Library off course – isolated from the public it was dedicated to serve. Pigeonholed into an awkward mezzanine area without equitable access, the original mellowed bookcases were unable to be filled with books for fear of the whole plunging through a floor structurally weakened by installation of a fire sprinkler system. Despite a community campaign the redevelopment also removed the Mortlock Library of South Australiana (MLSA) from the Jervois Building, enabling the main chamber to be used for dining functions (Figure 2).

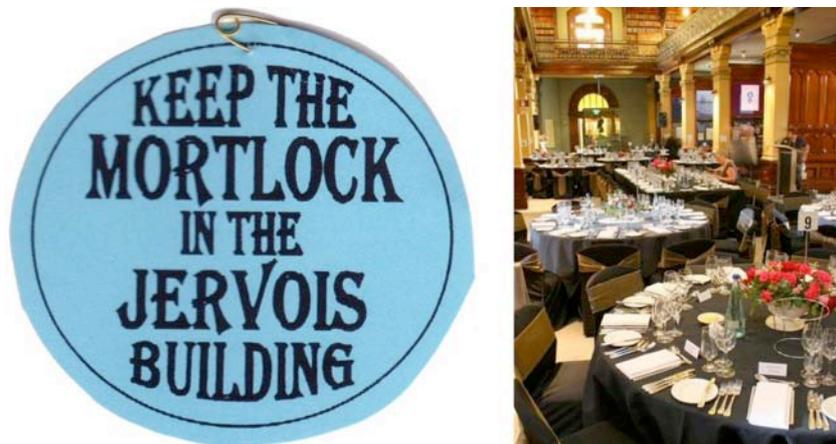


Figure 2: Badge (left) of community campaign to keep the Mortlock Library of South Australiana in the Jervois (Mortlock) Building (private collection). Interior detail (right), Library’s main chamber dining layout (Source: Libraries Board of South Australia Annual Report 2006-07).

By February 2005 the Libraries Board had reduced hours of access and withdrawn library services, stranding the Society without a Librarian. Struggling to keep the Library open to the public, members and volunteer librarians came to the rescue. In May/June 2005 the State Library released a Venue Hire and Catering Service Registration of Interest, seeking a ‘professional venue hire and caterer’ to be given exclusive use of certain areas. Areas in heritage buildings targeted for Venue Hire would exclude the public before standard closing times, and would be increasingly converted to private and exclusive use.

‘The iconic Mortlock Chamber is an excellent example of a late Victorian Library and is an exhibition showcase, displaying the rich heritage of South Australia. This venue is ideal for larger functions such as formal dinners, wedding receptions, cocktail parties and product

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launches and is available on two levels - the ground floor Main Chamber and the 1st Floor Gallery' (State Library of SA 2007a).

'The book-lined Circulating Library is a gracious, historically significant room fronting onto North Terrace and is ideal for private dinner parties, small cocktail parties and product launches' (State Library of South Australia 2007b).

The Minutes of the Board for 15 May 2006 mention 'serving the best interests of the State Library', and record the approval of a Notice to Quit and Notice of Termination and the serving of this Notice on the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia Inc (Libraries Board of South Australia 2006). It seemed the York Gate Library's centenary would coincide with its eviction.

4.1 FALSE TASTE IN BOOKS

Silver and Petherick included volumes of great scientific and geographical value in the York Gate Library and the Library's own catalogue formed 'a useful index to a knowledge ... of the countries and peoples of the world'.

It is now not possible to keep 'good books' or other records on the shelves that they used to occupy. Lack of protection from theft and risk of damage from food & wine events renders these unsuitable for reference collection purposes. Desperate need for space seems to have resulted in the pulping of at least 20,730 volumes (46 tonnes) according to the Libraries Board Annual Report 2006-07. Nevertheless the shelves are filled with less valued 'book-lining' - the 'heritage' Venue Hire areas might as well be filled with painted books of wood. "His Study ! with what Authors is it stored ? In Books, not Authors, curious is my Lord; ... Lo, some are Vellum, and the rest as good For all his Lordship knows, but they are Wood" (Pope 1731).

5. Decline and Fall

The sovereign State of South Australia is not a signatory to the *Convention for the Protection of the World Cultural and Natural Heritage* and there is no requirement for State Government departments or agencies to comply with the Burra Charter. The Australian Constitution does not explicitly grant powers to make laws for identification, protection and conservation of heritage, and States have separate and disparate heritage and development legislation. This

contributes to ongoing destruction of sites entered on Australia's Register of the National Estate (RNE) (Henderson 2007).

The responsibility for South Australia's heritage is divided between the Department for Environment and Heritage (built heritage) and Department of Premier and Cabinet, Arts SA Division (moveable cultural heritage). In practice South Australia's tangible and intangible heritage falls into a no man's land. The Heritage Places Act does not explicitly protect an historic site's use or function. Historic library collections do not have heritage protection despite their eligibility as objects intimately associated (for now) with a listed site. Historic collections are not explicitly recognised as contributing to the heritage significance of historic buildings. Public access, intrinsic to the structures' purpose/function, is not protected.

Having survived the death of its founder, the York Gate Library has found an appropriate home amongst historic library building stock and become interwoven with the building's story. Conversion into book-lined, event venues for private parties and dinners has caused these to become increasingly alienated from the public and library services. Unsympathetic changes are not exposed to consultation or public debate, are not vetted by a cultural heritage assessment nor conservation management plan – Australia's Burra Charter is missing in action.

In 2008 the Library celebrates its southern Centenary despite all the threats that militate against such survival. The history of the York Gate collection demonstrates the quirks of fate that have destroyed millions of books over the centuries, but, until now, these have touched lightly enough upon the York Gate to have left it largely intact. Books threatened in the past had found their way into the safe harbour of William Silver's library. A title burnt by Calvin survives, the rarity of Lewin's *Birds of New Holland* commemorates the loss of others of its ilk. Items in the York Gate Library are representative of other, less fortunate collections – those of Hamilton, Wodhull, Beckford, and Ellis, all broken up at auction. Even the companionship of missing books can be traced in the catalogue – lost to fire at Silver's business office or to borrowers who didn't return.

It would be wise to heed the words of Lieutenant Governor of Alberta, the Honourable Lois E. Hole, CM, AOE (2004):

'...the real battle of the 21st century, I believe, will be between those who would use ignorance to serve their own greed, and those who selflessly open the doors of knowledge to anyone who cares to listen',
'Our libraries require all the love and care we can give ... for libraries

don't just preserve the wisdom of the past; they contain the seeds of a better future' 'We must not allow them to crumble into disuse'.

The York Gate Library's catalogue bears witness to the destruction of other books and other libraries. It is left to our generation and to our successors, to keep the doors open to this 'Fountain of Knowledge' and ensure that its catalogue does not bear witness to the ruin of the York Gate Geographical and Colonial Library.

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