



A library in constant use

THE LIBRARY IN THE WHEATBELT

For the dedicated bookworm, reading a good book in an extensive library is as close to heaven as one can get. But for the monks of the Benedictine Order, reading is a not just a pastime but a sacred ritual, and their monastery is a repository of faith and knowledge. Just over an hour's drive north-east of Perth lies Australia's only monastic town, New Norcia. Within the town is a library of such literary and cultural significance that it almost stands in defiance of the dry wheatbelt country that surrounds it.

During the early days of Western Australia, a new mission was established in the vast unknown land of the interior. New Norcia was founded in 1847 by a group of Benedictine monks, and among their meagre provisions were books. It was the intention of their leader, Dom Salvado, to 'establish, little by little, a library in this desert of Australia, as large as possible'.

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The oldest part of the library is housed behind the monastery walls and was built by the monks during the early 1900s. The baroque-style rooms are wood panelled and lined with solid wooden shelves and the ceiling is pressed metal. The well-worn reading chairs and empty spaces along the lined shelves indicate a library in constant use. Old books sit comfortably beside objets d'art.



Librarian Sue Johnson

The tiny monastic town of New Norcia in Western Australia is home to a collection of literary treasures owned by the town's Benedictine monastery. HEATHER ZUBEK, who has been visiting New Norcia for many years, tells the story of this little library that has survived in the harsh Australian outback for more than 150 years.

For the Benedictines, 'a monastery without a library is like a fortress without an arsenal', as an old proverb has observed. Reading was prescribed in the Rule of Saint Benedict, and throughout history monks were required to read sacred texts. *Lectio divina*, or sacred reading, continues to be an important part of the monks' daily religious practice.

'Each mealtime the monks are read to as they eat their food,' says Sue Johnson, librarian for the monastic library since 1996. 'Their meals are incredibly ritualised

and there is no conversation.

'There is quite a wide range of subjects [to choose from], mostly religious, of course, but there is also a significant collection of books on Australian, Indigenous studies, art and journals of explorers.

'To my surprise I've found books on topics as diverse as vintage rose varieties, druidic medicine, maritime navigation

and even Lord Nelson's letters to Lady Hamilton.'

A previous abbot, Placid Spearritt, was a great lover of books and had a reputation as a great hoarder. Abbot Placid encouraged donations of religious books to bolster the library's collection.

'He had a dream that the library would be a huge depository of religious books. And that's what we've become,' explains Sue. 'We have books that you can't find anywhere else. It's part of our national heritage.'

Books dating back as far as the early 1500s are safely secured within the



Old books and objets d'art



Well-worn reading chairs

monastery walls. And books no longer required in universities, seminaries, convents or private collections are now finding a permanent home within the library. Over the years there have been some fascinating literary discoveries.

'A library student doing work experience found an antique kabbalah manuscript in the old monastery library,' Sue says. 'It was written with poor quality ink on both sides of poor quality paper. The title page, at the back, was legible, but in Hebrew. I sent a photocopy of the cover to Rabbi Coleman in Perth and he sent back a very excited reply.'

Research was done on the paper's watermarks and a delegation from Perth's Jewish community travelled to New Norcia to examine the manuscript.

'They determined that it was a copy of a kabbalah titled *Shoshan Sodot*, written in 1734. The original document was written in Kiev in 1495.'

The manuscript is a record of kabbalistic thought and practice, containing many important secrets that its author wanted to write down to ensure their preservation during a time of great oppression for the Jewish people. Today the manuscript is held at a university in Jerusalem, where it is known as the New Norcia manuscript.

Another work-experience student found something tucked into one of the library's old books. 'It was found to be a 15th-century French illumination,' Sue explains.

The New Norcia Library is a rich repository for knowledge, so it's not surprising to find that Sue and the New Norcia archivist, Peter Hocking, receive a growing number of requests to study its contents from researchers and scholars not only from Australia but also from around the world.

Peter cares for over 20000 items of correspondence and 60000 photographs housed in five rooms in the monastery itself. There is a huge range of material there, from boarding passes to farm management plans kept by the monks, which provide valuable information for researchers.

'We're in the process of getting everything scanned, so it's a long journey,' says Peter.

The New Norcia Library is a private library, a monks' library, belonging to the Benedictine Community. It's in constant use and certainly not left to collect the dust that usually accumulates with the passage of time. It is a unique collection that reflects a culture of devotion and faith as well as the desire for new knowledge and ideas. **91**

NEW NORCIA LIBRARY LECTURE

The 2012 New Norcia Library Lecture will be held on Friday 7 September 2012. This year the event will highlight the National Year of Reading. The principal speakers are **William Yeoman**, Books Editor and Senior Arts Writer for *The West Australian* and well-known author **Liz Byrski**, who lectures in Professional and Creative Writing at Curtin University of Technology. **Damien Webb**, Indigenous Literacy Project Officer at the State Library of Western Australia, will also speak. For bookings and more information contact Sue Johnson on 08 9654 8060 or go to newnorcia.wa.edu.au.



Original library