

The Royal Society of New South Wales Community Heritage Grant

ROBYN STUTCHBURY

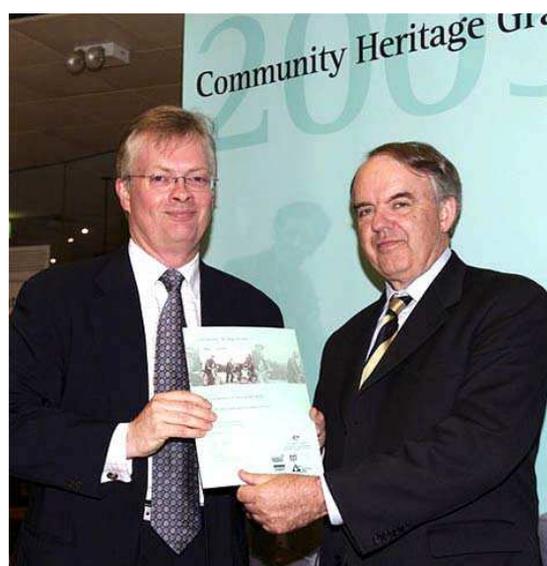
INTRODUCTION

Probably few members will be surprised to hear that the collection of books and other items owned by the Royal Society of NSW is of great historical and scientific significance. What might be more of a surprise is its degree of significance. This has been revealed by expert consultants during almost six months' investigation for our Community Heritage funded project. Their reports have been submitted together with our final report and our application for a second round of funding for 2007. The reports will be available through the Society's office and website.

Our \$5 500 (plus GST) grant was announced by the Federal Minister for the Arts and Sport, Senator the Hon. Rod Kemp, at the National Library of Australia, Canberra, on Wednesday 9 November 2005. A total of \$377 865 was distributed to 76 groups from around Australia to assist in the identification and preservation of community owned but nationally significant heritage collections. The Community Heritage Program is managed by the National Library of Australia and funded and supported by the Australian Government through the Department of Communications, Information Technology and the Arts, the National Library of Australia, National Archives of Australia, the Australian Film Commission and the National Museum of Australia.

Guidelines for the project called for a national significance assessment of the collection by a professional historian or similar expert and a preservation survey of the collection or part of a collection by an accredited professional. The recommended criteria for determining the significance of a collection are its historic, aesthetic, scientific and social values. The society's collection is rich in all of these values and the degree of significance was further assessed using the comparative criteria of provenance, rarity,

representativeness, condition and integrity, and interpretive potential.



John Hardie receiving the Community Heritage Grant on behalf of the Royal Society of NSW from the Federal Minister for the Arts and Sport, Senator the Hon. Rod Kemp.

WORKING GROUP

Soon after the Royal Society of NSW was granted Community Heritage funding, a working group of members of Council was formed to steer the project and assist consultants. All members of the working group are practising scientists with a keen interest in the history of science and the recognition that over the years, science has been sorely neglected.

Professor Jak Kelly, President, physicist;
Ms Robyn Stutchbury, Project leader,
geologist and science educator;
Mr John Hardie, Vice President,
geologist and educator;
Ms Christine van der Leeuw,
Honorary Librarian and scientist;

Dr Eveline Baker, Secretary, chemist and educator;

Mr Jim Franklin, Councillor, research physicist.

In November 2005 John Hardie attended the three-day intensive Preservation and Collection Management Training Workshop held at the National Library of Australia, the National Archives, the National Museum of Australia and the National Film and Sound Archives in Canberra. Information from the workshop proved invaluable and each person involved in the project was issued with a copy of the handbook outlining the procedures for the project.

TASKS OF THE WORKING GROUP

The working group contributed well in excess of 400 hours to the project. Some were spent on two major working bees at Darlington Road, where we concentrated on setting up, cleaning and labelling previously purchased metal shelving; opening 30 cartons of publications and sorting the books into topic areas. They were then listed on a spreadsheet according to the following categories: author, title, volume, year of publication, broad topic area, shelf location and comments such as condition, provenance, etc. The list could then be sorted according to any one of these categories. Our librarian also checked the Libraries Australia database for the availability of selected titles.

Time was also spent with the consultants at Mitchell Library and Prestons where, at each site, as many items as possible could be examined in one day.

EXPERT CONSULTANTS

The working group engaged two professionally qualified assessors conversant in science as well as history. Dr Peter Tyler we chose from the Professional Historians' Association list and Dr David Branagan, former Royal Society president and geologist, was chosen because of his long standing commitment to the history of science.

As indicated, each consultant tackled the project from a different perspective. Peter's overall consideration of the historical significance of the collection was based on the premise of there being a common perception that NSW (and Australia) was a cultural desert in 19th century, with little regard given to the small intellectual strata of society of the time. There is far more emphasis on convicts, bushrangers, squatters, in the early history. Peter also considered the preservation of the collection and later suggested some 30 recommendations for how it should be cared for.



Dr Peter J. Tyler, BA, MLitt, PhD, Grad.Dip.Ad.Ed., Hon.FAIEH; Consultant historian; Vice-President, Professional Historians' Association (NSW), who agreed to assess the overall historical significance of the collection according to National Library guidelines and to make recommendations for how it should be preserved and made accessible (Peter Tyler's report: 'Report on Historical Significance').

David Branagan examined the collection item by item, recording significance based on the recommended criteria and noting the condition and state of preservation of each. Both consultants generously contributed professional time far in excess of the hours covered by the grant.



Dr David Branagan, M.Sc, PhD, FGS, Hon Life Member, Geol.Soc.Aust., (Member of the Basser Library Committee, Australian Academy of Sciences) who agreed to use the criteria: provenance, rarity, representativeness, condition and integrity, and interpretive potential when assessing the significance of individual books and other items (David Branagan's report: "Report on the Cultural, Historical and Scientific Significance of the Society's Library and its State of Preservation".)

THE COLLECTION

The collection of the Royal Society has been subjected to a number of moves over a number of years with the last being from its rooms at Macquarie University to the current premises at

the University of Sydney. As a result of so many moves, the collection is now stored at various localities; some are at the Mitchell Library, where they are stored under archival conditions but without access to the public, and others are at the Darlington Road office where many of the items are in need of urgent preservation measures but have some access to members and researchers by appointment. The Royal Society's collection housed in the Dixson Library at the University of New England is in the care of librarians who provide full access to researchers and the public, whilst the eight pallet loads in commercial storage at Prestons is stored under plastic wrap and although relatively protected it is completely inaccessible for research.

Dr David Branagan has estimated that the total number of publications in the collection would be in excess of 45 000 with the bulk of these being serials at the UNE. This project examined some 1000 items that had been stored in 30 boxes at Darlington Road. Another 29 of the 48 boxes of various items at the Mitchell Library and 21 boxes (on two of eight pallets) of publications at Prestons were also examined.

IN CONCLUSION

It must be remembered that the collection has been in a state of decline since the NSW Government resumed the Society's building, Science House in Sydney, for the Rocks Redevelopment in the 1975. Although the 'green bans' movement prevented the demolition of Science House, which was the winner of the first Sulman Prize for architecture, it was never returned to science, becoming instead, Sports House. We would like to think that our collection might one day be rehoused in Science House, which was once jointly owned by the Royal Society of NSW so that in regaining it, the Society would have the opportunity to rebuild its library and collection to the standard set by the Royal Society of Victoria.

We should also take stock of the Liversidge collection and perhaps make it a focal point for future exhibitions. It is remarkable that Archibald Liversidge, who was Professor of Geology and Mineralogy, and later Professor of

Chemistry at the University of Sydney is celebrated at the Australian National University with streets and buildings named after him and yet, at the University of Sydney he goes unrecognised.

In his report, David Branagan comments, "In view of Liversidge's contribution to Australian Science and to the University of Sydney it is a sobering fact that the biography of Liversidge by Professor Roy Macleod, of the University, completed several years ago has not yet been deemed worthy of publication by Australian publishing houses. It is sad also that despite the naming of a street in Canberra for Liversidge his contribution to the University of Sydney remains without acknowledgement (by a named building etc.) within the grounds, or even within the Department of Chemistry."

Another outcome of the project is the recommendation that the Hargrave collection should be considered for World Heritage Listing. The section of the collection owned by the Power-

house Museum has already been listed and it seems fitting that the society's items should be included.

The Royal Society's Community Heritage project is seen to be the first step in preserving and making accessible the Society's collection of scientific books, journals and historical documents and other items. Our ultimate aim is to complete the assessments of the entire collection by once again calling on professional conservators, so that eventually our extensive and unique collection can be rehoused. Once rehoused, it will be possible to exhibit the rarer items and researchers and the public will be able to access various items of the collection. With this aim in mind, we have submitted the application for a second round of funding through the Community Heritage Program. Although we have all worked extremely hard to make the most of our expert consultants' contributions, we are aware that we have a long way to go before we can claim success.

R. Stutchbury
2006