

A Visit to New Norcia 11 October 1996

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A highlight of the Conference was our visit to the library of the Benedictine monastery at New Norcia. This library collection of some 70000 volumes covers all fields of knowledge, secular and religious, theoretical and applied, although it has not shown significant growth in recent imprints (particularly in secular areas). It does however contain a quite extraordinary proportion of publications of bibliographic and historic interest - there are more than 2500 titles published before 1800 (these were identified for the Australian and New Zealand Early Imprint Project). These include some splendidly illustrated works. There are also a large number of more recent works of major significance including many first editions. (For a good overview of the collection and the library see Trevis Lawton's article "History among the trees: the New Norcia Library", published in the *Australian Library Journal*, November 1993, pp250-254).

It is not however just the library collection itself which is remarkable - the location of the library adds in a marked manner to its interest. The small town of New Norcia (some two hours north of Perth) is the only monastic town in Australia. The combination of flamboyant Spanish architecture and mediterranean vegetation, with some hearty vernacular buildings and familiar Australian landscape give this town a signal character.

Through the courtesy of the Prior, Dom Placid Spearritt, we were invited to inspect not just those buildings which are generally accessible to interested visitors but to see that part of the library which is housed inside the monastery itself - the three adjacent rooms which now house the religious works of greatest bibliographic interest are splendid and dramatic spaces with notable architectural features; we also visited the new library where works of current active interest to the monks are being rehoused, and (outside the monastery) the areas where the secular collection is housed. Dom Placid had also arranged for us to spend some time in the monastery archives with the archivist, and for Dom Chris to explain other aspects of New Norcia to us.

This was a very special day - the companionable drive to New Norcia marked by vistas of wildflowers, the bracing and somewhat unsettling exposition of Dom Placid (with its underlying theme that unless libraries have a real, urgent motivation they should be abandoned), the opportunity to spend some time in a most interesting and evocative historic location, and in particular the eye- and mind-opening opportunity to see what must be one of the most remarkable library collections in Australia - all contributed to make this a most rewarding day.

We are most grateful to Dom Placid and to the New Norcia librarian Sue Johnson for their generous hospitality - and wish Sue much success in her challenging role in the library.

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