
Benedictine Monastery

New Norcia, Western Australia

I am the librarian at the Benedictine monastery in New Norcia, which is one hundred and thirty kilometres north of Perth, and seventy from the nearest town. Do I feel isolated? Yes and no.

Perhaps I should feel isolated because I am the only professional librarian at New Norcia, but there are a lot of people who assist me in a part-time capacity. Some are trained librarians, some are monks, some live in New Norcia, and others travel regularly or irregularly from Perth and they all do valuable library work. Thus my library family is quite extensive. Even when people move on, they keep in touch. For example, in 1994, Julianne Simpson catalogued our rare book collection, before leaving to work on the Early Book Project at Oxford, and then in 2002, she returned to deliver our annual New Norcia Library Lecture.

For support and guidance, I have a library committee of four monks headed by Abbot Placid Spearritt, himself a former librarian, and a keen promoter of our library. The committee makes sure that the library is not lost or forgotten amongst the many other activities that take place in New Norcia.

ANZTLA members in W.A. have made sure that I am part of the organization. Once a year, they hold a meeting in New Norcia, and other meetings are held during lunch hour so that I can travel to Perth and attend them. I have been included in the planning for the conference in Perth later this year.

Our annual library lecture brings to New Norcia up to a hundred librarians from across the whole library spectrum. They enjoy a great day out, and I get my once-a-year chance to network, and to be part of the library world. There is a lot of good will towards New Norcia, particularly from the Library School staff at Curtin

University, who consider the New Norcia library to be a pet project.

However, it is certainly isolating that there is no other library like that of New Norcia anywhere else in Western Australia. We have a private library with a huge number of books and journals, and some are modern, but many are old or very old, and most are donated rather than specifically purchased. Most of our catalogue is on-line, and we do inter-library loans, but the twelve resident monks are the chief library users. Cataloguing is my chief task. My previous library experience was quite different. I used to be a teacher-librarian with a small, relevant collection and many demanding users, and that seems more like the current experience of most of my ANZTLA colleagues.

Women are not permitted within the monastery enclosure, where the main collection is situated, so it is certainly a form of isolation for a librarian to have no direct access to much of the collection. But the less important books are shelved in various buildings outside the monastery enclosure, and there are procedures to give me access to all books.

So I can say that geographic isolation is not a concern for me, but I lack much in common with other theological librarians because of the unique nature of the New Norcia library.

Sue Johnson

