

The National Library's STACKS

Housing a growing repository of millions of items imposes logistical problems on the National Library. Susan Aitkin explores the stacks to see how things work

IF THE STACK ATTENDANTS at the National Library of Australia started to lay out each of its shelves of material along the route to Sydney, they would pass Mittagong before the estimated 191 kilometres of

shelving ran out. If the collection keeps expanding at its present rate, the shelves will have reached Sydney by the year 2010.

The sheer size of the collection poses major logistical problems for the Library, especially for the 70 staff

in the Collection Management and Document Supply Section. One consequence of the distances involved is the blisters sometimes suffered by the 20 stack attendants who walk hundreds of kilometres a year, retrieving and replacing books.



The National Library's Hume warehouse has approximately 27 km of shelves holding pre-1980 serials and some overseas newspapers. Photograph by Kate Agyemang. NLA Photographics

On a busy Saturday just before university exams, they may receive requests of 1400 stack items, all of which have to be retrieved and later replaced. They retrieved over 200,000 books and serials last financial year, a figure which does not include requests for newspapers. The requests were from readers and also from the document supply service which provided more than one million photocopies of pages from books and serials (including newspapers).

The main problem for the section's Stack Services Unit is how to ensure that readers receive requested items within the Library's stated goal of 20 minutes. Another

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major problem is how to store the items and ensure there is still enough room on the shelves for future additions.

Requesting a book is relatively simple as far as the readers are concerned. You search through the catalogue until you find the book you want, and then you request that book by title and call number on a three layered call slip. The reading room staff keep one copy, and the remaining two are sent to the appropriate stack by pneumatic tube. A stack attendant retrieves the slip and goes searching for the item, and sends it by lift to the reading room, leaving a copy of the slip in the empty place in the shelves.

The process sounds relatively simple until you consider the size of the collection and also the size of the demand placed on it.

Thirty years ago much of the National Library's repository lived in the basement of the old Administration Building, now the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade, guarded by a pair of iron-barred doors.

There the labyrinthine shelves of books extended so far into the bowels of the building that readers

would sometimes be locked in overnight because they couldn't find their way back out before closing time, according to Eddie Smidmore, who started with the library in 1960 as a delivery driver and now heads the Stack Services Unit.

'After that we had to set up a book and sign them in and out so we would know if anyone was still missing,' he recalls. 'It was like a maze down there.'

'When Parliament was sitting, someone had to stay in the stacks until it rose, just in case someone might want a book. But it might not rise until one a.m. Someone was supposed to ring when it rose, but sometimes they forgot. You would come in in the morning and find the person on duty the previous night fast asleep still waiting for the phone to ring.'

From the basement of one building, the various stacks of the National Library have now spread over four floors of its marble-clad home, as well as a utilitarian storage building in Canberra's southern industrial suburb of Hume.

The Library now has over 4.5 million monographs and 'microform equivalents', and over 204,000 serial titles of which nearly 109,000 are current and are thus increasing. The remainder of the shelf space is taken up by films and video cassettes (over 23,000 titles by June 30, 1990), over 8,000 shelf metres of manuscripts, over 45,000 tape recordings in the oral history collection and a further 119 metres of transcript, over 150,000 music scores, over 40,000 paintings, over 511,000 photographs, over 400,000 maps, and nearly 564,000 aerial photographs.

Because the different sections expand at different rates, and because of building work being carried out, a number of stacks have moved or will move location, which causes no small problem for the Collection Management and Document Retrieval Section. Moving collections is arduous and time-consuming, and then everybody has to be educated about the new location. The National Library's internal Stack Directory

now runs to 39 pages and has to be updated at least once a year by Eric Pozza, Acting Librarian of the Collection Maintenance and Retrieval Service.

The bulk of the space is taken up by the General and Australian collections which now cover 115 kilometres of shelves. Australian Collections, which broadly cover anything written by an Australian, published in Australia or about Australia, take up 27 kilometres of those shelves. General Collections are further divided into three, into what are known as 'monos, serials, and pams'. Australian Collections are split in two: monos and serials are together and pams are separate.

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(Monographs are books, serials are continuing publications such as journals, magazines and newspapers, and pamphlets are basically anything without a hard cover which is under 100 pages.)

The space constraints mean these collections are further divided by size. To stack an octavo-sized item next to a bound volume of newspapers the size of an elephant folio, would result in a tremendous waste of space. More shelves can be hung in the same area if like is stacked with like. Staff therefore curse when the editors of a serial decide to change its shape.

One of the constraints of a classification system such as the Dewey system used at the National Library is that space must be left on each shelf for new additions. Once a collection takes up more than 85 per cent of the shelf space, it has grown too large for the system to operate effectively. The monograph stack had reach that point by June last year and was 'compact'. The remaining space was taken out, and the books moved together to create more space in a usable amount. This area is now the home of books catalogued after June 25 and does have space for additions.

Similarly, the serial stack would quickly run out of room if the serials were stored as complete sets. Think how much room 160 years' worth of the *Sydney Morning Herald* would take up. Most of the pre-1980 serials and pamphlets, which tend to have a 'low-use rate', are therefore stored out at Hume.

This problem with space—Eric Pozza estimates the Library can contain the collection within the two buildings for no more than three years, four at the absolute limit—has led to a debate over the value of using the Dewey system in a massive stack system. It is a debate which is largely divided between those who view the stacks from a librarian's point of view and those who service the stacks.

Melvil Dewey developed a system which allowed people to 'browse' the shelves, looking at books grouped by topic. Librarians argue that the Dewey system is essential to their work: it is important to be able to see a book in the context of the others around it. If it has been

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misfiled, it is still likely to be in that general area and should be able to be recovered fairly easily.

Stacks staff say that with the Dewey system call numbers can become so long that items are likely to be misfiled (a maximum of 33 characters is theoretically possible, though Library policy ensures that generally there are no more than 15 per item). For example, it is hard to differentiate between the 14th and 15th characters in a series of 20. They would like a running-number system of storage, which they say

would facilitate filing and allow each collection to take up the minimum amount of space.



Valdi Tasak and Eddie Skidmore at work in the National Library's lower ground floor lakeside compactus

Photograph by Loui Seselja, NLA Photographics

The Library recently commissioned a feasibility study looking at the document delivery service and warehouse space at five year intervals until 2010.

'There is no point in looking longer than 20 years, because we don't know what changes technology will bring,' says Eric Pozza. That the Library will require extra space is certain; what is in doubt is where that space should be and how it will be used. Some staff have expressed the view that the library would have been better off to have been built outside the building constraints of the Parliamentary triangle. Their utopian library is a large building in a larger field, which can be added to indefinitely. Others say that the information explosion has meant that it is impossible for a library to contain everything, and librarians will need to be increasingly selective about what it is they house.

One proposal is that the new building should house the high-use and fast-growing areas of the

library—the document supply section and the serials. It is estimated that 80 per cent of photocopy requests are for items in recent serials. This is what has happened at the British Library, the repository of 18 million volumes, which has finally divorced itself from the British Museum after a marriage of 150-odd years and built itself modern accommodation at St Pancras. Its document supply and some other non-reader services are in Yorkshire.

Another proposal is to cull more low-use items to go to the new building. The highest-use serials, for example, are those about science and technology, and about social science. However, science and technology change so rapidly that these serials sometimes fall out of date within months of publication. Thus there is less demand for older issues which could be the first to be stored in a low-use warehouse.

The feasibility study has now been completed by the consultants,

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a consortium comprising Austin Australia, Peter Cooke & Partners, BIS Shrapnel Pty Ltd, and Eva Burns and Associates. Staff are studying it before making recommendations to the Library's Council, which will make the final decision.

Joe Arganese

THERE ARE FEW LIBRARIES in the world where a stack attendant has the knowledge to be able to take a serial publication back to the cataloguing section saying that it has been assigned the wrong call number. And to have been right.

Such a man is Giovanni Arganese, whose first language is Italian, whose education was disrupted by World War Two, and whose library career started literally by accident.

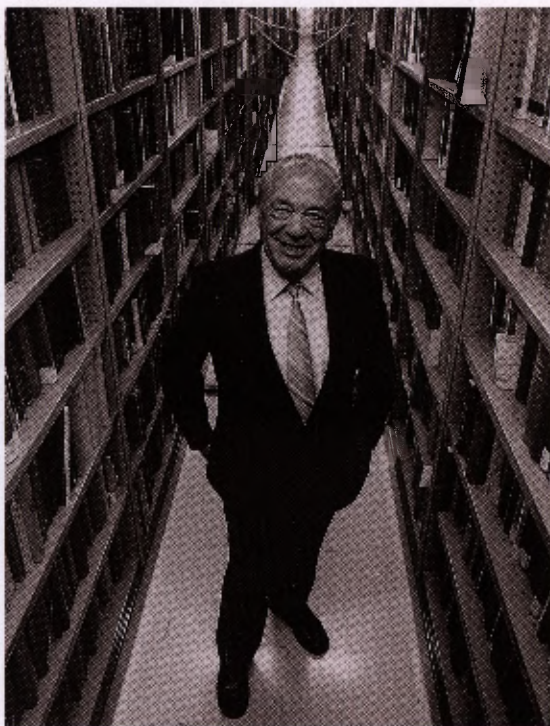
'Joe', who retired in January after 27 years with the National Library of Australia, was offered a job in stacks after he injured his back working as a brickie's labourer on the outside of the Administration Building which housed them. 'The money wasn't really much—I had to get a second job as a kitchen hand in a restaurant,' he recalls. 'I had five little boys to bring up by then.

'People were very helpful,'

Joe remembers. 'After two months they asked if I would like to learn how the monograph stacks worked. I did. I learned. Then one day they said I was going to be put in charge of the monograph stacks.'

After a year's supervision, he was put in charge of the serials. He remained in charge of the serials until his retirement, a section which has grown to be the largest and one of the most complex of all the stack areas, and which has the highest use.

Back in 1968, the new building for the National Library was finally ready to receive books. Joe recalls it as a mammoth move. Just packing them to be loaded on to trucks was a job in itself, but then staff faced the problem of a myriad boxes in the new building. 'Bob Allen—he was head of the management services then—he said they wanted the books back in order.' It took Joe nine months of working back four to five hours every night to get the collection back in sequence. 'That's why all those



Giovanni 'Joe' Arganese wearing a suit in honour of a photograph taken on his retirement from 27 years' service in the stacks of the National Library

Photograph by Andrew Campbell, courtesy the *Canberra Times*

books are memorised in my brain,' he says with a grin.

He remembers Bill Thorne, then Assistant Director-General, coming to the stacks to ask for his help in locating ten books Parliament wanted quickly. 'In ten minutes we had found them all. He invited me to have a cup of coffee with him in the canteen. Everybody looked to see me having coffee with a big shot.'

People who worked at or visited the Parliament in its former residence might remember seeing Joe polishing the cabinet in Kings Hall which contained the copy of the Magna Carta. He also used his visits to do a periodic sweep of certain offices in the building to retrieve books whose borrowers had been tardy in returning them.

Today, one of his sons works in the Parliamentary Library, and another in the National Library, the latter joining Joe's de facto family there. He has been a guiding hand to the junior stack attendants, many of whom are starting a new

life in Australia just as he did after the war.

These days they come from places like Laos and Vietnam, though Greece, Macedonia, Austria, Germany, Russia and Hungary have also been represented by staff in the stacks. These staff have formed a multicultural resource invaluable when readers are requiring foreign-language books. Joe has also befriended more than a few junior librarians wending their way for the first time round the stacks.

Joe has walked so many kilometres in his 27 years at the library, retrieving and replacing the books he knows so well that he finally graduated to a pair of massage sandals after fallen arches made walking a painful exercise. Retiring because at 65 he had to, he was not quite sure what he was going to do with all this extra leisure,

except perhaps improve his golf.

Eddie Smidmore, who joined the Library two years earlier than Joe, believes that Joe's contribution can be placed on par with that of better-known Library notables such as Harold White (former National Librarian), Cliff Burmester (former Assistant National Librarian) and Pauline Fanning (former Director of the Australian National Humanities Library). 'All of the people who want books to read or photocopies of articles depend on a high standard of service in the stacks. If the stacks are not well maintained, the services can't work well.'

Rod Stroud, a reference librarian with General Reference and Information Services agrees: 'Joe has been the key to having an efficient stack, which means we can offer a high-quality service. We would all like to keep Joe,' Rod Stroud continues, 'he is such a lovely man.'

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