

Literary salons, avant garde journals and radical causes

Laurel Clark on selected Melbourne bookshops of the late Nineteenth and early Twentieth Centuries



Above: Cover of the *Stream* magazine, August 1931, published by Gino Nibbi.

One of Melbourne's early bookshops, the Book Lovers' Bookshop and Library ran for forty years and became something of a legend in the Melbourne book world. Founded by the notable Fabian, Henry Hyde Champion, the business was run with the assistance of his wife Elsie Belle. It opened in 1896 and closed in 1936.

In association with the business, Champion founded *The Book Lover* in 1899, "a monthly penny journal of literary reviews, comment and news which

continued for 22 years"¹. Subtitled "A literary review", it was a vehicle for information for the Book Lovers' Library (it was common practice then for bookshops to also run lending libraries.) *The Book Lover* contained articles on Australian literature, poetry and book reviews and included works by Henry Lawson and Banjo Paterson. Whilst *The Book Lover* had a long run, it was more notably the shop and Elsie who "appealed to the intellectuals of Melbourne"². In 1901 Champion had a stroke which left him semi-paralysed and so Elsie took over the business. It was certainly radical then for a woman to be the sole manager of a book shop. This was recognised by the journal *The Australian Woman's Sphere* (one of the many gems of the Baillieu's microfilm collection), in its series "How women can succeed in business". The first in the series featured Elsie and the Book Lovers'.

The shop fostered a specific clientele. "People with literary and artistic tastes supported it, because it held books not usually found in commercial lending libraries"³. Elsie loved the theatre and pioneered the sale of John Galsworthy, Bernard Shaw and J. M. Barrie in Melbourne. The Book Lovers' therefore made its mark on the Melbourne cultural scene, and the notion of the shop as a centre for literary and intellectual interests and innovation set a precedent for other book shops.

In 1928 the Italian Gino Nibbi arrived in Melbourne and soon after opened a small book shop, The Leonardo, at 166 Little Collins Street. The shop was "stocked with over 1,200 books as well as prints and reproductions"⁴. Melbourne's literati were quickly attracted to the shop for it stocked not only English but also Italian, French, German, Russian and Spanish books. Of particular significance for art lovers was the fact that Nibbi stocked prints of modern artists like Matisse, Cézanne, Modigliani,

Van Gogh and Gauguin; until that time the work of these artists had not been seen in Australia. As early as 1929 Nibbi had incurred the wrath of the conservative Melbourne establishment by placing a Renoir nude in his shop window. He was asked by the police to remove it!

Nibbi's association with writers and champions of the avant garde was formally established in July 1931 when "the notable Melbourne 'little' magazine *Stream*"⁵ was published from the Leonardo. (*Stream* is one of the precious 'little' magazines in the McLaren collection). The subscription form gave 166 Little Collins Street as its address. Its editor was Cyril Pearl who went on to become a distinguished Australian writer. Pearl was then still at university and coincidentally in July 1931 he became the editor of Melbourne University's *Farrago* (held in the Baillieu Special Collections).

Stream started boldly with grand aspirations. It was to be "published monthly, as a medium of intellectual expression... universal in outlook"⁶. It ran for three numbers only, July, August and September 1931, and had a greater coverage of literature than art and music. European writing was its distinct preoccupation, and translations, particularly from French, were common. Nibbi wrote for *Stream* on modern art and attacked the conservatism of the Victorian National Gallery. He advertised the Leonardo with the romantically worded "There's a flavour of Montparnasse about this place".

Stream's European 'vision' was possibly a knee jerk reaction to Australia's emphasis on nationalistic literature and art, stemming from Federation and exemplified by writers of *The Bulletin* and artists of the Heidelberg School. This conservatism, particularly in art, held sway in Australia in the twenties and thirties and it is not surprising that The Leonardo and Nibbi were part of the battle which ensued between conservatives

and moderns.

Whilst *Stream* ceased publication in 1931, the Leonardo "thrived within stagnant Melbourne culture"⁷. Artists like Arnold Shore and Adrian Lawlor, interested in modern art in the late twenties, acknowledged the influence of the Leonardo. It is not surprising then that in 1937, when the modernist camp joined forces to oppose the formation of the Australian Academy of Art by the then Prime Minister, Mr. Menzies, the discussions took place in the Leonardo. In response to the conservative proposal for an Academy George Bell and other Melbourne moderns issued a pamphlet "To art lovers". It invited anyone interested in joining the Contemporary Art Society to contact Nibbi or Adrian Lawlor at the Leonardo. Bell and his group acted quickly and on 13th July 1938 the Contemporary Art Society was formed with Bell as President. Modern art had officially arrived in Melbourne and the Leonardo had been its physical and ideological host.

In 1947 Nibbi closed his shop and returned to Rome. After its association with *Stream* and the Contemporary Arts Society, in the forties it continued as it had done initially, to supply readers and particularly art lovers with the latest from Europe. Throughout its nineteen year existence in Melbourne, it had been a progenitor and nurturer of the avant garde.

So the Book Lover and the Leonardo were involved in promoting and pioneering literature and ideas, and the enduring Melbourne tradition of book shops which are by no means just about the selling of books.

¹ Sendy, J. *Melbourne's Radical Bookshops*, Melbourne, 1983, p. 23.

² Henderson, L. M. *The Goldstein Story*, 1973, p. 169.

³ Ibid.

⁴ O'Grady, D. "Sincerely Gino Nibbi", *Overland*, No. 111, June 1988.

⁵ Tregenza, J. *Australia's Little Magazines*, Adelaide, 1964, p. 39.

⁶ *Stream*, Vol 1, No. 1, July 1931.

⁷ O'Grady, op. cit.

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siderable resources in Yiddish material. About 50,000 volumes in Yiddish and 1,000 in English are held in addition to serials from all over the world. The whole range of Jewish culture is covered, with some emphasis on Eastern European Jewry both before and after the Second World War, but this is not a religious library, and little specifically religious Judaica is held. The library is open for very restricted hours, confined in fact to Sunday mornings, but the librarian is willing to show small groups over the library at other times by prior arrangement. You will need to telephone her at the Braille and Talking Book Library on 867 6022 to arrange a time.

The Makor Library and Resource Centre holds some 6,000 monographs, covering Jewish history and culture, the Holocaust and the Australian Jewish community. As well as its monograph collection and almost 100 serial titles, it holds a considerable video collection and an important clippings file. The Librarian has asked me specifically to tell you that although there is a charge of \$4.00 to borrow from the Library, she will be happy to show you around free of charge. I have been asked, however, to point out that an appointment will be necessary. The Library is in cramped quarters and simply cannot accept large groups. It is, however, a major resource in the field and should be seen.

The Jewish Holocaust Centre and the Jewish Museum of Australia both hold important collections. The Holocaust Centre took over the Holocaust material from Kadimah some years ago. Its collection is available for consultation but not for loan. The Centre is open during the mornings from Monday to Thursday. It is very small, and you should ring to make an appointment before appearing at the door.

The Library of the Leo Baeck Centre in East Kew holds some 1,400 monographs while the Kew Hebrew Congregation also has resources in the Library attached to the synagogue.

Monash University is expanding its Jewish studies courses, and while its collections are far from the strength of Melbourne University's the two institutions are endeavouring to work in cooperation rather than competition, so one may

expect in the future to find specific titles at Monash which are not held at Melbourne.

The Northeastern Jewish War Memorial Centre is staffed by volunteers and open only on Sundays. Its collection of some 1,500 books covers all aspects of Judaica.

So far, I have concentrated on describing some collections. If you really want to know what's in them, however, you need to get to see them. I have also concentrated on institutions with collections specifically of Judaica or material produced for or by Jews. Of course, if your interests extend to modern Israeli politics, for example, you will find a different battery of libraries offering collections in Arabic, the history of other Middle Eastern countries, etc.

I am sure there are libraries and collections I have missed and one way of identifying these would be to consult some of the many books written on the history of Jews in this country. A look at the acknowledgments pages of these works will give clues about collections of relevant material. The recent 2 volume history by Hilary and W.D. Rubinstein on the Jews in Australia, and Serge Liberman's Bibliography of Australian Judaica, as well as Marianne Dacy's union list of Periodical publications from the Australian Jewish community are a few cases in point.

As well as these information sources, one finds, as one visits the various libraries, that the librarians themselves provide additional information and contacts. This kind of networking is invaluable to anyone embarking on a quest for library resources in any field. It is, however, most likely to be successful if you can refine your search and do the basic spadework yourself.

The moral of all this, I suppose, is that no matter how badly the mainstream reference works seem to let one down, there are always other avenues one can pursue. In this case, while offering special thanks to Dr John Foster of the Melbourne University History Department, I should also pay tribute to the Melbourne telephone directory, which provided my starting point and enabled me to obtain a great deal of cooperation and assistance from others.

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