

EATING A PALM TREE: THE HISTORY OF AN ALIA SPECIAL INTEREST GROUP

George Miller

The Asia and Pacific Special Interest Group (APSIG) will celebrate twenty-two years of activities in August 2010. It was formally approved at the Library Association of Australia (LAA) Council meeting on 26/27 August 1988.

In early 1988, Asian Studies librarians from the Australian National University (ANU) suggested to their colleagues at the National Library of Australia (NLA) that a working group be formed to put a proposal to the LAA that an Asian Special Interest Group be established. The librarians from the National Library suggested that the group be expanded to include the Pacific, and it was this joint idea that went to the LAA. After the LAA Council approved the concept, the first formal meeting of APSIG took place at the University of NSW during the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) Conference in that same month.

Anthony Ketley of the NLA was appointed the first Convenor, supported by a small committee, and it was decided that communications between members through the means of a newsletter was the most critical issue if the Group was to be sustainable. This has been proved correct, attested to by the fact that the Group is still active and that in November 2009 the 71st issue of the Newsletter was published.

In addition to enhancing communication between those area studies librarians in Australia working with collections on Asia and Pacific, the Group also had as its aims the raising of interest in libraries in the Asia-Pacific region among our colleagues in the LAA (now the Australian Library and Information Association – ALIA) and Australian librarianship generally. Cooperation with librarians in the region to advance and promote the profession was a third aim.

The period of Ketley's Convenorship from 1988 to 1996 was a particularly active time. Almost immediately after APSIG's establishment it was agreed that a panel on inter-cultural relations in Asian and Pacific librarianship be organized for the 1990 Perth conference of the Association, as well as a workshop on conservation. APSIG also successfully lobbied such groups as the Asian Studies Council, a Working Party on Library Provision in Higher Education Institutions and a Parliamentary Committee chaired by Barry Jones, called the Committee on the Future. APSIG made written and verbal submissions. The issues raised by APSIG were included in the final reports of these enquiries.

During this period, biennial general meetings of APSIG were held at the ALIA conferences. APSIG also had a representative on ALIA's International Relations Committee. APSIG contributed in a small way with the planning of the Special and Law Librarians' Conference in Canberra in 1991 and convened and participated in sessions of the ALIA/NZLIA Conference in New Zealand in 1994. The focus by APSIG at the latter conference was on the promotion of library associations in the Asia/Pacific region.

One of the more ambitious projects APSIG took on in the early days was the organising of training workshops in preservation, to take place in Southeast Asia and

the Pacific. We received grants from the Australian government's aid branch (now known as AusAID) to finance these projects and they were very successful, thanks largely to the quality of the experts that APSIG contracted to run the workshops, Wendy Smith and Ross Harvey. The fact that ALIA Head Office provided accounting and legal support in the handling of the grants was also of critical importance. The workshops were conducted in Hanoi, Bangkok and Fiji. In 1994 ALIA's Preservation Special Interest Group and the National Library of Australia took on the responsibility for the continuation of these workshops which APSIG had initiated.

APSIG's survey of databases on Asia in 1994 was one of the Group's first ventures into the new world of electronic information. Nereida Cross from the University of New South Wales was appointed initially to manage the project and she was followed later by Susan MacDougall. This work, titled *Asian Resources: a Select Directory of Databases*, became a part of ASIA ROM, a CD-Rom published by Informit, while a printed version, *Asian Resources Directory* was launched by the Deputy Director of AusAID, Dr. Peter McCawley, in March 1997. Virginia Walsh represented ALIA at the launch. It was not long before APSIG had a webpage (originally on the ANU Coombs site, later moved to the ALIA site). The Group was also partly responsible for mounting an electronic mailing list for Pacific librarians, PACLIB, and later, in 2003, it commenced an electronic discussion list on the ALIA server, aliaAPSIG e-list.

During the first decade APSIG, while coordinated from Canberra, also had active state "chapters", especially in Victoria, Western Australia and New South Wales. In 1996 the Victorian Chapter, in cooperation with Monash University, organised workshops on Asian information sources for non-specialist librarians prior to the ALIA conference in Melbourne that year. In 1997 it also convened a seminar in cooperation with the National Centre for South Asian Studies on *South Asia: Renovating the National Collection*.

As it can be seen, APSIG frequently cooperated with other organizations in its activities. Most frequently, APSIG provided the initial impetus and continued to give expert advice, while the fellow organization provided the institutional resources. One such project was Adrian Cunningham's *Directory of Libraries and Archives in the Pacific Islands*, which APSIG produced in 1997 in cooperation with the National Library of Australia.

It is satisfying to know that participating in and gaining experience from APSIG activities has assisted a number of rising stars on their professional paths. One such person to benefit was Craig Boaden, who was the APSIG Newsletter editor from December 1992 to December 1996, producing 18 issues. Craig brought a catchy, quirky style, as well as a high degree of competence, to his Newsletters. It was no surprise therefore, that with the approach of the Olympic Games in Sydney he was appointed Manager, Information Management, with the Sydney Organizing Committee. Originally from the Pacific Training College in Sydney, Craig commented positively on the opportunities the editorship of the APSIG Newsletter had given him in developing a broad network of colleagues in Asian and Pacific librarianship.

A recurring event in the APSIG program has been the popular lunchtime talks, "Traveller's Tales". These usually consisted of illustrated talks by colleagues who had visited libraries, attended conferences, served as volunteers or worked as consultants in the Asia Pacific region. While members of the audience at these talks may have secretly envied the speaker his or her opportunity to work abroad, they nevertheless were able to expand their knowledge on such diverse subjects as the National Library of Laos or archives in Vanuatu.

Cross-fertilization between APSIG and the Asian Studies Association of Australia (ASAA) has been a constant theme of the Group's activities. This has most often been in the form of library seminars at the ASAA conferences or participation by academics in special panels on Asia and the Pacific at ALIA conferences. The most ambitious conference participation for APSIG was at the ALIA Albury conference in 1992. The Group organized no less than five sessions and was instrumental in having the Mariam Abdul Kadir, Director-General of the National Library of Malaysia as one of the keynote speakers at the Conference. Professor David Goodman and Mr. Tony Gallagher (from the Federal Department of Education) were two high profile speakers that APSIG was able to attract to the Conference. Another particularly successful panel organized by APSIG and the East Asian Library Resources Group of Australia (EALRGA) was at the 12th ASAA conference at the University of New South Wales in September 1998, largely organized by Andrew Gosling. This event occurred during the period when Susan Prentice was Convenor, between 1998 and 1999.

Following the gaining of independence by East Timor, there was an increase in interest by Australian librarians in the new country. This was reflected in a blossoming of articles in the APSIG Newsletter devoted to Australia's northern neighbour. In August 2002 APSIG organized an important seminar at the National Library of Australia on *The Role of Libraries in Building Civil Societies: the East Timor Project*, at which the main speakers were Professor Jim Fox, Mr. Alex Byrne and Ms. Judy Blood. Dr. Amareswar Galla, President of the International Commission on Museums also participated.

In June 2002 during the period of Jeanette Regan's Convenorship of APSIG, the ALIA Board of Directors approved the *Guidelines for Assistance to Libraries in the Region* which had been drawn-up jointly by APSIG and the International Relations Committee.

When Deveni Temu assumed the Convenorship in 2004 APSIG continued its interest in both printed and electronic information sources. The APSIG-EARLGA panel at the ASAA Conference in Canberra that year highlighted electronic publishing and publishing-on-demand, as well as a paper on the burgeoning volume of electronic publishing in China. Also in that year APSIG returned to its previous activity of conducting a preservation seminar, though this time the concentration was on digital preservation.

APSIG visits to many of the institutions in Canberra which have an interest in the Asia Pacific region were actively continued during Deveni's convenorship, including the St. Marks Library to see its unique collection of early bibles, (many used in missionary activities in the Pacific), the UN Information Centre, the National Islamic Centre and Library and the Centre for Arab and Islamic Studies at the ANU.

Sponsorship by a number of organizations and institutions has been critical in continuing APSIG's viability. The Group has been most fortunate to have received financial assistance from ALIA for the distribution of its Newsletter. The NLA and the ANU Library have been generous in providing venues for activities; the Canberra-based Asia Bookroom (www.asiabookroom.com/) has been a long-standing supporter through the provision of book vouchers to be used as gifts and prizes, as well as occasionally providing its attractive premises as a venue for talks, while the staff recruitment company, One Umbrella has provided financial support for catering.

In 2008 the majority of members of the APSIG Committee came from Queensland, partly in preparation for the IFLA Conference in Brisbane in 2010. Gail Parr, the Senior Librarian at The Southport School was initially the new Convenor. Though the Brisbane IFLA conference is not proceeding, the Committee is still formally based there, though there is still remains a strong input from Canberra, from where the Newsletter is published (msexton@netspeed.com.au).

APSIG has remained a small, unpretentious and in some ways, with its area focus, a unique Special Interest Group. But its longevity and constancy has meant that, when a survey of its activities is conducted, it is remarkable just how many and varied are the events it has undertaken. The Malayalam proverb which says, "If you chew slowly, you can eat palm trees", may not be an inappropriate aphorism.

CONVENORS

1988-1996	Anthony Ketley
1997	John Brudenall
1998-1999	Susan Prentice
2000-2001	Amelia McKenzie
2001-2003	Jeanette Regan
2004-2007	Deveni Temu
2008-2009	Gail Parr
2009-	Jenny Hale

NEWSLETTER EDITORS

1988-1992	George Miller/Susan Prentice
1992-1996	Craig Boaden
1997	Susan MacDougall
1997-1999	Helen Soemardjo
2000-2002	Dorothy Polonyi
2002-	Marie Sexton