In 1856 the South Australian Institute was founded by act of the colonial legislature. Its main purpose was to establish a permanent public library and museum for the colony. The act followed twenty years of unsuccessful attempts to set up a viable self-supporting public library free from any government aid or control. This article reviews these early efforts.

The South Australian Library and Scientific Association, 1834-8
W.H. Langham and others have celebrated the vision of South Australia’s founders who in 1834, two years before leaving London, formed the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association to plan a public library for the new colony. These accounts are romanticised. The ‘gentlemen intending to emigrate’ who formed the association were not so much aspiring young radicals as aspiring colonial gentry. A close look at the rules shows that the intended public library was really an exclusive gentleman’s club, with nomination by two members, a joining fee of 10/-, two guineas yearly subscription, and blackballing. This was very costly at a time when a labourer was paid five shillings a day. Only forty joined. They included all the principal officers of the colony and the largest land purchasers men like Gouger, Finniss, Fisher, Morphett, Hallett, Kingston and several others whose names were later strewn over the geography of the colony.

The library was a modest affair, consisting initially of 78 books and four volumes of pamphlets donated by Gouger. All of them were practical, contemporary works on the colonies, emigration, exploration, land sales, e.g. Bischoff’s *Van Diemen’s Land*, Pickering’s *Inquiries of an Emigrant*, Bliss on *The Statistics of Canada*, and Remarks on *Trial by Jury in New South Wales* - handbooks to establish a colony. Supplemented by some lesser donations, a selection of religious tracts from G.F. Angas, and £14 worth of secular pamphlets from the Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge, the library was packed into an iron chest and shipped for South Australia on board the *Tam O’Shanter* in July 1836.

No sooner did the *Tam O’Shanter* arrive at the port, than it sank at its moorings, and the box had to be fished up. Nobody had a key, so it remained unopened in Surflen’s Store in Adelaide for two years.

The Literary Association itself did not survive its transplantation to the Antipodes. Even before they left England members proved reluctant to renew their subscriptions. On the voyage out, Governor Hindmarsh, though titular head of the Association, was heard to say that he would not support the establishment of a library: ‘What good will books do our colony?’ he asked. More important, the members were too busy carving out houses in the bush and squabbling with Hindmarsh over land sales to think about books. Anyway, a book club with such an exclusive social base would hardly have been a public library.

The Adelaide Mechanics Institute, 1838-43
On 28 June 1838, after Hindmarsh’s recall, some of the defunct association’s committee, notably the lawyer Charles Mann and emigration agent John Brown, convened a meeting ‘for the purpose of establishing a Mechanics Institution in Adelaide’. This move was a bid for more popular support. While literary associations were very much middle class organisations, mechanics institutes, with their classes in reading, writing and grammar, practical lectures, and lower fees, included the respectable working class - petty clerks and
skilled tradesmen. Consequently, the new committee, though dominated by the professions and well-to-do merchants, included some tradesmen, and the subscription was set at half the old rate - six shillings a quarter - with no election and no joining fee. The library, now 300 volumes, was housed in the twelve-foot square, pre-fabricated, timber schoolroom which was built on North Terrace opposite Holy Trinity Church. J.B. Shepherdson, the schoolmaster, opened it nightly, 7.30 to 9 p.m., for members to borrow books. Eighty members joined, and some eight lectures were given before Christmas, on such subjects as ‘Science and Revelation’ ‘Animal Mechanics’ and ‘Mental Philosophy.’ However, the institute cannot have been too successful, as in mid1839 a meeting was called to determine whether it should be ‘reorganised or the books sold by public auction, to meet the existing obligations’.9

The meeting reorganised the institute, with Governor Gawler as patron and Edward Stephens, manager of the Bank of South Australia, as treasurer. The resuscitated institute thrived for two years, holding a series of popular lectures each winter and spring which attracted audiences of up to 250. The Library was moved out of the schoolroom into the care of Professor Platts, who ran a music shop and private circulating library in Gilles Arcade. It grew to 417 volumes. In 1840 there were some 100 subscribers. At the annual general meeting that year it was noted with pride that the debt of £53/7/1d had been cleared and there was £12/1/5d credit. The report forecast the imminent formation of classes and a museum. This, however, was not to be.

The young institute was swept away in the wake of the acute financial blizzard of 1840-1. So serious was the depression that for a time it threatened the existence of the colony itself. In such a climate people were not prepared to pay subscriptions, and by 1843, the institute had collapsed. The books had to be deposited with Mr Da Costa to cover a debt of £20.10

The South Australian Subscription Library, 1844-7

The next attempt to found a library came in October 1844, when the wealthy members of the old Literary Association met by private invitation in the barrister George Morphett’s rooms in North Terrace.11 They formed the South Australian Subscription Library, which, like the original Literary Association, was essentially an exclusive book club for the well-to-do, with its two guinea subscription and blackballing. Tradesmen were further shut out by the simple device of holding meetings in the Club House during normal working hours. Lectures and classes were abandoned; apart from the salary of the Librarian, £52 p.a., and rent for premises, all income was to be spent buying books in England. Mr Peacock, a Hindley Street merchant, offered them rooms in his exchange. Mann, who was active in the new library, secured the old institute books by paying the money owed to Da Costa.12

Despite their exclusive constitution, and small membership about a hundred –, it seems some of the Committee regarded the Subscription Library as an embryonic public library. It was often called the public library, and a clause in its constitution provided that should it be dissolved its property would be vested in the Governor-in-Council ‘for the gratuitous use of the colonists in general’.13 The members, then, wanted a library for the general public, but not in their lifetimes.

The fact that the old institute’s books, intended in part to help educate the deserving working class, had disappeared into the preserves of the wealthy, did not go unnoticed. The Register objected to the rump of the institute committee agreeing to hand over the books without a
There may be many to whom it would be most desirable to throw open the doors of the Subscription Library - who may not have, or who cannot afford the means

Is it not notorious that the class who would derive most advantage from access to the Library ... are ordinarily not much burdened with superfluous cash?

To make no provision ... is ... very illiberal and exhibits the Muses in a very unsocial light'.

Needless to say, the rules were not changed.

By 1847 this library, too, had difficulty getting money from its members, and reduced its subscription to one guinea in a bid to attract more funds. Murray's South Australian Almanack now pronounced it 'accessible to every class', but numbers scarcely increased. It was not just money which kept the humbler people out; they wanted classes and lectures, and feared the snobbery of the gentlemen subscribers.

The Adelaide Mechanics Institute, 1847-8

In August 1847 at 7.30 one evening Doran's Eagle Tavern in Hindley Street hosted 'a most spirited meeting of mechanics'. Also in attendance were 'several gentlemen', among them the surgeon Dr Cotter, who had been secretary of the former institute. Inspired by Governor Robe's moves to follow New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land in granting state aid to religion and education, they resolved to revive the institute in the hope (which proved vain) of a grant.

From the first their surviving minute book shows that they were as much interested in classes and lectures as in a library. The subscription was open to all, at five shillings a quarter, with half price for youths, and half the cost of classes to be met from the general fund. Weekly classes were planned in Grammar, Writing, Arithmetic, Drawing, French, Latin, Chemistry and other subjects, and also fortnightly lectures and quarterly conversaziones. The Subscription Library were asked to hand back the books.

A librarian, R.S. Tapley, was appointed on ten shillings a week.

Though it planned to help educate the labouring class, the institute's subscription was still daunting for them, at several day's pay, and its real support came from the professions, clerks, tradesmen and small merchants. Like its English equivalents, to quote their historian, the institute came 'to accommodate the new clientele of clerks and shopkeepers, who wanted not science and the discipline of study, but the opportunity of a little of the cultural elegance which they noted in their superiors'. Hence the conversaziones (with their exhibits, musical interludes and popular lectures) flourished, on one occasion attracting 700 patrons at a shilling each, while the serious classes languished, and the library increased only slowly.

The South Australian Library and Mechanics Institute, 1848-56

When the Subscription Library refused to return the books, which, after all, they had redeemed from the pawnbroker, the institute proposed a merger. The Library gentlemen agreed, subject to two conditions: that the institute pay the value of the Library's book
Notes

1 By ‘public’ I mean intended for public use, even if a subscription was required. Prior to 1850 libraries which were public in the dual sense of being for public use and funded from the public purse were virtually unknown in the British world. For a full discussion see T. Kelly, Early Public Libraries (London, 1966).

2 W.H. Langham, In the Beginning (Adelaide, 1936); H. Rutherford Purnell, The Public Library During One Hundred Years unpublished lecture, Adelaide, 1946, Ms. in South Australian Archives [SAA], D5627(T).

3 Minute Book of the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association, SAA, 31 [379a].


6 Southern Australian, 7 July 1838.

7 Ibid., 23 June 1838.

8 Ibid., 30 June 1838.


10 Ibid., 2 Oct. 1839; Register 18 July 1840; and Charles Mann’s Answers to the Committee of the Adelaide Library and Mechanics Institute, 15 Jan. 1853, SAA, A61/B1.

11 N.S. Quick to J. Ridley, 10 Oct. 1844, Ridley Papers, SAA, 1053/49.

12 Southern Australian, 10 Oct. 1844, South Australian, 26 Nov. 1844, 25 April 1845; Register, 7 Jan. 1845; Mann’s Answers.

13 Southern Australian, 18 Oct. 1844. Mann claimed the intention had been ‘gradually to form the nucleus of a Public Library’, Mann’s Answers. The Library received a free copy of the government Gazette as it would were it a public institution.

14 Register, 19 Feb., 1845; South Australian, 2 May 1845.

15 Murray’s South Australian Almanack (1846), p.81. Mann’s Answers.

16 South Australian, 10 Aug. 1847. The Sydney Mechanics School of Arts had received £200 p.a. since 1853, and in Hobart the institute had a land grant, D. Whitelock, The Great Tradition: A History of Adult Education in Australia (St Lucia, 1974), ch.3. See also footnote 25 below.

17 Minute book of the Adelaide Mechanics Institute, 1847–8, SAA, 1423. Conversaziones were large meetings with lectures, exhibitions, ‘dissolving views’ (slides), and musical entertainments.


19 Register, 18 Oct. 1848.

20 Minute Book and Mann’s Answers. In fact, a third of the books were novels.

21 Mann’s Answers.

22 Ibid.; and letter by ‘Jack Plane’ to the editor, Register, 1 July 1850.

23 ‘Adelphi’ to the editor, Register, 9 July 1850; ‘Quill’ to the editor, Register, 6 Sept. 1848; Register, 8 July 1848; Adelaide Times, 22 Jan. 1849.

24 ‘Jack Plane’ to the editor, Register 1 July and 3 Sept. 1850. Register, 25 Nov. 1853.

25 Mann’s Answers; J.H. Clark to Colonial Secretary, 13 July 1854, SAA, GIG 24/6/A (1854) 2039; Act No.16 (1855-6). Gold-rich Victoria voted £10,000 for a public reference library in 1853. In 1850 and 1851 the South Australian Government had voted special purpose grants to the library to buy specific British government publications, but these ceased in 1852, SAA, GIG 19/30.
collection, and that in future half all income would be spent on books. The sum was calculated to be £298. Luckily two benefactors, John Ridley, the miller and inventor of the stripper, and J.B. Graham, a wealthy ironmonger and mining speculator, each promised £100, and the balance was made up from institute funds. Thus, in May 1848, the hybrid South Australian Library and Mechanics Institute was begun, with 400 subscribers at £1 a year and a library of 2,000 volumes, in which ‘works of a lighter character ... formed rather the exception than the rule’.20

The marriage was not a happy one. The library men soon discovered that the impecunious institute committee had taken £98 from subscriptions for the forthcoming year to pay for the books, leaving the anticipated budget that much the poorer. Furthermore, the overheads were such that there was never anything like half the income left to buy books; or, for that matter, to maintain the classes.21 Recriminations abounded. Former institute men complained of the ‘trickery’ of the ‘Library drones’ in their insistence that available funds be spent on books; library men pointed to the breaking of the merger agreement.22 Mechanics complained of the ‘lover-refined and supercilious manner’ of the librarian and members, and detected undue influence of ‘clergy, landlords and employers’ on the committee; while gentleman subscribers were upset by ‘ill-bred persons’ who indulged in ‘stamping’ and ‘hissing’ at meetings, and saw on the committee ‘persons not having a passport into respectable society’.23 Outside, the democrats damned all of them as riven by ‘paltry jealousy% ‘pitiful parasites who would fain lock up science and lay an embargo on literature% and called for the government to make the library a real public institution, open to all and free.24

The institution lurched on, losing subscribers and satisfying nobody, until 1853, when Charles Mann proposed a solution. His idea was that the government should provide a building for the institute and an annual grant towards the purchase of books and officers’ salaries. In return, the subscribers would make all of their books available for the general public to read on the premises free of charge, though, of course, only subscribers could borrow them. No doubt part of his inspiration came from the [British] Public Libraries Act of 1850, which provided for the first time that local rates could be used to subsidise public libraries. John Howard Clark, a young accountant took up the plan, which was finally embodied in the act of 1856.25 The institute building was completed in 1861. It was not until 1884 that the free part of the library was separated finally from the subscribers circulation library and a proper public library was formed.

The persistence of the element of private subscription in the public library system for so long bears testimony to the colony’s founders’ determination that South Australia’s public institutions should be financially independent of the state. Twenty years of failure before 1856 showed that an adequate public library properly accessible to all the public could only be achieved with substantial state aid.

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Dr Carl Bridge, B.A.(Syd.), Ph.D., Dip.Ed.(Flinders), was employed by the Libraries Board of South Australia to write the official centenary history of the State Library of South Australia, A trunk full of books. This article appeared in South Australian volume 21 (1) March 1982 pp. 80-86, a now ceased periodical published by the Libraries Board of South Australia.