The library section of the Raffles Library and Museum, c. 1910. *Collection of the National Museum of Singapore, National Heritage Board. Gift of Sam Kai Faye.*

From COLONIAL VISION *to* KEY MEMORY INSTITUTION

A SHORT HISTORY OF THE NATIONAL LIBRARY

The National Library began life in 1837 with a modest collection of 392 publications belonging to the Singapore Free School.

By Lim Tin Seng

Somewhat remarkably, the idea of the National Library in Singapore can be traced back to 1819. Stamford Raffles, who signed a treaty with Malay rulers that year to establish a trading post on the island, envisioned a college that would educate the sons of the Malay elite as well as employees of the British East India Company. Included in the plan was a library to "collect the scattered literature and traditions of the country, with whatever may illustrate their laws and customs, and to publish and circulate in a correct form the most important of these, with such other works as may be calculated to raise the character of the institution and to be useful or instructive to the people".[1]

Sowing the Seed of Knowledge: Raffles' Vision

It would take another four years before Raffles convened a meeting on 1 April 1823 to establish the college that would become the Singapore Institution (today's Raffles Institution). Robert Morrison, one of the institution's founding trustees and notable missionary and educationist, reiterated the importance of incorporating a library in the school to facilitate learning and provide "care" for the books in Singapore and the region. He also emphasised that "every possible facility" should be provided to ensure that the library's collection was accessible and "rendered useful to the settlement".[2]

Unfortunately, the physical establishment of the library was delayed because the Singapore Institution was only established in December 1837 after the Singapore Free School, an elementary school founded in 1834, relocated from High Street into the intended premises of the Singapore Institution on Bras Basah Road, bringing with it a library.[3] With this move, the Singapore Institution Library was created with a humble collection – just 392 elementary education primers – described as so small it "in all probability [could] be locked into one medium-sized cupboard".[4]

The collection would soon grow and the library became popular among the users. Although the library was opened to the general public, borrowing privileges were only extended to the institution's students, teachers, donors and subscribers. Soon, calls were made for the establishment of a proper public library to serve the community beyond the school's operating hours. Several key residents, including Straits Settlements Governor William J. Butterworth, held a meeting on 13 August 1844 where they passed a resolution for the establishment of such a library. The Singapore Library officially began operations on 22 January 1845.[5]

The Singapore Library: Singapore's First Public Library

Although intended to serve a wider community, the Singapore Library, which occupied the "airy and spacious" north wing of the Singapore Institution building, was not a publicly funded institution but a private enterprise funded by its shareholders and three classes of subscribers (Classes II to IV). There was a tiered fee structure ranging from $1 (Class IV) to $2.50 (Class II, Class III and shareholders), with shareholders needing to pay an additional $40 joining fee. The fee determined the borrowing privileges and was subject to the subscriber's residency in Singapore.[6]

The Singapore Library acquired its titles through appointed book agents as well as second-hand purchases targeting "standard works of science, history, biography, voyages, travels, poetry, fiction, etc".[7] The library also encouraged the public to donate "works related to the East, and especially the Eastern Archipelago". Among those who responded was the Periodical Reading Club, which transferred its holdings to the Singapore Library, as well as prominent residents of the day. Today, some of these titles can be found in the National Library's Rare Materials Collection.[8]

The Singapore Library was initially well received. Described as an "agreeable place of resort… [and] recreation", it moved to the Town Hall (today's Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall) in 1862 to make it more accessible.[9] By 1863, however, the library

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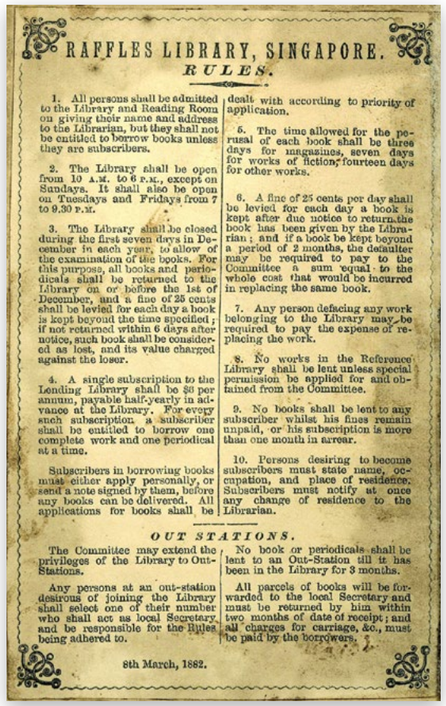
Level 11 of the Lee Kong Chian Reference Library at the National Library Building on Victoria Street. *Photo by Jimmy Yap.*



RAFFLES LIBRARY, SINGAPORE.

RULES.

1. All persons shall be admitted to the Library and Reading Room on giving their name and address to the Librarian, but they shall not be entitled to borrow books unless they are subscribers.

2. The Library shall be open from 10 A.M. to 6 P.M., except on Sundays. It shall also be open on Tuesdays and Fridays from 7 to 9.30 P.M.

3. The Library shall be closed during the first seven days in December in each year, to allow of the examination of the books. For this purpose, all books and periodicals shall be returned to the Library on or before the 1st of December, and a fine of 25 cents shall be levied for each day a book is kept beyond the time specified; if not returned within 6 days after notice, such book shall be considered as lost, and its value charged against the loser.

4. A single subscription to the Lending Library shall be $8 per annum, payable half-yearly in advance at the Library. For every such subscription, a subscriber shall be entitled to borrow one complete work and one periodical at a time.

Subscribers in borrowing books must either apply personally, or send a note signed by them, before any books can be delivered. All applications for books shall be dealt with according to priority of application.

5. The time allowed for the perusal of each book shall be three days for magazines, seven days for works of fiction, fourteen days for other works.

6. A fine of 25 cents per day shall be levied for each day a book is kept after due notice to return the book has been given by the Librarian; and if a book be kept beyond a period of 2 months, the defaulter may be required to pay to the Committee a sum equal to the whole cost that would be incurred in replacing the same book.

7. Any person defacing any work belonging to the Library may be required to pay the expense of replacing the work.

8. No works in the Reference Library shall be lent unless special permission be applied for and obtained from the Committee.

9. No books shall be lent to any subscriber whilst his fines remain unpaid, or his subscription is more than one month in arrear.

10. Persons desiring to become subscribers must state name, occupation, and place of residence. Subscribers must notify at once any change of residence to the Librarian.

OUT STATIONS.

The Committee may extend the privileges of the Library to Out-Stations.

No book or periodicals shall be lent to an Out-Station till it has been in the Library for 3 months.

Any persons at an out-station desirous of joining the Library shall select one of their number who shall act as local Secretary, and be responsible for the Rules being adhered to.

All parcels of books will be forwarded to the local Secretary and must be returned by him within two months of date of receipt; and all charges for carriage, &c., must be paid by the borrowers.

8th March, 1882.

(Top) The Town Hall (present-day Victoria Theatre and Concert Hall), 1870. The Raffles Library and Museum opened in the Town Hall on 4 September 1874. *Lee Kip Lin Collection, National Library Singapore.*

(Above) Rules of the Raffles Library, 8 March 1882. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

faced financial difficulties due to the low subscription rate. An irate patron wrote to the *Straits Times* to complain that the books in the library were "ill-kept, ill-assorted, entirely without any connection or fullness in any division of literature".[10]

By 1875, the library was saddled with a debt of $500 due to years of "mismanagement, neglect and a lack of subscribers". It was described by the *Straits Times* as being in a "moribund condition" with no new books added since 1873.[11]

The Raffles Library and Museum: The "Q" Collection

The issues faced by the Singapore Library coincided with the colonial government's consideration of a new museum, an idea influenced by a May 1873 exhibition of colonial products at London's South Kensington Exhibition Building (now the Victoria and Albert Museum). The Singapore Legislative Council advocated for a similar permanent exhibition on the island to showcase commercial products and artefacts relating to the ethnology, antiquities, natural history and geology of the region.[12]

At the time, there was already a small museum in the Singapore Library to collect artefacts that "illustrate the general history and archaeology of Singapore and the Eastern Archipelago". The museum was created in 1849 after Governor Butterworth presented the library with two ancient gold coins on behalf of the Temenggong of Johor.[13]

After Andrew Clarke became the new governor in November 1873, he refined the museum proposal to include a public library. The Singapore Library and its collection of books were transferred to the newly formed library, which was administered as a single entity with the museum known as the Raffles Library and Museum.

The library opened in the Town Hall on 14 September 1874, with the focus on collecting "valuable works relating to the Straits Settlements, and surrounding countries, as well as standard works on Botany, Zoology, Mineralogy, Geography, and the Arts and Sciences generally". The library had three sections – a reference library, a reading room and a lending library – and operated on a two-tier subscription-based model. First-class subscribers paid an annual fee of $20, or $5 quarterly, for the privilege of borrowing two complete works and one periodical as well as exclusive access to new books for three months. Second-class subscribers paid $6 annually, or $1.50 quarterly, to borrow one complete work and one periodical.

To ensure that "every possible advantage may be placed within the reach of readers in the Settlement", the library was also opened to non-subscribers but they were not permitted to borrow materials. James Collins, headmaster of the Singapore Institution, was appointed to oversee both the library and museum as librarian and curator.[14]

In 1877, the growing collections of the Raffles Library and Museum necessitated a move to the first and second floors of a new wing of the Singapore Institution, which had been renamed Raffles Institution. But this space soon proved inadequate, prompting the construction of a dedicated building on Stamford Road. This striking neoclassical structure, with its 90-foot (27 m) dome (now home to the National Museum of Singapore), opened on 12 October 1887. It housed the library on the ground floor and the museum on the first floor.[15]

The library's initial collection consisted of 200 newly purchased books and the 3,000-volume collection from the Singapore Library. Through purchases and donations, the collection grew to over 26,000 volumes by the end of 1900.[16]

While some books were available for lending, others deemed "too valuable for circulation" were housed in the reference library. Some were even locked in "cases with glazed doors" accessible only "for reference on the application to the Librarian". This collection, known as the "Q" Collection[17] focused on "works related to Singapore, the Straits Settlements, and the Eastern Archipelago".[18] The "Q" collection also comprised items acquired through purchases and donations from institutions and individuals.[19] (Today, it forms the core of the Rare Materials Collection of the National Library Singapore.)

By 1925, the "Q" collection had increased to about 900 volumes. Throughout the prewar years, it continued to expand with publications received under the Printers and Publishers Ordinance, materials from the library of the Malayan Branch of the Royal Asiatic Society and works from private libraries. Some prized titles obtained during this period include the 1849 lithographed edition of the *Hikayat Abdullah,* the autobiography of the Malay scholar and teacher Abdullah Abdul Kadir.[20] By 1941, the "Q" collection had grown to 1,787 titles, forming a "reasonably complete" collection of works relating to the territories in British Malaya.[21]

In 1938, the library reported that it had nearly 3,600 subscribers and issued over 238,000 book loans, a significant increase from 200 subscribers and 5,000 book loans in 1874. To "induce the younger generation to take an interest in reading", a Junior Library opened in 1923 for youths aged 10 to 21. By 1940, it had over 6,000 volumes.[22]

During the Japanese Occupation (1942–45), the Raffles Library and Museum was renamed Syonan Tosyokan and Syonan Hakubutsukan respectively. Due to the efforts of the Japanese museum directors and British staff, the collections of the museum and library remained largely intact. By the time the occupation ended, only about 8,000 books, mostly issued to subscribers before the fall of Singapore, were "unaccounted for".[23]

The Raffles National Library: Becoming a National Library

The Raffles Library and Museum reopened to the public in December 1945 after the Japanese Occupation. By the end of 1946, subscriptions reached 3,850, with Asiatic members outnumbering European members for the first time. The library also began rebuilding its collection, reaching 70,000 volumes by the end of 1947.[24]

The 1950s saw significant improvements under trained librarians Louise E. Bridges and Leonard M. Harrod. Bridges, Librarian from 1951 to 1952, transformed the library with a limited budget of $4,000 from a "dim, dingy [place] with cold echoing cement floors" into a place of "wonders". She introduced comfortable furniture, proper shelving for newspapers and implemented the Dewey Decimal Classification System, bringing order to the previously

A seating area at the Raffles Library, 1950s. The card catalogue cabinet is seen in the background. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

"chaotic mess". Bridges also established a booking system for popular titles, proposed an after-hours book return bin and implemented a fine system for overdue books. The first part-time branch library in the suburbs opened in Upper Serangoon in 1953.[25]

Harrod, who became Librarian in September 1954, expanded the collection to 80,000 volumes by 1955.[26] He initiated an "Oriental" collection featuring books in Chinese, Malay and Tamil, and started a music section with about 4,500 pieces of sheet music, music albums and miniature scores by the end of 1958. Harrod also built more part-time branch libraries in the outlying areas and proposed a mobile library service.[27]

On 1 January 1955, Harrod was appointed Director of the Raffles Library after its administration was separated from that of the Raffles Museum. Plans were also made for the library to move into a new $2.5-million three-storey building on an adjacent site previously occupied by the St John's Ambulance Headquarters and the British Council Hall.[28]

The foundation stone of the new building was laid on 16 August 1957 by the businessman and philanthropist Lee Kong Chian, who had donated $375,000 on the condition that "the library should be made available to the public without charge and that books in the languages commonly spoken in Singapore and in European languages other than English be provided".[29]

A milestone was reached in 1958 when the Raffles National Library Ordinance came into effect, officially separating the library from the museum, and the Raffles Library was renamed Raffles National Library. It also became a free library where members no longer had to pay a subscription fee, although a $10 refundable deposit was still required.[30]

The Raffles Library and Museum on Stamford Road, 1900s. *Courtesy of National Archives of Singapore.*

The National Library: Serving a New Nation

Harrod retired in January 1960 while the new National Library building on Stamford Road was still under construction. Hedwig Anuar, one of the few qualified local librarians, was seconded from the library of the University of Malaya in Kuala Lumpur to serve as the Raffles National Library's interim director. She made history by becoming the first Malayan and first woman to head the library.[31]

The new red-brick National Library building on Stamford Road was officially opened on 12 November 1960 by Yang di-Pertuan Negara (Head of State) Yusof Ishak. It accommodated a collection of some 140,000 volumes spread across an Adult Lending Library, a Children's Library and a Reference Library. The building also included administrative offices, a conference room, lecture halls, as well as storage and maintenance spaces for library and archival materials.

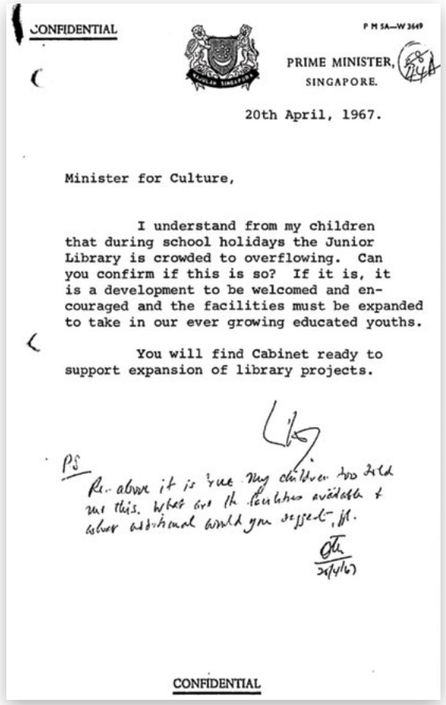
On 9 December 1960, Raffles National Library was renamed the National Library after the Raffles National Library (Change of Name) Ordinance was passed.[32]

Anuar, who returned to the University of Malaya Library in 1961 when her stint as interim director ended, was appointed assistant director (supernumerary) of the National Library in 1962. She succeeded expatriate director Priscilla Taylor in 1965 after the latter completed her contract and left in 1964. Over the next two decades, Anuar made significant contributions to the growth and development of the National Library.[33]

In 1963, the National Library's "Q" Collection made headlines when its bibliography, *Books about Malaysia*, was "hailed in all parts of the world" after it was published.[34] Thereafter, the library received two major donations. The Penang-born merchant Tan Yeok Seong donated his 10,000-volume on Southeast Asian works to the library in 1964. This is now known as the Ya Yin Kwan Collection. One year later, Mrs Loke Yew, mother of film magnate Loke Wan Tho (chairman of the board of the National Library from 1960 until his death in 1964) donated her son's collection of 1,000 books and journals on Malayan flora, fauna, travel and arts, known today as the Gibson-Hill Collection.

These donations, along with the existing "Q" collection, formed the foundation of the South East Asia (SEA) Room which opened on 28 August 1964. Today, the SEA Collection has evolved into the National Library's National Collection comprising the Rare Materials Collection, the Singapore and Southeast Asia collections and the Donors' Collection.[35]

Anuar implemented various initiatives to encourage people to visit the library and to read.[36] She launched the mobile library service, first proposed by Harrod, and set up fulltime branch libraries in housing estates to reach residents in the outlying areas. Queenstown Branch Library was the first to open in 1970. By 1990, there were eight branch


CONFIDENTIAL

PRIME MINISTER,
SINGAPORE.

20th April, 1967.

Minister for Culture,

I understand from my children that during school holidays the Junior Library is crowded to overflowing. Can you confirm if this is so? If it is, it is a development to be welcomed and encouraged and the facilities must be expanded to take in our ever growing educated youths.

You will find Cabinet ready to support expansion of library projects.

PS
Re above it is true. My children told me this. What are the facilities available & what additional would you suggest, pl.

CONFIDENTIAL

Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew's letter to the Minister for Culture pledging the government's support to expand the facilities of the Children's Library at the National Library, 20 April 1967. *From National Archives of Singapore, microfilm no. AR 006.*

libraries, contributing to a substantial increase in library membership from approximately 45,000 members in 1960 to over 640,000 members by 1990. Correspondingly, book borrowing surged from 703,000 loans to 9.2 million loans during the same period.[37]

Anuar placed great emphasis on growing the children's collection and sought to promote services to children. The Children's Library became so popular that it was usually packed during the school holidays. On 20 April 1967, Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew wrote to the Minister for Culture: "I understand from my children that during school holidays the Junior Library is crowded to overflowing. Can you confirm if this is so? If it is, it is a development to be welcomed and encouraged and the facilities must be expanded to take in our ever growing educated youths. You will find Cabinet ready to support expansion of library projects."[38]

In the 1980s, Anuar led the National Library on its path to computerisation. Book borrowing, book returns and membership registration were computerised, and the Online Public Access Catalogue to search and locate library materials replaced card catalogues.[39]

The National Library Board: Revolutionising Library Services

In 1992, the Library 2000 Review Committee was convened to conduct a comprehensive review of library services in Singapore. A key outcome of the committee's report, released in 1994, was the establishment of the National Library Board (NLB) on 1 September 1995 to oversee the development and management of the National Library and public libraries.[40]

With more autonomy and flexibility as a statutory board, NLB embarked on its journey of innovation and service excellence by leveraging new technology. In 1998, NLB became the first library system in the world to pioneer the use of radio frequency identification technology for all library processes and operations. Book borrowing and returning became faster and easier with automated self-check borrowing stations and automated bookdrops.[41]

In tandem with technological advancements, the physical library network was enlarged significantly. New regional libraries in Tampines, Woodlands and Jurong provided expanded collections and services, while smaller branch libraries were strategically co-located with community centres or housed within shopping malls to encourage more visitors to the library. This expansion has resulted in a comprehensive network of 28 public libraries across the island today.[42]

One of the National Library's main focus areas is the preservation and promotion of Singapore's literary heritage for future generations. In 2003, it embarked

The former National Library building on Stamford Road after an extensive makeover in 1997. *Collection of the National Library Singapore.*

on digitising materials relating to Singapore, including historical newspapers, rare and out-of-print books and digital content. These efforts led to the launch of Web Archive Singapore in 2006 (revamped in 2018) which offers access to archived Singapore websites, and NewspaperSG in 2010, an online resource of more than 200 Singapore and Malaya newspapers published since 1831.[43]

To grow the National Collection, the National Library welcomes donation of materials such as diaries, personal papers, letters, business documents, manuscripts, photographs and architectural plans. To date, it has received over 116,000 items from more than 425 individual donors, organisations and associations.[44]

In November 2012, the National Archives of Singapore – which is the "official custodian of all government records and the people's collective memory" – became an institution of NLB. Two years later, on 1 January 2014, the Asian Film Archive, a nonprofit organisation established in 2005 to preserve Asian film heritage, became a subsidiary of NLB.[45]

Shaping the Future of Learning and Knowledge

Since its establishment, NLB has been guided by a number of blueprints over the last two decades. In 2005, the *Library 2010: Libraries for Life, Knowledge for Success* report was published with the focus on "expanding the role of libraries in the knowledge economy and to developing knowledge-enabled Singaporeans". In 2011, NLB launched "Libraries for Life" which sought to "ensure that no one in society is left behind in this digital age and that libraries continue to be physical touch-points in the community".[46]

These strategic plans have led to initiatives that benefit library users and improve NLB's services and reach. Some examples include the nationwide reading initiative READ! Singapore in 2005, the Singapore Memory Project in 2012 (reconstituted as "Singapore Memories" in 2023) to collect "every individual's memory and story… to contribute towards the Singapore Story", the NLB Mobile app in 2014 (revamped in 2021) that provides access to the library's digital services and collection, and the National Reading Movement in 2016 to promote reading within communities.[47]

NLB's most recent strategic plan, LAB25, or "Libraries and Archives Blueprint 2025", was launched in October 2021 to direct NLB's five-year journey in its next phase of transformation. LAB25 aims to reimagine the libraries and archives of the future and to ensure that they remain vital and relevant in a rapidly evolving digital landscape.[48]

Aligned with this new blueprint, and with augmented reality and artificial intelligence (AI) being the buzzwords these days, NLB has embraced these emerging technologies to revolutionise user experience and improve operational efficiency. An example is the prototype of a generative AI-powered chatbook in 2024 featuring founding father S. Rajaratnam for users to learn about his life and contributions to Singapore, drawing from his authorised biography by former journalist and Member of Parliament Irene Ng as well as collections from the National Archives and National Library.[49]

Today, NLB is a key memory institution dedicated to preserving Singapore's cultural heritage. As it looks to the future, it will continue to experiment and innovate to serve a new generation of library users. At the same time, NLB's vision of nurturing readers for life, developing learning communities and creating a knowledgeable nation will remain at the heart of everything it does. ♦

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