

A gentleman's library: rare books and much more

The Symon Library in the Mortlock Wing of the State Library will be open to the public from Thursday 23 February.

In keeping with Sir Josiah Symon's 1934 bequest, the State Library is making this unique library available to the public for two hours each day (12 to 2pm, Monday to Friday).

Scottish immigrant Josiah Symon arrived in South Australia in 1866. He had a notable career in law before becoming the State's Attorney-General when he won the seat of Sturt in 1881. His political career focused on Federation and he was a prominent member of the 1897-98 Australasian Federal Convention. Of particular note during his political career was the establishment of an Australian Supreme Court to replace the Privy Council.

Notwithstanding his law and political career and advocacy, Symon was a person of broad scholarship and his personal library is testament to his wide interest in literature and antiquarian books.

The library he established at Manoah, his estate in Upper Sturt, consisted of 10,000 law and literature volumes. The State Library was bequeathed 7500 volumes, many of which are described as rare, with much of the collection dating back to the 19th century.

The bequest included furniture from the Manoah library, including the desk where he drafted significant Federation documents, as well as books, periodicals, maps, photographs, engravings, etchings, a statue and a bust. This entire collection is now housed appropriately in one of Adelaide's most historic buildings, the Mortlock Chamber.

"The opening of this wonderful historic and atmospheric library to the public provides our visitors with the unique opportunity to experience a personal library of a past era. Visitors will be intrigued with the breadth and significance of the collection and researchers will be able to use items from the collection in a room reminiscent of a 'gentleman's library', said Director of the State Library Mr Alan Smith.

Volunteer Ambassadors will welcome visitors to the Symon Library, Level 2, northern end of the Mortlock Wing each weekday between noon and 2pm. Access to rare books not on public display and requests for further research using the collection can be arranged with the State Library's librarians.

The opening by the Director will take place at 2.30pm Wednesday 22 February in the Mortlock Chamber, followed by special previews for invited guests. Descendants of the family will be present at the opening.

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