

## History of the Rare Book Discussion Group

In the August/September 2011 edition of *GeoNews*, then President Rod Shearing wrote:

*The society, mindful of a recent membership survey is planning some day time activities for members, in our rooms. We will be setting up a Friends Group with a Fine and Rare Books discussion subgroup for about 15-20 members. This will be your chance to browse the collection, up close and personal, select a volume or two, and research the origin of the volume, place of printing, the binding viz: boards and covers, techniques and paper and bring it to the discussion group and at the same time increase the Society's bibliographic strengths of the collection's content. Please contact our librarian Kevin Griffin on 82077266 for further details.*

According to Rod, the original idea for a Rare Book Discussion Group (RBDG) had come from (volunteer) Library Manager Kevin who thought that might lead to some purchase from the membership and give the Society something to “crow about” at other wider public forums.

The first meeting of the RBDG was held on the morning of April 17<sup>th</sup> 2012, the “object being to explore some of the exquisite early bibliographic material in the Society's Collection” (*GeoNews* April-May 2012.) Library Manager Kevin showed the group some of the earliest imprints such as Ptolomey's *Geographica* 1482 and Giovanni's Belzoni's *Views of Egypt* 1820. Almost all the eight publications revealed at this first session would have come from the Rare Book Room of the State Library where some of the rarest and most valuable material is housed.

A full program of RBDG sessions took some time to get going, despite the best efforts of early Convenors and other supporters. These include Heather Barrett, Pat Greet, Rex Heading, Bill Stacy, Diarshul Sandhu, Rod Shearing and Chris Birrell. Sadly, one of the earlier drivers Kevin Griffin, died in August 2013. As is the case today, the sessions require a blend of several components which include:

- A diverse, and wonderful collection of books, manuscripts, periodicals, maps/atlasses, photographs and other art work, artefacts/relics, historical newspapers, D' sized books, and more
- An interesting topic, with sufficient rare/valuable/not-often-seen material on the subject matter
- A presenter (or two) interested in the topic and able and willing to spend the many hours in the RGS Library preparing for the session.
- RGSSA Library staff willing to help with research, identifying and locating material and the “borrowing” process (remembering that none of it can be take outside the Library). They also help with registrations and general enquiries. Particular thanks to Phyl Twigg and Nona Verco for locating many of the books for the sessions, especially from the Rare Book Room and to David Wald, Wynton Heading and others for their support at various times.
- State Library staff particularly for accessing RGS material from the Rare Book Room (thankyou Sara Stoddart) and Security Staff to enable after-hours access to the Library

- Providing “clerical” assistance to presenters where needed to assist in preparing notes, publication details for the session, photocopying etc. Particular mention to Chris Birrell and Sally Hanley for their tireless efforts.
- A Convenor to coordinate the process, answer out-of-session queries, host sessions, liaise with presenters, oversee planning of each year’s program, provide information to *GeoNews* and the website and for the year’s program brochure, check Eventbrite entries etc. Over the years, this fairly demanding role has been undertaken by Pat Greet, Rex Heading/Bill Stacy, Diarshul Sandhu and Jill Kerby.
- Front-of-house person to welcome participants, provide name tags, ensure hand cleaning, organise photocopying etc, undertaken by Sally over recent years
- An Eventbrite Systems coordinator to modify each session information as required and record registrations (and payment from non-members.) Thankyou Rick Flint for making this happen even when you are away on holiday!
- Access to the Library for sessions and to the upstairs gallery on occasions

So, it was not until September 2013 that an Advanced RBDG program was in place, then held on the third Thursday of the month in the RGS Library. These three sessions provided an overview of the York Gate Library acquired in 1905 and of the huge task of cataloguing the whole Collection, a presentation on 19<sup>th</sup> Century publications on botany and related areas and a tour of the State Library’s Conservation Services and facilities.

2014 was the first annual program ranging from “Australian Inland Exploration” in February to “German pioneers in South Australia” in November.

As we gained more experience, some changes have occurred over the years:

- Sessions were moved to the fourth Thursday of the month, a week later than lectures. Occasionally, sessions were held in the afternoon or early evening
- Participant numbers were limited to 20 to ensure sufficient “space” to view the contents
- More “participant” sessions were included to look at particular aspects of the Collection such as manuscripts, newspapers, the top gallery or the Specials cabinet
- Some topics were presented by non-members who were expert in that topic (shown by \* in the table below)
- On occasions, field trips were included e.g. to the Museum’s Mawson Collection or the State Library’s Rare Book Room
- In later years, the April RBDG topic was selected both for its value to the Discussion Group and to the Society’s [Exhibition in the History Month of May](#)
- Given the poor condition of much of the Collection’s rare or valuable material, a voluntary donation was collected from RBDG participants to assist with repair and conservation.
- Having the RBDG program on the Society’s website has attracted international enquiries from time to time.

While not formally stated, the objective of the RBDG remain the same as in the early years.

- To enable members to become acquainted with our extensive collection of significant and rare books, maps, manuscripts and artefacts in a more intimate way
- To share ideas within a relatively small group of interested people in an informal atmosphere
- To ensure that the material in the Collection is accessible to and viewed by members and a wider audience on a regular basis, particularly those items stored in the Rare Book Room, Upstairs Gallery and other locked locations
- To afford support to the “Adopt a Book” program where members and supporters provide funds towards the repair of some of the most remarkable books in our care.

### What Topics have been covered?

In the five years from 2015 to 2019 inclusive the following topics were covered, loosely grouped into eight categories.

Category	Title of Session
Australian and New Zealand Exploration and Development	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• John McDouall Stuart, 1815-1866, first to cross mainland Australia south to north</li> <li>• Captain Cook 1729-99, one of the world’s greatest navigators</li> <li>• Captain Matthew Flinders 1774-1814, first to circumnavigate Australia</li> <li>• Early Settlement in Aotearoa (New Zealand)</li> <li>• The Chinese People in Australia</li> <li>• The Discovery of Gold in Australia</li> <li>• Captain Charles Sturt 1795-1869, Soldier and Explorer</li> </ul>
“Australiana”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Australian Fauna – a 19<sup>th</sup> Century Perspective</li> <li>• *Sir Archibald Grenfell Price 1892-1977, geographer, historian, educationalist</li> <li>• SW Silver and the Underwater Communication Cables, to connect Australia with Europe in 1872</li> <li>• *Charles Todd 1826 to 1910, man of many disciplines</li> <li>• *Flinders, Banks and the Library at Soho Square</li> <li>• Shipwrecks, Lighthouses and Lifeboats</li> <li>• The contribution of Germans to 19<sup>th</sup> Century Australia</li> <li>• John and Elizabeth Gould – Ornithology, Art and Entrepreneurship</li> <li>• The Amazing Art of George French Angas</li> </ul>
South Australian Settlement/Exploration/Surveying	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Gills at Glen Osmond</li> <li>• The “Birth” of the City of Adelaide</li> <li>• Books Written by People Named in the Streets of Adelaide</li> <li>• History of Settlement in South Australia</li> </ul>
Europe/Africa/Asia	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Waterloo, and the defeat of Napoleon in June 1815</li> <li>• David Roberts: Egypt and the Holy Land</li> <li>• The Silk Road and Central Asia</li> <li>• The Archaeology of the Middle East and North Africa</li> <li>• Japan from the 16<sup>th</sup> Century</li> <li>• Alexander von Humboldt 1769-1857, notable Prussian Geographer, Explorer and Scientist</li> <li>• 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> Century Engravings depicting Travels to the Americas by European Explorers</li> </ul>

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Ethiopia, the Search for Prester John and Exotic Emperors</li> <li>• Europe Unfolding: the great era of European Exploration from the 15<sup>th</sup> Century onwards</li> <li>• The 1883 Eruption of Krakatoa in the (then) Dutch East Indies</li> </ul>
Polar Regions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Polar Expeditions: heroic exploits from ancient times to the 1930s, including a visit to the Mawson Collection in the SA Museum</li> <li>• Antarctic Exploration: from Weddell to Wilkins</li> </ul>
General (world-wide) Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• A Journey Through Medical History</li> <li>• Flax and its use from Ancient to Modern times</li> <li>• Volcanoes, Earthquakes and Tsunamis</li> </ul>
Components of the RGSSA Collection	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• The Photographic Collection</li> <li>• “D” Sized Books</li> <li>• *Where are all our Rare books? (visit to the Rare Book Room of the State Library)</li> <li>• The RGSSA Relics Collection</li> <li>• The RGSSA Manuscripts Collection (two sessions)</li> <li>• Books from the Specials Cabinet</li> <li>• The Society’s Art Work</li> <li>• Newspaper Clippings from 1860 to 1880</li> <li>• Children’s Literature in the RGSSA Collection</li> <li>• What’s on Level 3 of the Mortlock Wing?</li> <li>• The Rare Book Room: its RGSSA Content, Protection and Preservation</li> </ul>
Associated Library Topics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• *Book Binding</li> <li>• The Silver that Turned to Gold: the SW Silver collection of about 7,500 titles purchased by the RGSSA in 1905</li> <li>• *What Makes a Book Rare?</li> </ul>

Of these 50 sessions, an impressive 38 were presented by members, seven by non-members/visitors (shown by an asterisk above), and five by participants, particularly when viewing components of the Collection, such as manuscripts. Of the sessions presented by members, at least ten individuals presented more than once and one or two presented four times, either alone or with a colleague. These figures speak for themselves.

Attendance at sessions has averaged a very consistent 20, with some sessions of the more popular topics repeated in the afternoon or the next day. In 2016 alone, there were 56 different participants who attended one or more sessions, out of a total RGSSA membership of about 320. New members are especially welcome, particularly as no preparation is required, other than turning up before 10.30am with an open mind, ready to be amazed! Friends who interested but not members can come along for \$10, payable on registration.

**Jill Kerby**

**Convenor, Rare Book Discussion Group**

Dated June 2020, while the RBDG program was suspended due to COVID-19 restrictions and the Library closure. Please accept my apologies for any omissions or errors in this article. Input and comments gratefully received from Rod Shearing, Nona Verco and Chris Birrell.