**Introduction**

This double special issue arises from a symposium held at the State Library of New South Wales in February 2020. Sponsored by the State Library of New South Wales, the University of Liverpool’s Eighteenth-Century Worlds Research Centre, and Western Sydney University, *The Subscription Library Movement and the Cultural Origins of the State Library of New South Wales* symposium explored the origins of the subscription library movement and cultures of reading in Australia, Europe and North America, as well as the role of the Australian Subscription Library (now the State Library of NSW) in the early history of New South Wales. Presenters’ papers considered readers, rules and library collections, as well as the roles they played in community formation, cultural life, and politics. The symposium also launched *Libraries, Reading Communities and Cultural Formation in the Eighteenth-Century Atlantic,* a Digital Humanities project funded by the Arts and Humanities Research Council in the UK. Based in the Department of History at the University of Liverpool – and working in collaboration with researchers at the University of Glasgow, Western Sydney University, the American Philosophical Society, California State University, Long Beach, the University of West Georgia, Muhlenberg College, and the University of Helsinki – the project’s primary aim is to investigate the contribution of books to social, cultural and political change in the Age of Enlightenment and Revolutions.

This special issue is split into two parts. Following on from part one (*Library & Information* History, 37.2) – which explored the eighteenth-century origins of the subscription library movement, from its beginnings in the British North American colonies to its adoption in the British Isles and beyond – this second part considers the subscription library movement and cultures of reading in the nineteenth century, and more specifically in Australia. Maggie Patton (State Library of NSW) investigates the founding and earliest years of operation of the Australian Subscription Library, including an analysis of the Library’s members and their ties to colonial Sydney’s burgeoning civic institutions. Staying with the Australian Subscription Library, Richard Neville (State Library of NSW) explores the tensions between the private nature of the Library and its dependency upon public funding, which plagued the institution throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century. Finally, using historic library loan records from the nineteenth-century Lambton Mechanics’ Institute, Dr Julieanne Lamond (Australian National University) traces the reading habits of Australian politician Matthew Charlton, highlighting the potential (and limitations) of such sources for informing studies of historical reading practices. Taken together, the three papers assess some of the long-term consequences of the developments explored in the first part of this special issue. Transplanted to a new colonial context – this time, within the Pacific, rather than the Atlantic, world – these papers demonstrate the subscription library’s importance for promoting community building, civic culture and political awakening in urban communities across nineteenth-century Australia. The three papers also reveal some of the limitations of the subscription library movement that came to the fore during the nineteenth century which eventually led to their demise, including their increasing precarity as a ‘public’ yet ‘private’ institution and their inherently exclusive nature. Finally, in contrast to those papers in part one which were primarily concerned with the origins and early development of subscription libraries, the three papers contained within part two also highlight the ways in which proprietary-based libraries changed and developed in response to their local contexts; the library of the Lambton Mechanics’ institute – primarily established as a working man’s library – providing a particularly illuminating example.

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