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## president's report

In recent weeks I have had the great privilege of attending several functions co-hosted by the Medical Alumni Association and Rare Books of Fisher Library. At each of these functions Rare Books have showcased the very special medical books from their collection. With over 60 books on display, they included some of the oldest in the collection (the herbal *Ortus Sanitatis*, by Jacob Meydenbach published in 1491 and later 16th century re-prints of Galen, Celsus and Hippocrates); many classics (Thomas Willis' *Cerebrae Anatome* of 1664; William Harvey's 1660 publication, *De motu cordis*; Laennec's description of the stethoscope in his *Traité de l'auscultation mediate* of 1826); and many of local interest such as the journal of the first fleet surgeon Dr John White published in 1790 and the more recent MD theses of Professors Charles Bickerton Blackburn and Charles Ruthven Bickerton Blackburn submitted in 1903 and 1939 respectively.

These functions were attended by some of our very new alumni (final year students) and some of our more mature alumni and it appeared that all were very impressed with the collection. I never ceased to be amazed by this extraordinary resource that we have at the University of Sydney.

Not only does Fisher Library have an extraordinary collection of books, it has quite an interesting history of its own. The purchase of books was one of the first priorities of the University Senate in 1851. By 1853, the Senate reported that "the foundation has been laid of a library ...it is superior, it is believed, to any other collection in the Colonies". Possibly this accolade is still true today. In 1878, Thomas Walker, a great philanthropist, purchased for the library the book collection of Nicol D Stenhouse, consisting of 4000 volumes. The library accommodation, then in the Senate Room next to the Great Hall was severely stretched.

Thomas Fisher, after whom the current library is named, bequeathed to the University upon his death the sum of £32,000 (in modern terms the equivalent of \$3.2 million) in 1884 for the purpose of "establishing and maintaining a Library". Thomas Fisher was a remarkable man. Born in 1820, the son of two former convicts, orphaned at 12, apprenticed to a shoemaker, Thomas established a profitable shoe making business. Although he had never attended the University, he was clearly impressed by the University and of the value of a higher education.

In 1902 construction began on the original Fisher library. This truly magnificent Gothic sandstone building with its impressive ceiling of cedar beams soon proved too cramped for the ever expanding Library collection. The present library was opened in 1963; the research wing in 1967, while the original Fisher library was renamed the MacLaurin Hall.

As we move towards an electronic age it is even more important that our old books, our heritage, is preserved, appreciated and utilised. More such viewings are planned for 2012 and we will let you know in Radius and on our website.

See Sydney Medical School Alumni website for information about the new Alumni Awards. Voting closes in February 2012.

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