JCPML Exhibition Opens

John Curtin: A Man of Peace. A Time of War is the major permanent exhibition of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML). The official opening of this exhibition by respected political journalist and commentator, Michelle Grattan, on April 20 was timed to lead into Australians' observance of Anzac Day.

Featuring documents, photographs, moving footage and artifacts from John Curtin's life, the exhibition was developed in conjunction with the National Archives of Australia and the material has been drawn mainly from the collections of the National Archives and the JCPML. Its establishment as a permanent exhibition at The John Curtin Centre allowed the JCPML to expand the displays to incorporate three-dimensional memorabilia, such as Curtin's personal library of books and Hansards, his writing desk and favourite cigarette case. The exhibition briefly summarises Curtin's life story, then focuses on the achievements and challenges of his period as wartime prime minister from 1941 to 1945. The purpose of the exhibition is to explore the complexities of Curtin's story and interpret a range of views on his role in Australian history in a dynamic, engaging and accessible way.

In the years since World War II, Curtin's appeal to America has been seen as the genesis of Australia's alliance with the United States. His clash with Churchill has been hailed as a milestone on Australia's road to independence. He was also the first prime minister to appoint a press secretary and his career as a journalist and editor influenced the prime minister's relations with the wartime "press circus"—points which Michelle Grattan addressed in her opening speech.

David Black, curatorial adviser to the exhibition and JCPML. Historical Consultant, said: "John Curtin was an unlikely prime minister. He was modest, reserved and austere, often lonely and prone to bouts of dark depression. Yet rarely has any politician enjoyed such universal respect and affection from both sides of the political fence." And according to Prime Minister John Howard: "Most historians rank him amongst Australia's better prime ministers. He showed determination and commitment. The fact that he was prime minister during a war speaks a lot for his ability."

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Putting the show together...

John Curtin is revered by some as Australia’s greatest prime minister. He was leader for less than four years, but those years are amongst the most critical in our history and the impact of his wartime leadership is still being felt today.

To prepare the exhibition for the opening required months of planning and coordination—working with the exhibition designer, set installers, lighting designers, computing and audio-visual specialists.

The majority of the work—unpacking crates, cleaning displays and installation—was accomplished over an intense two week period by a dedicated team of installers supervised by exhibition designer Rosemary Simons and aided by JCPML staff. *

New Book on John Curtin Released

Australia’s first prime ministerial library is pleased to release a new book on John Curtin which gives a glimpse into the life and times of Australia’s wartime prime minister. Written by distinguished historian, author and Curtin biographer, Dr Geoffrey Serle, AO, For Australia and Labor: Prime Minister John Curtin contains photographs drawn from the JCPML’s collection, several of which have rarely been seen. The book contains a helpful glossary of names, a list of further reading and an index.

On April 20 the manuscript of the book was officially deposited with the JCPML. Dr Serle spent several weeks at the JCPML in 1997 as the Inaugural JCPML Visiting Scholar to complete research on the book in which he traces Curtin’s life from his birth in 1885 through his formative years with the Victorian Socialist Party and as editor of the Labor newspaper, Westralian Worker, to his political career as Member for Fremantle and eventual place in Australian history as one of the nation’s greatest prime ministers.

Dr Serle and the JCPML hope that this book will introduce a new generation to a great Australian prime minister.

Geoffrey Serle

Dr Geoffrey Serle, AO, is a highly respected historian, author and John Curtin Biographer. He was general editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography (ADB) from 1975 to 1988 and his contribution to the ADB is highly regarded.

Dr Serle’s books have won several prestigious awards including the Ernest Scott prize and the Age Book of the Year. His published works include: The Golden Age, Sir John Medley and John Monash: A biography.

Michelle Grattan

Michelle Grattan is a well-known and respected political journalist and commentator.

She currently works for the Australian Financial Review in Canberra. Ms Grattan is the co-author of two books: Can Ministers Cope? and Managing Government, and is a regular contributor to Radio National.

Rosemary Simons (left) oversees the installation of the exhibition

Dr Serle (left) chats with Mrs Elsie Macleod, daughter of John Curtin

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