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Inside This Issue

Congratulations 2

On The Move 3

LATT 1998
Constitution 4

COMLA
Column 7

National Libraries: Role and Function

This article seeks to provide general information on the role and function of national libraries.

What exactly is a national library? The concept of a national library is a well established one, and dates back to the 18th century. Traditional national libraries, in essence if not always in name, developed from the large libraries of Europe, many of which had their origins as royal libraries or large private collections. Their pre-eminent collections gave them national status and their growth was aided by laws and regulations, which made it compulsory for copies of books printed in the country to be deposited with them.

In the 19th century, national libraries were established in more than 20 countries as a 'symbol of national pride', and this process continued well into the 20th century, especially in the newly independent nations created since the end of World War II. It is estimated that at the end of the 1980s there were well over one hundred national libraries in the world.

The Library of Congress, The British Library, the National Library of Canada, France's Bibliothèque National, the National Library of Nigeria and the National Library of Ja-

maica are just a few prominent examples. Notwithstanding the existence of so many recognizable examples, however, the matter of definition, what a national library really is, remains a problem.

As one writer notes:

"there is no standard model, national libraries exhibit more variety than any other type of library in the functions they perform".¹

Perhaps the most widely accepted definition of a national library is that formulated at the 16th General Conference of UNESCO held in 1970:

"Libraries which, irrespective of their title, are responsible for acquiring and conserving copies of all significant publications published in the country and functioning as a deposit library, whether by law or under other arrangements. They will also normally perform some of the following functions: produce a national bibliography; hold and keep up to date a large and representative collection of foreign literature, including books about the country; act as a national bibliographical information centre, compile union catalogues; publish the retrospective bibliography".²

Several writers such as K.W. Humpreys³, Maurice Line⁴, and Stephney Ferguson⁵ have defined national libraries in

(Continued on page 6)

The NALIS bill
was assented to
in the Senate on
September 10th, 1998

NALIS

Integration of the relevant Libraries is official. The recommended names for the Board of NALIS are about to go to Cabinet.

After the appointment of the Board the top eighteen administrative posts which have already received Cabinet's approval will be filled.

At this time preparatory work and administrative measures are being undertaken.

LATT's nominee as our representative for the board is **Dr. Margaret Rouse-Jones.**

The National Library Building

Work is well under way at this time. Slabs for the arcade have been laid and it is expected that the completion date of May 1999 still obtains.

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