



QUEANBEYAN NSW



Name: **Mechanics Institute; School of Arts**

Address: 110-112 Monaro Street 1891 - 1927
Crawford Street, 1927 - 1947

The Town: Queanbeyan is a regional centre in the Southern Tablelands in south eastern New South Wales adjacent to the Australian Capital Territory. The town centre is located on the Queanbeyan River, a tributary of the Molonglo River.

The town grew from a squattage held by ex-convict and wealthy inn-keeper, Timothy Beard in the 1820s. Queanbeyan was officially declared a township in 1838 when the population was about 50. The railway reached the town in 1887, just two years after Queanbeyan was proclaimed a municipality. This contributed to the continuing growth of Queanbeyan as an agricultural centre. In this regard William Farrer deserves a mention for his research into wheat varieties and his support by the Queanbeyan community. (A bust of William Farrer can be seen in Farrer Place in Queanbeyan)

Queanbeyan continued to grow as the centre of a successful primary producing district. Today it has extensive light industry businesses, a population of about 40,000 and an economy inextricably linked to that of its recent neighbour, Canberra.

Establishment:

The nineteenth century was the golden age for the self-educated, self-made man seeking further improvement through organisations such as School of Arts and Mechanics Institutes.



The free and compulsory primary education system had produced people who, in their maturity, required groups such as these to further their education.

Much of the initial impulse for a School of Arts was made by the Reverend Alberto Soares. Newly arrived in Queanbeyan in the early 1850s, he established the Church of England Association, the principal aim of which was to form a lending library. It was out of this initiative that the School of Arts was born. However, many attempts were made before success was achieved finally in 1887.

In 1858, Terence Aubrey Murray identified the need for a Mechanics Institute when he spoke at the banquet commemorating the opening of the Queen's Bridge over the Queanbeyan River. A committee was formed with support of station owners from Bungendore to Naas. However, the Institute foundered as Murray failed to deliver the promised series of lectures. The Church of England Reading Room was revived but became a debating society and support dwindled. Later, the Queanbeyan Mutual Improvement Society operated from Wright's store where there were poetry readings and debates.

A second Mechanics Institute established a library and lecture program in three rented rooms in town. This attempt ended when the landlord rented one of the rooms to the Bank of New South Wales and seized the other two with the goods and chattels for unpaid rent (even though the Institute was receiving ten shillings in the pound subsidy at the time).

In 1886, the State Government set aside land for a future School of Arts, and the government subsidy was increased to a pound for a pound. Finally, on the 12 May 1887 the School of Arts was established with Mr G. Tomsitt being elected the first President. However, due to factional interests, lax management and insufficient funds, it wasn't until 1891 that premises were secured with the purchase of the Evans Building in Monaro Street for 225 pounds, and the School of Arts opened its doors there on 21 July of that year. Dr. Patrick Blackall donated 100 books which were well kept (unlike the Institute days when 5 books were used by a drinker in Tattersall's Hotel as a headrest). A Literary and Debating Society was established in conjunction with the School of Arts which addressed topical questions such as whether or not women should be allowed the vote. A Music and Dramatic Club was also established presenting three plays in one season. In 1891 – 95 Library holdings increased to 701 and membership grew at the rate of one person per week.

Building:

The Evans Building, built of hand-made bricks, was located at 110 -112 Monaro Street. The School prospered and in 1926 was able to raise 3,500 pounds for a new building at 251 Crawford Street. The School was at its peak and the erection of the new building, which opened in 1927, reflected the optimism and good economic times of the mid 1920s that Queanbeyan was then enjoying. The architect was J.W. Sproule who had been attracted to the district by the Canberra induced building boom. He chose the Inter-War Georgian Revival style. As with the Evans building before, the Crawford Street premises provided a library and billiard room and housed several cultural groups such as the dramatic, debating and literary societies. For several years it was the focus for the town's cultural and leisure activities. However, the use of the building declined in the 1930s. This was partly due to the Depression and also to the development of alternative leisure pursuits such as the cinema and





radio. In 1947 the Queanbeyan Council bought the building which then served as the Municipal Library from 1947 – 1975. It now houses the Queanbeyan City Council Chambers and local government offices. It is valued by the community for its aesthetic qualities and for its continual use as a meeting place since its construction. It is also a major civic landmark and has been placed on the National Estate Register.



The Evans Building in Monaro Street now houses the Queanbeyan Age and political offices but prior to this, it was home to the popular School of Arts Cafe which offered cabaret style entertainment to the people of Queanbeyan and Canberra from 1983-2000. Mr Webb, Member for Monaro, spoke in the NSW Parliament of the “sad occasion” of the Cafe’s closure and said that it had put Queanbeyan on the nation’s cultural map.

Acknowledgements:

Queanbeyan Municipal Library

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