The children run by, iPods in ears, hurrying to the rhythms of their twenty-first-century technologies. These children are the sixth generation to have lived in this house, which is right in the heart of the Hamilton region, but surely the first to have been driven so.

Like the children, I have the privilege of living in a house full of stories. Let me introduce you to some of them. Come with me to what I consider to be the heart of this house: an old library which reflects the interests of two of the pioneers of 'Australia Felix': Samuel Pratt Winter and Samuel Winter Cooke.

The doors of the library are small and glass-panelled, with small brass doorknobs. One pane of glass alludes to a long and jolly evening. It is inscribed with the name Jules Renard L’anvers and is accompanied by a cartoon of a whiskered gentleman, etched, according to family tradition, with a diamond ring. We step up into the room and are struck by its intimate size, about that of a good size stone hut, which, indeed, it was. The two alcoves on each side of the fireplace were once windows, and the fireplace itself is large enough for a good log fire, with enough room, maybe, to hang a billy. The room is divided into two. The larger section has the fireplace and, through an arch, the smaller space has a door that once led out to the verandah. In the late 1880s, Patrick Aylmer, the station carpenter, lined three of the walls with beautiful blackwood bookcases and cupboards and placed among them a long tapestry-covered sofa.

From 1837, Samuel Pratt Winter gathered books for himself, his friends and for the men who worked for him. Three thousand books in all are crammed onto the shelves and piled in the cupboards. Food for the brain; books with which to pass long winter evenings or quiet summer days. Books on science and religion, encyclopedias and travel books, poetry and great literature, school books and books of instruction. Included too are Hansards and writings from the Colony. Orphaned and aged eighteen, Samuel Pratt Winter left his home in Ireland to journey to Van Diemen’s Land. There he worked under the supervision of an Anglo-Irish family with whom he prospered. On hearing the reports by Major Thomas Mitchell of the good country he had found to the south of the Murray River, Winter crossed Bass Strait with his own stock, to seek land in ‘Australia Felix’. He arrived on the Wannon River in 1837, to be joined by his two brothers and a sister. He began building this homestead in 1845, and throughout his life he was able to contain the demands of farming enough to travel widely. He remained a bachelor until the end, and during his travels he collected books and paintings to bring home.

Winter’s particular interests were travel and natural history. He had a large collection of travel books, Baedekars...
especially, and travel maps. He called himself an agnostic, but his interest in natural history led him to ponder the links between science and religion, no doubt pondering the great debate that Charles Darwin had begun after the publication of his famous book in 1859. Winter’s great friend the Reverend Father Julian Tenison-Woods was a frequent visitor and used this collection of books while writing his papers on geology and paleontology for Australian and overseas journals.

To the right of the fireplace, the two top shelves of the south wall reflect the commitment of Samuel Winter Cooke to his church and community. They are filled with books of country sermons and biblical exegesis. Yet travelling down the shelves, passing the green-tassled bugle and mouldy tin of bulky beef that have been added as relics of World War I, we find The Art of Travel, a volume considered indispensable to the nineteenth-century traveller. Winter Cooke was the second son of Samuel Winter’s sister Arbella and her husband, Cecil Pybus Cooke. He inherited his uncle’s property in 1878, somewhat unexpectedly, and gave up his law practice in Melbourne to become a farmer. His collection shows that he had an interest in antiquarian books, including a leather-bound sixteenth-century volume called Worthies, featuring illustrations of various worthy gentlemen. There are gold-embossed leather-bound books and books written in French, German and Greek. Tucked in to the smaller shelves are many tiny books, including one bound with covers made from the timber of the Mary Rose sailing ship. Winter Cooke seemed to share his uncle’s interest in natural history, for we find a shelf of stuffed Australian birds and a copy of Gilbert White’s ode to English nature, The Natural History of Selbourne. We also find volumes of poetry by Scott, Byron, Longfellow, Tennyson and Shakespeare.

Through the arch, and beside a small collection of modern day local histories, are the stately rows of Hansards—black for Victoria and red for the Federal Parliament. Gibbons’ Rise and Fall of the Roman Empire hides behind a display of brasses together with a series of books printed especially for journeymen—the ‘Everyman’s Library’. This series was shipped out especially for the farm workers entering the men’s hut library, but now they spend their days beneath a large framed etching of ‘The Iron Duke’ (Duke of Wellington). In the cupboard below are some faded flags—the Royal Ensign, the Union Jack and more—together with piles of newspapers, saved because they tell of significant events both in the Colony and the world at large. Here we find pages from Punch alongside pages from the Illustrated London News. On the west wall, in a corner, is a collection of early Australian books and down at floor level is a very early edition of the Encyclopaedia Britannica.

Elsewhere in the library, we find a set of novels by Charles Dickens and a copy of The Moonstone by Wilkie Collins, rubbing shoulders with Mrs Gaskell’s Wives and Daughters. The library’s visitors’ book has been signed by a number of writers, including Ada Cambridge and T.A.Browne. In the centre of the room is a sturdy round table, and there are leather chairs on each side of the fireplace. Some early photography hangs on the walls, and pottery, china and memorabilia is displayed on the shelves.

Of course, each generation of Winter Cookes who have lived in this house has added to the collection of books
and memorabilia that is now spread throughout the house. However, I hope I have been able to convey something of the warm feeling I get when I enter that rather dusty old room at the heart of the collection. Like the man who started the collection, I have a passion for books and history, and the old library is a small jewel of the past, in these technological times. No doubt, the books reflect an era that is long gone, but they still contain ideas and inspirations that I think my grandchildren may one day discover and understand for themselves.

**Endnotes**

1 ‘Australia Felix’ was the name given to much of western Victoria by the explorer Thomas Mitchell, who traversed the area in 1836.

2 Jules Renard (1833-1898), wool broker and merchant

3 For information about Patrick Aylmer, see The Brown Land Was Green, by Mavis Thorpe Clarke, a descendant of the Aylmer family.

4 Rev. Julian E Tenison -Woods (1832-1889) was a Catholic priest, educationist and scientist

5 Wilkie Collins (1824-1889) English novelist, playwright and writer of short stories.

6 This was Mrs Gaskell’s last, unfinished novel. She is also known as the publisher of The Cornhill Magazine, 1864-6

7 Ada Cambridge (1844-1926) was a writer and wife of Reverend George Cross, Rector of Coleraine.

8 T.A. Browne (1826-1915) was better known by his penname, Rolf Boldrewood. He was a pastoralist, police magistrate, gold commissioner and novelist.

Catharine Winter Cooke is married to Samuel Winter Cooke who is a fifth generations farmer on a property first established by Samuel Pratt Winter in 1837.