

The Role of Libraries in Shaping the Humanities: Australia in the 1950s and '60s

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Abstract

Libraries have long been crucial institutions for the humanities. However, rarely have humanities scholars reflected on how central libraries have been historically to their research and scholarship. As digitization of library and archival materials accelerate it is timely that humanities scholars reflect more substantially on the roles of these institutions. This article starts from the premise that humanities scholarship is a networked activity in which libraries, universities and a range of other institutions play crucial but changing roles in sustaining this work.

To explore this argument, two major research libraries in Australia in the 1950s and '60s are discussed- the Mitchell Library located in the heart of Sydney and the National Library of Australia located in the capital city of Canberra. With both libraries occupying iconic buildings erected in very different eras, they presented themselves physically as worthy of their claim to national leadership. Their status as well as the actual physical spaces of the libraries played significant roles in shaping how humanities research, particularly in fields like history and literature, was conducted within them in this period as well as the scholarly persona of those undertaking this research. Similarly, the seemingly quotidian practices, such as collection management and acquisition policies, of such libraries were central to the moulding of modern research cultures of the Australian humanities and to the formation of particular fields of study.

The Role of Libraries in Shaping the Humanities: Australia in the 1950s and '60s¹

Introduction

This article explores ways in which research libraries increasingly shaped humanities scholarship in the twentieth century. It argues that such institutions actively contributed to the type of studies and scholarship undertaken, as well as to the fashioning of the personae of the humanities scholar in this period. It draws on a broader study being conducted in Australia of humanities scholarship as a networked activity in the second half of the twentieth century.² As such it challenges the narrative frequently told of the humanities scholar in Australia as being typically a sole operator who was required increasingly in the last few decades of the twentieth century, and into the twenty-first, to adopt the science model of research.³ The article looks at how the creativity of humanities scholarship historically has not just the work of individual scholars but the work of a network of cultures and institutions that needs to be understood as much more central to this creativity than simply being infrastructural support.

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I wish to acknowledge the importance of Bruno Latour's work in science studies to my concern with institutions of the humanities, their interlocking character and importance to public trust in the humanities. See Bruno Latour, *An Inquiry into Modes of Existence. An Anthropology of the Moderns*, trans. Catherine Porter (Cambridge, MASS: Harvard University Press, 2013). See also Stephen Muecke, "An Ecology of Institutions: Recomposing the Humanities," *New Literary History* 47, Nos 2&3 (2016): 231-248.

² This broader study is funded by the Australian Research Council; the work on libraries was also funded in part by a Fellowship from the National Library of Australia. Three institutions are being studied: libraries, universities and learned societies in Australia in the second half of the twentieth century

³ This is a narrative that emerged in the 1950s in Australia as humanities scholars worried about the changes occurring in universities as posing a threat to traditional ways of doing humanities scholarship. These concerns became more pressing in the 1980s as the federal government began to be more active in developing research policy and humanities scholars spoke of the increased dominance of the "science model". See for example: J.P. Hardy to R.M.Crawford, 8 July 1982, Crawford Papers, University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) 1991.0113, 9:1:28

This more general concern is pursued by examining the particular example of how two major research libraries contributed to the development of historical and literary scholarship in Australia in the 1950s and '60s. These libraries were both seen as national institutions at the time and vied with each other for primacy in this role: the Mitchell Library, the research arm of the State Library of New South Wales located in Sydney, and the National Library of Australia located in Canberra, Australia's capital city. Both were creating major collections of private papers and other historical documents relating to the history of Australia and to the development of Australian literature; the Mitchell Library was developing too a major collection on the history of the Pacific region as was the National Library with more of a concentration on Asia.⁴

Humanities scholars frequently mention individual librarians and archivists in their acknowledgements of those who have helped in the production of their manuscripts. However, rarely have they reflected on just how central libraries and archives are to their research. In Australia this has changed to some extent in recent years as humanities scholars, in the context of the rapid emergence of digital humanities, argue to government that libraries and archives are crucial infrastructure for the humanities and should be supported as such by public funds. But this development so far has not prompted scholars in Australia, or elsewhere, to reflect in any substantial or critical fashion upon how these institutions have been centrally involved in shaping

⁴ Several other cities in Australia have significant research collections with the State Library of Victoria being the next biggest in terms of Australiana collections. But in the 1950s and '60s the Mitchell and the National Libraries held the largest collections and were competing with each other in claims to be the National Library.

humanities scholarship over the years rather than simply providing support as crucial infrastructure.⁵

Recent work in critical archival studies over the last two decades provides several leads as to how to address this lacunae. In arguments relevant to both archives as well as the manuscript and private papers collections of research libraries, scholars in this field have analyzed the cataloguing and descriptive practices of staff. As Wendy Duff and Vernon Harris, among many others, have argued about archives:

Personal histories, institutional cultures, gender dynamics, class relations, and many other dimensions of meaning-construction are already at play in the processes of records description. Every representation, every model of description, is biased because it reflects a particular world-view and is constructed to meet specific purposes. ... What we choose to stress and what we choose to ignore is always and unavoidably subjective, and the value judgments that archivists make affect in turn how our researchers find, perceive and use records.⁶

In pursuing such concerns, critical archival studies are particularly focused on how personal and institutional frameworks shape the way in which materials are selected

⁵ A few notable exceptions include Arlette Farge's excellent book, *The Allure of the Archives*, trans. Thomas Scott Railton (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2013) and Antoinette M. Burton (ed.) *Archive Stories. Facts, Fictions and the Writing of History* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2005). In addition, Peter Cochrane (ed.) *Remarkable Occurrences. The National Library of Australia's First 100 Years 1901-2001* (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001) contains excellent celebratory essays on that Library's collections. But very few contributors to these books reflect on the actual shaping of their scholarship by research libraries and archives.

⁶ Wendy Duff and Verne Harris, "Stories and Names. Archival Descriptions as Narrating Real and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2, (2002): 263-285, 275.

and made accessible to scholars and hence how these particular world-views thereby shape the work of researchers using archives. They seek to use this perspective to open up archives to other forms of representation and other voices than those of the most powerful.

This paper utilizes insights from this now vibrant field of critical archival studies to reflect on how the special collections sections of two major research libraries have shaped humanities research in Australia.⁷ But it puts less of an emphasis on the concept of bias to stress the ways in which the practices of research libraries shape humanities scholarship in productive as well as problematic ways by the forms of classification used, how materials are catalogued and described in particular ways and what materials are collect or retained. This shaping of knowledge needs to be made more transparent, but while revealing biases, it should also be about giving credit to the importance of the work of librarians and archivists – and the spaces they work in and support - in being fundamental to the authority, content, ways of thinking, assumptions and sense of identity of those participating in humanities scholarship.⁸

Recent work in library and archival studies has also opened up an interesting field of investigation into materiality and archives with a focus to date being primarily on the

⁷ Both institutions discussed in this paper are formally designated as libraries but their holdings include substantial special collections or archives of original documents, historical objects and manuscripts of institutions and individuals. Official archives of government papers and documents exist separately nationally and as state institutions.

⁸ This argument about the need for humanities scholars to recognize the work and expertise of librarians and archivists has been made by a number of scholars in archival studies in recent years, but their focus tends to be on recognizing archival studies rather than archivists' contributions to humanities scholarship. For example, Michelle Caswell, "'The Archive' is Not An Archives: Acknowledging the Intellectual Contributions of Archival Studies," *Reconstruction* 16, no. 1 (2016), <https://escholarship.org/uc/item/7bn4v1fk> [8/2/17, 2:47:53].

materiality of the records studied by library and archive users.⁹ This article too is interested in materiality but, in this case, of libraries themselves; it looks at how the buildings and spaces of these institutions, as well as the daily practices of librarians, shape humanities research. As Pieter Huistra notes in his study of the Feith archives in Groningen, just as laboratories and fieldwork are crucial to the formation of a discipline in scientific knowledge, so too in the humanities “space matters”.¹⁰ A focus on the physicality of library buildings draws attention to the way in which they shape the nature of the scholarship that takes place within them and the scholarly identity or personae in the humanities. This perspective extends the work of critical archival studies to enable further discussion about the role of such institutions in the formation of particular disciplines and about the way in which libraries have become essential to the public credibility of modern humanities research. The following two sections of this paper look at the buildings of the two libraries to be discussed here to develop this argument. It then goes on to examine the histories of their collection processes and daily practices of collection management to pursue a more general discussion of how libraries have shaped humanities scholarship, focusing in this instance on Australian historical and literary studies and on Asia and Pacific studies.

The focus is on the 1950s and ‘60s as a time when the two libraries considered were involved in major collection gathering and the roles of librarians were changing and becoming increasingly professionalized. This was a time too of major changes in

⁹In the context of the increased digitization of archival records, scholars, such as Maryanne Dever, have sought to argue for the importance of material literacy in which scholars develop a fine-tuned sensitivity to the work that paper does in the archive. Maryanne Dever, “Provocations on the pleasures of archival paper,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 41, no. 3 (2013): 173 – 182, 179, 180.

¹⁰ Pieter Huistra, “The Documents of Feith. The Centralization of the Archive in Nineteenth-Century Historiography,” in *The Making of the Humanities, vol. II. From Early Modern to Modern Disciplines*, ed. Rens Bod, Jaap Maat and Thijs Westeijn (Amsterdam: Amsterdam University Press, 2012), 357-375, 357.

humanities teaching and scholarship in Australian universities with the emergence of Australian history, Australian literature and Asian studies as significant features of that change. The expansion of universities in Australia after the Second World War was described in 1959 by the Australian Humanities Research Council, the predecessor to the Australian Academy of the Humanities, as ‘feverish’.¹¹ While this was particularly in the scientific and technological fields, it was also true of Arts faculties with an increased demand for additional teachers in public schools being one of the drivers for this development. With the expansion of Arts faculties more professors were appointed¹² and greater specialization became possible. Australian history, Australian literature and Asia and Pacific studies appeared slowly as subjects in their own right in universities. As Stuart Macintyre and Julian Thomas emphasize in their discussion of the historiography of Australian history, such developments were not straightforward, linear processes. But the development of library resources in terms of book collections as well as research collections, such as manuscripts and private papers, were essential conditions of possibility for their emergence.

Library buildings: The Mitchell Library

Figure 1. The Mitchell Library, Sydney

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<https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:MitchellLibrarySydney.JPG>

The Mitchell wing of the then Public Library of New South Wales was opened in 1910 in Sydney. It had been built in response to the major donation of Australiana and

¹¹ J.J. Auchmuty and A.N. Jeffares, ‘Australian Universities: The Historical Background’ in A. Grenfell Price (ed.), *The Humanities in Australia. A Survey with special reference to the Universities* (Sydney: Angus and Robertson, 1959), 14-33, 31.

¹² In Australia, many departments had only one professor who was also the head of the department in the 1940s. This began to change in the 1950s.

other materials by David Scott Mitchell, a keen collector and the recipient of an inheritance at a relatively early age that enabled him to devote much of his life to this interest. What is now known as the Mitchell building, however, was not fully built until 1942, with the assistance along the way of another enthusiastic, wealthy collector, William Dixson. The Public Library had acquired Australiana materials in the late nineteenth century, spurred on by growing national sentiment, but now with these donations of substantial research collections and its new building, the Mitchell Library was increasingly claimed to be a national institution - if not the national library - by its advocates, staff and trustees.

Built of yellow Sydney sandstone but echoing features of the British Museum (and Library at the time), this building continues to be loved by the public and scholars alike for its decorated brass doors, stately vestibule, reading and other public spaces with warm timber furnishings, stained glass windows, marble corridors and solid wooden furniture. Scholars such as Greg Denning, a highly respected Australian cultural historian, have written in reverential tones about its impact on their work. Denning spoke of “lov[ing] the walk down the corridor past the Librarian’s office to the old Reading Room”,¹³ of treasuring its space and the colleagues he would see there. In doing so, he was weaving the effects of these particular spaces into the story of his scholarship, into how he thought and wrote. He identified the silence, the grandness of the spaces, the community they created, the sense of scholarship and the pleasures of reading that such libraries have conveyed and supported. At the same time his reflections on a love of libraries were conveying a story of the authority of

¹³ Greg Denning quoted in Elizabeth Ellis, “An Ambitious Endeavour. The Mitchell Library in the 21st Century,” *Upfront. Journal of the Friends and Supporters of the State Library of New South Wales* 15, no. 1 (2003): 6-7, 6.

the historian relying on the strength of their collections and on the way their spaces facilitated quiet concentration, dedicated scholarship and focused thought.

Figure 2. The Mitchell Library's Friends Room, previously the Readers' Room

Author's own photograph

Similarly, Tom Griffiths, a distinguished contemporary Australian scholar who works extensively in the Mitchell and National libraries, talks of “act[s] of pilgrimage” with “rituals and protocols of access, the reverent quiet of the room” that still enable humanities scholars today to enjoy “silent communion” with the papers of such libraries and archives.¹⁴ The rituals that Tom Griffiths describes prepare the researcher for patient, meticulous reading as well as for the obstacles and the momentary discoveries of the unexpected that are characteristic of how historical research is still performed in the physical spaces of research libraries. As Arlette Farge notes, working among historical documents is necessarily “slow work”.¹⁵ But as she also comments, the slowness of hands and thought is also a source of creativity. The inventiveness of the scholar begins with the work of creating their own archive, collating - through copying by hand, photocopying, scanning electronically - materials to be juxtaposed with other materials in their research notebooks that weren't necessarily together before. Similarly, other materials are culled or discarded.

Carla Hesse too has referred to the way libraries, particularly in the past, conveyed and facilitated a “synchronous form of community and a space for reflexivity”, for the

¹⁴ Tom Griffiths, *The Art of Time Travel. Historians and their Craft* (Carlton, Vic.: Black Inc, 2016), 11.

¹⁵ Arlette Farge, *The Allure of the Archives*, 55.

“slow form of exchange” where there is time and space for reflection and debate.¹⁶

The dominance of these physical and social spaces in enabling the humanities in the 1950s and '60s had real effects in terms of how its research and scholarship was conducted; they were productive forces in what Chris Otto calls “the slow formation of ... sensibilities”, the “soft instilling” of capacities.¹⁷ These spaces shaped how humanities scholars worked and thought, and the forms of social exchange that sustained them. Libraries, in this sense, are spaces in which the humanities were typically performed as ways of knowing and learning in the twentieth century - up until the 1970s at least - just as laboratories have been seen as iconic spaces for the performance of science.

The features of the Mitchell Library to which past and present scholars refer so lovingly, then, not only reflected certain historical notions of knowledge-making in the humanities at that time, but were institutionalizing them, giving them material form. The building and its spaces celebrated but also were strengthening a particular culture of knowledge-making with characteristic practices, ways of mind and understandings of the self as a humanities scholar. They both authorized and rendered them possible.

Figure 3. The Mitchell Library’s corridor to the Reading Room of the Mitchell Library in the 1950s and ‘60s

Author’s own photograph

¹⁶ Carla Hesse, “Humanities and the Library in the Digital Age”, in *What Happened to the Humanities?* ed. Alvin Kernan (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1997), 107-121, 114 – 115.

¹⁷Chris Otto, *The Victorian Eye. A Political History of Light and Vision in Britain, 1800 – 1910* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 60-61.

But these rituals of scholarship at the Mitchell in the 1950s and '60s were tucked away in a dedicated, lovely room down the corridor that Denning celebrated, giving a sense of specialness to those who worked there. The sight of fellow scholars quietly working in its large and well-furnished reading room in this august building provided an arena in which humanities research could be understood by the participants to be a national endeavour to which only an elite, a community of fellow scholars, could contribute. What we need to recognize here is that, at the same time as this imaginary performed in the spaces of the Library sustained a humanities scholarly self, it privileged certain identities and ways of knowing and excluded others. As scholars working in the field of critical archival studies have pointed out in recent years – in an argument that is not only relevant to the work of archivists but particularly to manuscript or special collections librarians - these sorts of spaces sustained a specific form of class and masculine identity. Library staff have typically been either excluded from mention in such celebrations of the spaces of libraries and the communities to be found there or positioned as feminized assistants servicing scholars, often explicitly in the language of ‘handmaidens’, a term which even library staff at the time used about themselves.¹⁸ Gendered fantasies of male library users about this feminine labour force were occasionally too overtly enjoyed by scholars as in the 1990 memoirs of one of Australia’s most well-known historians working in this period, Manning Clark. He tells a story, apparently quite unselfconsciously, of young men in the Mitchell Library competing as to who could be first each day to look up the skirt of the senior librarian to see her underwear as she climbed steps to fetch books for them.¹⁹

¹⁸ Casswell, “‘The Archive’ is Not An Archives,” para. 24.

¹⁹ Manning Clark, *The Quest for Grace* (Ringwood, Vic.: Viking, 1990), 167. Clark’s story has been criticized as flawed historically by Sylvia Martin in her biography of the librarian who Clark dishonours in this way: *Ida Leeson. A life* (Crows Nest, NSW: Allen and Unwin, 2006), 186.

The spaces of such research libraries, then, shaped humanities scholarship in a range of ways in terms of modes of thought, patterns of work and sense of self in the 1950s and '60s. This scholarship was about intensive, slow, rigorous, empirical work undertaken within a small elite community that was primarily male and scholarly, with little attention being paid to the work of the librarians themselves. Their work was mostly invisible, behind closed doors and in basements, except when they were on the floor of the reading rooms seen to be there in a service capacity only. This culture of focus on the quiet, concentrated work of the scholar conveyed a sense of the authority for the work being conducted by them through the intensity of the working environment and the wealth of resources being provided, physical and personal.

Library buildings II: The National Library of Australia

Figure 4. The National Library of Australia, Canberra

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https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:National_Library_of_Australia,_ACT_-_perspective_controlled.jpg

The new building for the National Library of Australia (NLA) opened as late as 1968 but was designed with a commitment to also providing just such spaces for scholars. The Library itself was first established as a parliamentary and commonwealth library following the formation of the new Commonwealth of Australia in 1901. It was not until 1960 that these two functions were separated and the Government of the day affirmed the National Library as a nation-building project that would contribute strongly to ensuring that Canberra was appropriately recognized as the capital city of Australia.

The national aspirations for the new building were clearly articulated in its Greco-Roman design. But unlike the Mitchell Library with the British Library as its guide, the Washington Library of Congress had been the NLA's model from the early years of the Commonwealth. This was also spelt out in the early 1960s in the architectural brief for the new building from the National Capital Development Commission.²⁰

Walter Bunning, the architect who was to work full-time on the building for almost seven years, was enthusiastic about his brief. He believed that a fine building for the Library was essential if it were to fulfill its role as a national building and for the national aspiration it would articulate. He explained shortly after it had been opened that he had tried to create a timeless building not a “with-it” building ... one that “has to last for centuries”.²¹ He also set out to ensure the internal features of the building would create “a spacious atmosphere of scale and dignity befitting a public building of national significance” and it had to be appropriate for a “major reference and research institution”.²²

Figure 5. The National Library of Australia, entrance foyer

Author's own photograph

Bunning was sensitive too to the experience of people working in the Library – both librarians and users - so that those “inside have a calm serene outlook ideal for working and studying”.²³ The building was planned down to the most minute detail to

²⁰ National Development Development [sic] Commission, National Library of Australia, Canberra, ACT, Architectural Brief. No. C 24/61, Revised 10.11.61, C.A. Burmester Papers, National Library of Australia (hereafter NLA), MS 2321/5/2, file: National Library Building.

²¹ “End of a Dream – the story of the National Library,” no date but clearly 1968 – a few days after Library opening, 3, Walter Bunning Papers, NLA, MS 5543/3/5.

²² National Development Development [sic] Commission, National Library of Australia, Canberra, A.C.T. Architectural Brief, No. C 24/61, Revised 10.11.61, C.A. Burmester papers, NLA, MS2321/5/2, file: National Library Building.

²³ “End of a Dream,” Walter Bunning Papers, NLA MS2321/5/4, 2.

have both the gravitas and the functionality to make it a space for concentrated work and reflection, a thought-producing environment - conveying the feeling that those using its spaces were engaging in something that was bigger than themselves, part of a long history of thought and reflection. But it was also to be modern and exciting with grand artworks commissioned mostly from Australian contemporary artists, such as Leonard French's stained glass windows, strikingly placed in the foyer, and Tom Bass's huge metal sculpture looming over the Library's entrance. The building's monumental character gave expression to an inspiration for a modern nation, a liberal democratic culture, based on reasoned public discourse. And its beauty and quiet grandeur, both in terms of the building and its internal spaces, articulated a commitment to what humanities scholar, Rey Chow, refers to as the "pleasures of the mental labour".²⁴

The stature of the building too announced the value of this culture to the national interest through its magisterial presence and internal grandeur. So did its location on the shores of Lake Burley Griffin, within what is still referred to as the "Parliamentary Triangle", and alongside where it was planned at that time to build a new parliament house.²⁵ The Library's solidity enabled it to go on transmitting these ways of knowing and scholarly practices - and the sense of their public significance - to new generations of scholars as well as supporting those already schooled in the associated habits of mind to continue to practice them there - and experience their pleasures.

²⁴ Rey Chow, "An Addiction from which we never get free," *New Literary History* 36, No.1 (2005): 47-55, 53.

²⁵ The new Parliament House was eventually built higher up on a small hill behind the Library but other buildings appropriate to this initial vision of the triangle were soon under construction alongside on the Lake's foreshore, including the High Court of Australia and the National Gallery of Art.

Figure 6. The National Library of Australia, main reading room

Author's own photograph

Its grand, well-furnished, main reading room on the ground floor of the Library conveyed this sense to the general public who visited and studied there. As National Librarian, Harold White, explained to *The Canberra Times* in 1966, one of the objects of the library's plan was to "give the public some concept of what a research institution of this kind is".²⁶ Humanities scholarship could be seen to be performed in this space. But the NLA also had a number of exclusive rooms on its upper floors for 'advanced' scholars such as its manuscripts room with beautiful Australian red cedar wall-paneling for use by scholars wishing to access its special collections. Just as with the Mitchell Library's old reading room, this manuscripts room was away from public view as other specialist rooms on upper floors, such as for the Asian collection, would be a few years later. A feeling of exclusivity was heightened by readers' tickets for the special collection rooms that were only provided to those who could establish their bona fide credentials with men dominating the early recipients.²⁷ Security procedures for these rooms too spoke of only those "in the know" being the true inheritors of these ways of knowing and habits of mind as did the silence and stillness of even the main reference room of this Library. The new building of this national

²⁶ *The Canberra Times*, Thursday 31 March 1966:10.

²⁷ According to Graeme Powell only 24 women were represented among the first 100 readers: "The readers of '68," *National Library of Australia News* 12, 2 (2001): 14-16, 16. Powell also notes that the National Librarian at the time, Harold White, was a bit alarmed at the popularity of the Library with undergraduate and school students when it first opened making the library not quite the quiet scholarly library of their dreams. This points to how the whole library, including its main reference room, was conceptualized by its early custodians as a place to conduct and celebrate a particular kind of scholarly work. Powell adds that the Library did start to more closely accord with this early vision as more scholars started to use it.

library announced a story, to the nation as well as its scholars, of humanities knowledge being produced by an elite, a special few, in the interests of the nation.²⁸

Library knowledge-making practices I: The National Library of Australia

While the building was clearly significant to the way in which the National Library from the late 1960s was to contribute to a particular set of practices for humanities research and scholarship, particularly in the fields of Australian history, literature and the Asia Pacific - symbolically as well as practically - other initiatives were equally important that preceded and then continued after its opening. The apparently more quotidian practices of institution-building deployed by staff were fundamental to its functioning but also to how it played a major role in the shaping of knowledge-making in the historical, literary and regional studies fields of the humanities at this time. It was in the area of collection building that the National Library had a particularly notable impact in key areas of humanities research in Australia in the 1950s and '60s.

The National Library's oral history interviews and personal papers collections provide important documentation of the practices of the Library in building up its collections in the 1950s and '60s. The stories, for example, of Cliff Burmester, who was eventually to become Chief Reference Officer, and for the last few years of his career, Assistant National Librarian, and of Pauline Fanning, who held a number of positions during her long career in the Library, including briefly as the Director of the

²⁸ For a time in the 1970s the Library sought to enhance its role as an institution supporting science but this did not become a major focus for a variety of reasons. See M. Middleton, "Scientific and Technological Services in Australia: I, History and Development," *Australian Academic and Research Libraries*, 37, 2 (2006): 111-135.

Australian National Humanities Library, reveal what at one level could be seen as the serendipitous nature of collections-building, particularly in the years immediately after the Second World War and into the 1960s.²⁹ A number of librarians over the years have also written about the Library's collection development practices. Graeme Powell, for instance, has documented this carefully in the cases of, for example, the papers of Alfred Deakin, Australia's first Prime Minister, and of Henry Handel Richardson, a great, female Australian writer.³⁰ Powell demonstrates the involvement of a large number of individuals and networks of relationships in the pursuit of and negotiations over gaining these collections.

To talk about serendipity in these processes does not mean that they were by any means simply ad hoc, accidental. There was great skill, knowledge and judgement involved as was the case even with the more routine processes such as carefully scanning published international catalogues of collections on a regular basis to identify potential purchases for the Library.³¹ But often the personal characteristics of librarians and their ability to get on (or not) with certain key donors of particular 'formed collections'³² were important too, as was the case with the famed collection of E.A. Petherick. Acquired by the Commonwealth Government in 1909 for what was then the parliamentary library of the new Commonwealth, this extensive collection of books, manuscripts, pamphlets, maps and prints on Australia and the Pacific wasn't

²⁹ Oral history interview with C.A. Burmester by Alec Bolton, NLA, ORAL TRC 2359; Oral history interview with Pauline Fanning by Alec Bolton, NLA, ORAL TRC 2248.

³⁰ Graeme Powell, "Modes of Acquisition: The Growth of the Manuscript Collection of the National Library of Australia," *Australian Academic and Research Libraries* 22, No.1 (1991): 74-80; Graeme Powell, "Building an Archive: The H.H. Richardson Papers in the National Library of Australia," *Australian Literary Studies* 18, No. 3 (1998): 213-218.

³¹ This was referred to in the Burmester and Fanning oral history interviews and commenced under the leadership of Kenneth Binns who was head of the Commonwealth National Library up until his retirement in 1947.

³² Collections that had been formed by individuals for their own interest and benefit, offered for sale or donation, frequently through international booksellers.

fully appreciated until Kenneth Binns was appointed to the Library in 1911. He saw the collection's potential to form the basis of an Australiana research section for the parliamentary library. He also formed a strong relationship with Petherick, a rather prickly character, thereby ensuring that the Library would receive substantial additions to this collection after Petherick's death.

Being in the right place at the right time played an important role in Cliff Burmester gaining the trust of Leon Kashnor to bring his collection of seventeenth and eighteenth century political and economic manuscripts from London to the National Library in the 1950s as was his having a personal interest in economic and political history.³³ And networks of relationships and the presence of the Library's Liaison Office in London were crucial while negotiations went on for almost 40 years to build the now outstanding collection of Henry Handel Richardson's papers.

The Library was collecting a broad range of materials particularly after the Second World War but it had been developing an Australiana collection ever since the early 1900s. It became more focused on this in the 1920s when it acquired the journal of James Cook and other related manuscripts. This focus intensified after the War. So too the interest in Asia grew, commencing particularly in the 1930s and growing rapidly during the War, assisted in part by the handover of Japanese materials to the Library - confiscated when the Japanese embassy was closed during the War³⁴ - and more generally by the issues faced by Australia during that period. From 1951 an

³³ Peter Cochrane, "Becoming National," in *Remarkable Occurrences, The National Library of Australia's First 100 Years. 1901 - 2001*, ed. Peter Cochrane (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2001), 21-39, 21. Cliff Burmester discusses this success at a number of points in his *Memoirs* and in his Oral History Interview with Alec Bolton.

³⁴ *National Library of Australia Guide to the Collections*, Compiled by C.A. Burmester (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 1982), XXII.

exhaustive collection of Indonesian publications commenced and within two years the Library had committed to the development of major collections in Chinese, Japanese and Korean languages.

Meantime serendipity still prevailed when on several occasions Harold White, as National Librarian in the 1950s and '60s, appealed to the intellectual interests of the Prime Ministers of the time, primarily Robert Menzies, to acquire special publications that had become available such as an original 1297 manuscript of the Magna Carta and the Nichol Smith Eighteenth Century collection.³⁵ The range and number of these initiatives, then and later, certainly justified the vision of the Library as following the “dynamic model” provided by the Library of Congress as the architectural brief for the Library building had specified.³⁶ The National Library was entrepreneurial, actively pursuing collections and developing strong networks to ensure their success rather than simply waiting for donations.³⁷

Up until approximately the mid-1950s, the Library’s active and opportunistic collection building practices had put it “in advance” of local researchers, according to Burmester. Increasingly from about 1956, however, the growing strength of the research profile of the Australian National University (ANU), established in Canberra in 1946, began to test the research resources of the Library. And indeed the interest in the Library from scholars outside the Canberra region, he says, was on the increase

³⁵ C.A. Burmester, *Memoirs*, VII – X, C.A. Burmester Papers, NLA MS 2321/1/4, p.148.

³⁶ National Development Commission, National Library of Australia, Canberra, A.C.T. Architectural Brief, No. C 24/61, Revised 10.11.61, C.A. Burmester papers, NLA, MS2321/5/2, file: National Library Building.

³⁷ This culture still exists in the NLA although their financial capacity to purchase major archives or collections is often a severe limitation. And the days of Prime Ministers handing out funds for such purchases on the basis of personal interest have long passed.

too.³⁸ Moves began to be made for a more systematic approach to acquisition policy in the early 1960s within the National Library itself and through encouraging more collaboration among the main Australian research libraries. Harold White initiated a “Conference on Source Materials for Australian Studies” in Canberra in 1961, with 24 institutions represented and 44 attendees. It was a key moment for the National Library as it increasingly took a leadership role nationally but also in encouraging Australian libraries to develop a more coordinated approach when international competition for collections and particular texts and objects was starting to create significant financial challenges.

It was not all sweet accord at this meeting with disagreements in particular about whether it was best to limit the number of collecting bodies in Australia or whether “the more the merrier” was best.³⁹ But agreement was reached that institutions should inform each other of their current programs of collecting and current fields. And that it was “in the national interest that the work of locating and collecting and reducing [sic] to proper custody Australian source material should be actively and energetically developed”.⁴⁰

In the 1950s the NLA worked closely with academics particularly from the new National University in the acquisition of formed Asian collections giving depth to the holdings for an institution that, internationally, was fairly late into this field compared with other major research libraries particularly of former imperial powers. Together

³⁸ “Acquisition Policy,” C.A. Burmester Papers, no date or author, but seems likely that it is 1956-7 and Burmester the author, NLA MS 2321/2/12.

³⁹ Conference on Source Materials for Australian Studies; Minutes, C.A. Burmester Papers, NLA MS2321/3/2

⁴⁰ Conference on Sources Materials for Australian Studies; Correspondence, Report of Sub-Committee (A) C.A. Burmester Papers, NLA MS2321/3/2.

librarians and Asianist scholars were, as David Walker has remarked, “mould[ing] the development of their discipline”.⁴¹ In the 1960s too the National Library developed a more systematic collection policy for its Asian collection. It appointed a head of the Orientalia Section, as it was then called, and moved in 1964 to ensure that “its Asian collections were increasingly created, maintained and interpreted by staff with sophisticated language skills in the major languages in the region”.⁴²

This brief survey of key features of collection practices in the NLA in the years leading up to and during the 1960s illustrates the importance of an element of serendipity involved in collection building during this period (which of course still plays a role today) as well as of the more customary processes of collection building. Both were about a set of judgements of value and intellectual interest that were being played out and exercised in a skillful manner by the Library’s staff. And in doing so they were creating and delivering on a knowledge-making role in the humanities not just locally but nationally and internationally. They provided the resources but their skills, insights and experience contributed crucially too to the types of projects and the way in which scholarly or advanced research could be conducted as well as to the sorts of stories that could be told on the basis of the materials collected. The personal interests of librarians and the institutional perspectives that then dominated would have shaped the judgements the librarians made on what was and wasn’t important to be collected and led to inevitable distortions, silences, and suppressions in the public record being collected by the National Library. But by the same token the

⁴¹ David Walker, “Studying the Neighbours. The Asian Collections,” in *Remarkable Occurrences*, 163-182,173.

⁴² Walker, “Studying the Neighbours,” 181.

inventiveness, insights and dedication of the librarians need to be seen also as positive contributions to knowledge-making in the humanities at this time.

The National Library's practices also contributed to and shaped the humanities in several other fundamental ways at this particular historical moment. As the Library developed its collections it was strengthening a sense of itself as a research library. Harold White signaled the importance of this understanding of the Library as early as 1956 in his submission to the Paton Committee reviewing the role of the National Library. The Library, he said, has become "conscious of its responsibility as a centre of scholarly research...".⁴³ This development coincided with but also contributed to humanities scholars in Australian universities starting to pay more attention to research and to understand themselves as doing 'research' rather than 'scholarship'. Rather than being focused on erudition and learning as was the case for humanities scholars particularly before the Second World War, they would increasingly understand themselves as doing "original research" and see this as fundamental to the credibility of their work among their peers as well as the general public. Similarly they were starting to conceptualize their work as being about 'projects' and beginning to apply for research funds from the newly established Australian Research Grants Committee.⁴⁴ Crucially they began to see research as being something that they might

⁴³ Submission to the Prime Minister's Committee on the Future Control and Development of the National Library by the Librarian at the request of the Chairman, Professor Paton, Papers of C.A. Burmester, NLA MS2321/1/2 (1956): 4.

⁴⁴ The Australian Research Grants Committee (ARGC) was to note in its Fourth Report for the Triennium 1967-69 that the "concept of a research project does not apply as readily in the humanities and the more humanistic social sciences as it does elsewhere," indicating the slowness and haltingness with which this notion of humanities scholarship changed: *Parliamentary Papers, 1969*, (Canberra: Commonwealth Government Printing Office 1970),16.

do in Australia on Australian and Asia-Pacific topics rather than just in Europe or North America.⁴⁵

Networks of academics and librarians at this time often worked together on the development of and in creating greater interest in collections such as through the joint biennial Nichol Smith Seminar of the National Library and the Australian National University on Eighteenth Century Studies commenced in 1966. The Library also encouraged academics travelling internationally to keep their eyes open for potential collections for the Library.⁴⁶ And in focusing on 'Australiana' and increasingly on collections relating to Asia, the Library was not only making research in these areas possible but being at the forefront of their development.

The emergence of a great national research library in the 1960s contributed centrally, then, to the growing profile and a new sense of authority for humanities research at that time. Scholarly research based on the meticulous studying of 'original' materials had increasingly become the basis of how humanities research, particularly in fields such as history, literature, linguistics, classics, archaeology, Asian studies, asserted credibility and intellectual standing. And the National Library was actively involved in determining the focus of that research with its collection priorities being Australiana and Asian materials. The networks of relationships and practices of forming its collections contributed centrally to knowledge-making in the humanities in Australia as did, of course, the activities of those involved in researching and writing about the collections.

⁴⁵ Comment by Sir Keith Hancock in interview by Stewart Cockburn for his biography on Sir Mark Oliphant; NLA Oral History Collection, KH; 1:1:/5 ORAL TRC 889. (no date).

⁴⁶ Memo White to Burmester, 18/2/63, Subject: Scholars Going Overseas, C.A Burmester Papers, NLA MS2321/2/5, General Papers 1963.

Library knowledge-making practices II: The Mitchell Library

While librarians from the National Library were absorbed primarily in the 1950s and '60s by collection building and taking a leadership role in coordinating this activity throughout Australia, those from the Mitchell Library, with its longer history in collection building, were to become just as focused on how to make its collections accessible to scholars, to its users, during this period.⁴⁷ A concern with accessibility for libraries' collections had begun in the late nineteenth century but accelerated after the Second World War in Australia. Librarianship had begun to be seen as a profession with the need for formal training as techniques were developed to make collections more directly accessible by scholars themselves rather than their relying on librarians to find and identify materials relevant to their work. Partly driven by democratization of the knowledge professions and universities, and the associated increased demands for library resources,⁴⁸ and partly by the expansion of collections and reference materials, the librarian's role shifted from that of preservation to being more about the organization of knowledge and fostering use by others.⁴⁹ Librarians were no longer able to spend as much time working alongside individual scholars

⁴⁷ The NLA also had a strong interest in accessibility throughout its history but its focus in this period was as much on the importance of accessibility to its nation building project and creating nationally-based bibliographical tools.

⁴⁸ Brian H. Fletcher, *Magnificent Obsession. The Story of the Mitchell Library, Sydney* (Crows Nest: Allen and Unwin, 2007), 190, refers to the growing demand for information and for readers' tickets and the increasing numbers attending the Mitchell Library Reading Room. Mounting demand for services can be demonstrated by the fact that in 1958, 596 reader tickets were issued; this more than doubled by 1966/7, with 1245 issued. Fletcher, *Magnificent Obsession*, 253.

⁴⁹ Peter Crisp, "Preface," in *Australian Academic Libraries in the Seventies. Essays in Honour of Dietrich Borchardt*, eds. Harrison Bryan and John Horace (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1984), i-xv.

dispensing their knowledge, experience and insights into their library's collections to individual researchers.

At the end of the Second World War, the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales began to pursue the issue of making its collections more directly accessible by users, requesting initially the preparation of a publication providing a short annotated catalogue of manuscripts to make it possible for library users to find out about the Library's holdings independently of librarians. Some advances were made on this project in the next few years but staffing shortages caused considerable delay. In 1955 the first tentative list of the major holdings of the Mitchell and Dixson collections appeared.⁵⁰ This work accelerated but at the same time so did the size of the Library's collections. In 1963 a staff manual was published announcing a more streamlined approach to the cataloguing of manuscripts that abandoned the previous standard of detailed cataloguing and binding but at the same time established clear protocols to ensure not only the accessibility of materials but how the authenticity of the papers could be ensured by, for example, instructing staff to avoid reorganizing private papers so that the context of specific documents was not altered.⁵¹ This precept of attention to initial context, assumed fundamental to cataloguing, classification and description of records, was to be challenged in later decades, but at that time was seen as of self-evident importance in guaranteeing authenticity.

The Mitchell Library under the leadership of John Metcalfe as State Librarian between 1942 to 1959, and Phyllis Mander Jones, Mitchell Librarian from 1947-1957,

⁵⁰ Fletcher, *Magnificent Obsession*, 174.

⁵¹ S. Mourot, Manuscripts Librarian, *The Mitchell Library, Sydney/ Manuscripts Section Staff Manual* (Sydney: The Public Library of New South Wales, March 1963/ Revised 1964).

was particularly interested in developing classification systems. Through these systems they were seeking to organize knowledge – identifying what keywords might be appropriate to support the work of researchers, providing finding aids that described the materials available, establishing their provenance or context, and so on. Through such practices archivists and research librarians bring certain aspects of collections to the fore and provide a particular narrative about them that shapes how they are approached and experienced by scholars. The documents or objects studied by researchers were to be thereby transformed by their very existence in the library or archive collection - first, by the decision of a librarian or archivist that they were worthy of collecting and, second, by the work that was then to be done on them through various descriptive and cataloguing tools. Greg Denning wrote of the Cook journal in the National Library, MS1 - the manuscript he knew so well - that it was more than just an item in the Library's collection, it was "all that contextualises it and all the bibliographical tools that lead the historian to the totality that MS1 can be".⁵²

As Michelle Caswell notes:

How archivists represent records determines how researchers may access them, and subsequently, which records they use to write histories, make legal decisions, and shape society's views of the past.⁵³

Phyllis Mander Jones played a key role in initiating moves to make its collections more accessible. She also took up an educative role to promote this apparently scholar-driven approach to the Library's collections. In 1952, for example, she sought to stimulate interest in Australian-based research among university students through a

⁵² Greg Denning, "MS1 Cook, J. Holograph Journal," in *Remarkable Occurrences*, 1-19, 9.

⁵³ Caswell, " 'The Archive' is not an Archives," para. 18.

series of lectures on sources at the Mitchell Library for the study of Australian literature.⁵⁴ And she gave public talks and prepared publications over the years on sources for Australian history including a highly regarded publication on locating records of Australian, New Zealand and Pacific interest in the British Isles, published in 1972, based on materials collected by the Australian Joint Copying Project initiated by the National Library and the Mitchell Library in the 1940s.⁵⁵

This growing enthusiasm for a refocused role and ways of operating for major public research libraries was an international movement, promoted in particular by the Carnegie Corporation commencing in the 1920s. Australian librarians at the Mitchell and the National Library were the recipients of Carnegie travelling scholarships in the 1930s and 1940s to study what was happening particularly in America in the professionalization of librarianship. Their travel exposed them to the changing ideas of libraries as educational institutions and as collections of materials, organized intellectually and physically by librarians for direct access by users.⁵⁶

Large-scale initiatives to ensure the most efficient methods of classification and cataloguing of reference and research materials and to enable international consistency and collaboration were also encouraged by UNESCO after the Second World War.⁵⁷ These developments enabled a broader social group to participate in

⁵⁴ "Lectures on Australian literature," University of Sydney, 1952 file, ML MSS 4337, Phyllis Mander Jones Papers, Box 1.

⁵⁵ P. Mander-Jones, ed. *Manuscripts in the British Isles Relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1972).

⁵⁶ Peggy Sullivan, "Carnegie Fellowships for Libraries 1929 - 1942: A microcosm of Carnegie Cooperation and American Library Association Joint Enterprise," *Libraries and Culture* 31, No. 2 (1996): 437 - 441.

⁵⁷ Jean F. Arnot, "Report. International Conference on Cataloguing Principles, Paris, 1961," *The Australian Library Journal* 11, No.1 (1962):13-18.

humanities research. Instead of claims to expertise being dependent on the deep knowledge and reputation - the erudition - of a small scholarly elite, the authority of humanities researchers was to become increasingly seen as reliant on the meticulous nature of their research. Painstaking research of “original sources” pursued by researchers themselves with the assistance of library finding aids and catalogues facilitated and organized a different type of knowledge-making that a broader social group could partake in and be seen to perform in the spaces of a public library. The accessibility of materials also ensured that sources could be checked and the credibility of scholarly claims vouchsafed by peers subsequently working on related or similar projects.

Conclusion

Librarians were increasingly writing about their practices in professional journals in the period reviewed in this paper but what they did not reflect upon was that these everyday practices shaped humanities scholarship in crucial ways. Librarians discussed documentation and bibliographic organization as being at the heart of their techniques. John Metcalfe referred to the “business of classifying as the central, the essential mystery of librarianship”.⁵⁸ But they also saw their work as neutral - facilitating scholarship but not influencing it. Scholars too, while typically politely and even warmly acknowledging the support of individual librarians or archivists, did not pay much attention to the profound influence on their scholarship of the seemingly quotidian practices of librarians through the work of classification, cataloguing, bibliographical descriptions as well as the more high profile activities of

⁵⁸ John Metcalfe, “The Profession of Librarianship,” *The Australia Library Journal* 6, No.4 (1957): 151-160, 157.

collection building in particular areas. Nor did they reflect in any depth on the significance of library buildings in shaping how they worked and understood and felt about what they did.

The belief in neutrality has now been challenged in recent decades by archival and library studies that have focused on the class, gender and racial biases involved in such practices as discussed earlier this paper. However, this paper has explored how it is possible to go further in historicizing what goes on in libraries and archives and to look at the interlocking nature of the institutions in which humanities scholarship is carried out. It raises the possibility of scholars reflecting more self-consciously about their practices and sense of scholarly self as changing historically and shaped by a wide range of institutions of the humanities. Thinking about humanities scholarship as a networked activity in this way suggests that a wide range of institutions are responsible for the credibility as well as the creativity of the humanities. In making this more visible, the possibility arises of creating a conversation about how to work together to secure a dynamic future for the making of the humanities.

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