

ARTICLE



# Of sentimental value: collecting personal diaries from the First World War

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## ABSTRACT

Weeks after the Armistice was declared, Principal Librarian William Ifould of the Public Library of New South Wales recommended to Library Trustees that the institution begin to collect ‘private and official documents’ produced during the war. By early December 1918, advertisements began to appear in Australian and New Zealand newspapers, encouraging returning soldiers to sell their personal diaries to the Library. Known as the European War Collecting Project, this acquisition program was the first of its kind in Australia. This paper explores the Library’s acquisition of personal diaries written by those who served and analyses the appraisal methodologies carried out by State Library staff. This case study underscores the recent archival debate which has re-assessed the role of archivists in assessment, appraisal, preservation (and privileging) of some collections over others and argues that archivists mediate and consequently shape the collections in their institutions.

## KEYWORDS

Mitchell Library; First World War; personal diaries; archival collections

## The creation of an archive

There has been much re-assessment in recent decades of how archives, and consequently, collective memory have been constructed. Authors have challenged the long-held understanding of the archivist’s role as impartial and passive; acquiring and preserving collections for the future interrogation by historians. The post-modern re-assessment of the role of the archivist in ‘mediating and thus shaping the knowledge available in the archives’<sup>1</sup> has been acknowledged; archives have never been neutral institutions.

Archival institutions have played an active role in shaping the way we see the past, making decisions on what to preserve.<sup>2</sup> Joanna Sassoon argues that archives are ‘actively constructed and defined in ways that suit those who are in control of the institutions,’<sup>3</sup> and that there is a ‘need for an understanding of the social and cultural processes by which archival memory is created, shaped and preserved in a range of institutions.’<sup>4</sup> In their 2002 article exploring the theme of archives, records and power, Schwartz and Cook describe archives as social constructs that emulate the ‘social needs of the rulers, governments, businesses, associations and individuals who establish and maintain them.’<sup>5</sup> They conclude that the very nature of determining the significance of material selected, and thereby privileged and preserved, is made within the society that created them. This selection has therefore a profound influence on what is understood as archival

or documentary evidence. An archive is ‘the basis for and validation of the stories we tell ourselves, the story-telling narratives that give cohesion and meaning to individuals, groups and societies.’<sup>6</sup> McIntosh agrees, arguing in his 1998 essay on the Great War and the creation of archives that archivists ‘play a critical role in the creation of society’s memory, and, its logical obverse, in creating silences.’<sup>7</sup>

This paper seeks to give an account of how one Australian institution set about acquiring personal accounts from those who served in the First World War, and to examine its methodology in assessing, selecting, and thereby privileging some collections over others. The decisions to acquire and preserve some collections, whilst rejecting or de-valuing others, reflects the beliefs and attitudes existing in post-war Australian society, and within the collecting institution. The personal writings of those who served were recast, just like their authors, into heroic, national narratives around service, bravery and sacrifice.

## The European war collecting project

Just days after the Armistice was declared in 1918, Principal Librarian William Ifould met with the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales and unveiled his ambitious acquisition project to acquire material produced by Australians during the war:

the Mitchell Trustees should decide to act independently of the Federal authorities in obtaining miscellaneous material for the Mitchell Library and that he be authorised to take the necessary steps to advertise widely that the Trustees desired to purchase or acquire by donation all such material.<sup>8</sup>

The Trustees adopted this recommendation and William Ifould began his well-resourced, highly strategic and broad ranging collecting drive. With a healthy acquisitions budget, he began to advertise in December 1918 and 1919 in newspapers throughout Australia and internationally the Library’s intention to purchase personal diaries from those who had served.

There is something about personal diaries that intrigues the historian and amateur alike; it is a glimpse into an interior world, a personal viewpoint, an individual’s experience. Piggott recognises personal diaries as ‘one of the earliest, if not *the* earliest type of record.’<sup>9</sup> He recognises that the personal diary ranks among the top half-dozen record types widely known within Australian society, and is the premier personal record.<sup>10</sup> A broad description of a diary could be: ‘data set down or captured in chronological sequence for future reference.’<sup>11</sup> This might describe a diary, journal, logbook or day book. Piggott concludes – after examining a sample of published diaries –, that they can include elements of narrative, memoir, photographs, illustrations and notes, compiled chronologically. When it comes to Australian diaries written in wartime, Piggott recognises ‘the impulse to record.’<sup>12</sup> It was not only the officers who were recording their war experiences, but all ranks were documenting their experience of leaving home, encountering foreign lands and people, and attempting to articulate their military careers. They were recording their participation in a historic and monumental world war:

the so-called “digger” experience of the World War I trenches in the Dardanelles and France brought forth innumerable diarists and photographers who, before and after the war, produced hardly a single archival document of their own. Their letters and diaries collectively form the only substantial body of writing by the Australian working class.<sup>13</sup>

It was these personal accounts, from all ranks, that Ifould was determined to seek out and acquire for the historical record. Ifould used to his advantage the national reputation of the Mitchell Library and its significant collections of Australiana to establish an international advertising campaign and procure detailed, first-hand accounts from the war.

This collecting drive, known as the European War Collecting Project did not come out of left field. The Library, from its opening in 1910, had already commenced purchasing large and significant collections of diaries and papers. During the first decade of its existence, the Mitchell Library and its Trustees were following the collecting principles set down by the Library’s benefactor himself, David Scott Mitchell, whose plan had been to collect ‘every authentic document and manuscript that would supply original material for history, no matter how unimportant they might appear to ordinary persons.’<sup>14</sup>

There was already precedence in seeking out significant collections of material, and in negotiating purchase prices. In this early period, important diaries, letters and other documents relating to the exploration of NSW and Victoria were purchased. Just prior to the war, the Library had successfully negotiated and purchased the papers of Governor Lachlan Macquarie from a descendant in the United Kingdom, thus illustrating the ambition of the Public Library and its Trustees. The determination to continue to enhance the Mitchell Library’s collections was mostly due to the energies and enthusiasms of one man, the Principal Librarian of the Library.

William Ifould began his career at the Public Library of NSW in 1912, arriving from the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia. He was keenly interested in furthering the Library’s interests and was particularly focused on enhancing the collections. The Library’s Trustees were determined to elevate the Mitchell Library to a national, not merely a state institution. ‘This collection is essentially a National collection rather than a State Library . . . and it must always be considered the first and principal depository for documents relating to the history of all the States of the Commonwealth,’<sup>15</sup> wrote Ifould in 1913.

The collecting project commenced with a circular that was reproduced widely in newspapers and through the network of the Returned Sailors and Soldiers Imperial League of Australia, followed by advertisements in Australian and New Zealand newspapers from December 1918, running for six months in urban and regional newspapers, along with several British newspapers: *The Times*, *The Daily Telegraph*, *The Morning Post*, the *Daily Mail* and *The British Australasian*.

An advertisement in *The British Australasian* in August 1919 began: ‘Australasian soldiers who have kept diaries at the Front are notified that the Mitchell Library, Sydney, desires to purchase suitable ones for preservation in the State Archives. Good prices for good material.’<sup>16</sup>

Whilst the advertisements published in the press varied, emphasis was placed on collecting personal diaries of those who served, regardless of rank. The Library was seeking to acquire high quality, detailed and descriptive accounts from all theatres of war where Australians had served, written not just by soldiers, but also sailors and airmen and

those who served in medical corps. Diaries kept by nurses were not explicitly sought out and very few were offered to the Library at the time.

No other Australian institution could act as quickly or as thoroughly as the Mitchell Library in this period. As Condé has observed in her analysis of the collecting efforts of the Mitchell Library and the Australian War Memorial in the post-war period, 'as far as is known, this was the first organised attempt at collecting personal records relating to the war.'<sup>17</sup> The Australian War Memorial commenced their collecting of personal papers and diaries some ten years after Ifould's. Unlike Ifould and Mitchell Librarian, Hugh Wright, Memorial staff were ex-AIF members, and much more familiar with military units and significant battles. They specifically targeted individuals or next-of-kin by requesting material via personal letters and relied upon records being donated or copied for their collection. The material donated to the Memorial was a mixture, however letter collections were the priority. They also received memoirs, published obituaries and newspaper cuttings, unlike the Mitchell Library.

A companion institution, the State Library of Victoria (then the Melbourne Public Library), sought to acquire both published works and soldiers' diaries. An ambitious goal was set by the Melbourne Trustees in 1915 to comprehensively collect contemporary published literature on the European war, including books and pamphlets. Lack, Kafkarisos and Struve highlight the publishing phenomenon of war pamphlets during these years: they were easily produced, topical and cheap.<sup>18</sup> The Trustees of the Public Library of NSW recognised Melbourne's comprehensive collecting of publications on the war and decided not to follow suit:

such a library would be expensive and would take far more space than is available in the Reference Library building. Moreover, the Public Library of Victoria [sic] is buying war books extensively, and if such a collection for special students is provided in another Australian state, it is inadvisable to duplicate more than the important books in New South Wales.<sup>19</sup>

Whilst building a strong published collection in multiple languages, the Melbourne Trustees hoped to also acquire original manuscripts and made appeals for donations from returned soldiers. This was less successful. Post war, the Trustees reported that the Melbourne Public Library had added largely to the collection of works on the war but received very few gifts of manuscripts or works issued on the field of war.<sup>20</sup> Dewar concludes that Melbourne's limited success in acquiring original manuscripts was a result of the competitive collecting activities of the Mitchell Library and the nascent Australian War Museum. The Mitchell Library advertised widely in Victorian newspapers and encouraged Melburnians to visit Sydney to see the growing collection in September 1919.<sup>21</sup> The Melbourne Public Library acquired some war-related manuscripts in the immediate post-war period but had to wait until 1974, the 60th anniversary of the beginning of World War I, for La Trobe Library Field Officer, Patsy Adam-Smith to begin a public campaign to acquire original manuscripts from the Great War. Adam-Smith recognised that the lives of First World War servicemen were coming to an end and their collections needed to be preserved.<sup>22</sup>

### **'Of sentimental value'**

The Mitchell Library was specific about the types of material it was interested in acquiring. Ifould wanted accounts written at the time of service, not memoirs composed

after events. He was concerned that accounts written afterwards could be invented or embellished, and emphasised it was original, first-hand accounts that would be of use to future students of 'camp and trench life, and of military engagements'.<sup>23</sup> Likewise, there was little interest in mere travelogues of Cairo or London and the Library had already declined many of these. In a letter to J.C.S. King in early 1919, the Mitchell Librarian emphasised that 'the Library is not buying travel notes because that information is already available in printed form in guidebooks and books written by eminent travellers'.<sup>24</sup> An assumption was being made that the average soldier or nurse's responses to their foreign surrounds would not be of value to researchers of the future.

Ifould was particularly seeking accounts which had *sentimental* value and intended to make these available for future generations of students to examine:

They are being collected to retain the sentimental value that should attach to the diaries kept by the brave men who fought in the Great War and also to make available later on to the students of history, artists, poets and others, the occurrences and the feelings that the men experienced in that great struggle. Nearly all the diaries we have purchased mention the names of chums who have been killed or wounded ...<sup>25</sup>

Understanding what this 'sentimental value' was, and what Library staff understood this to be, is what I would like to explore next, with a view to assessing whether this collecting criterion was a radical departure from the Library's traditional collecting areas. It was a proto-social history collecting project, a recognition of the value of records documenting 'history from below', half a century before social histories started to be published.<sup>26</sup>

Sentimental accounts were personal writings which revealed the authors emotions, their individual experiences and observations of serving in the Great War. In early December 1918, Ifould produced his rationale, or criteria for collecting material, which was reproduced in newspapers:

#### SOLDIERS' DIARIES

When the part played by the Australians is written, the official despatches will furnish much useful data, but for the personal feelings, doings, and relationships of the men, their thoughts and actions, the diaries or journals kept by the men themselves will be of the greatest value. The Trustees of the Mitchell Library recognise the importance of collecting and preserving these records ... Originals are wanted, not copies. We advise anyone having in their possession such diaries to make copies for their own use and offer the originals to the Mitchell Library, which is the treasure-house of Australia for choice manuscripts and rarest books and is the best depository for the diaries and important letters written by the men who gave Australia a place on the scroll of Fame.<sup>27</sup>

The 'personal feelings, doings, and relationships of the men, their thoughts and actions' were the criteria the Library was seeking from diaries. In March 1919, Ifould employed the services of H. H. Southwell, based in London, to act as the Library's agent to seek out diaries held by servicemen in the process of returning home. In his memorandum to Southwell, Ifould outlined what the Library was hoping for:

the fullness of the entries, the value of the entries to future historians ... or from the point of view of opinions of our men. The record from a psychological view is of some importance as is also the record from a sentimental point of view. I mean by this that whilst a diarist might not have been in a position to obtain information of any value to historians from strategic or

tactical points of view, yet the daily and intimate records of individual men, their hopes and fears and feelings generally, their expressions of opinions concerning their officers, their mention of other men by name – especially those coming from particular districts who refer to the doings of men of their own districts; all these things must be taken into consideration in estimating value.<sup>28</sup>

Elements in the above criteria are reminiscent of the general set of collecting guidelines for the Mitchell Library that Librarian Hugh Wright outlined in 1916: ‘personal reminiscences of old settlers should contain accounts of the growth of towns and districts, location of business firms in the old days, original of names of localities, streets, and so on, anecdotes of celebrities and old identities, price of commodities, methods of travelling, accounts of important events and functions.’<sup>29</sup> Emphasis in both these instances seems to have been on acquiring material that would be of value to future historians: detailed descriptions, personal viewpoints of the founders of districts and notable identities.

The European War Collecting Project, however, marked a significant departure in the Library’s acquisition philosophy. By deciding to purchase collections created by the average person, the Library and its Trustees were acknowledging the significance of the average person’s writings and experiences. They were collecting accounts written by people from all ranks of life: farmers, bricklayers, carpenters, clerks, railway men, teachers, architects, journalists, artists, scientists. There was an expectation that these diaries would not articulate detailed battle strategies or tactics affecting the Australian divisions: ‘we do not expect diaries to contain much information of value except the diaries of higher officers, especially of divisional commanders and those attached to General Headquarters.’<sup>30</sup>

These diary collections would reside on the Library shelves alongside some of the great names in European-Australian history, the great explorers and statesmen:<sup>31</sup>

Quite apart from the historical value of these things, and the importance of bringing them together in one great collection as soon as possible, it is a high honour for soldiers, and the relatives of soldiers, and, in fact, for their descendants for future generations, to be able to refer to their soldier boys’ diaries permanently preserved in the archives of the State of New South Wales, in this the greatest of Australian libraries. The Mitchell Library has a wonderful collection of Australian manuscript material, including the journals, log books, and diaries of the greatest of Australian navigators and explorers – Cook, Banks, Flinders, Bass, Sturt, Stuart, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills, Eyre, Mitchell: of the great Australian statesmen – Wentworth, Parkes, &c., and it is surely a splendid thing that the diaries recording the experiences of our soldiers at the front should be carefully preserved in this collection, and made available for present and future generations.<sup>32</sup>

Ifould’s collecting project may seem a radical one for 1919, given the humble origins of many of the authors and the small, unpretentious volumes of notebooks, written up in indelible pencil, smudged and dirty. Library staff accepted many of these accounts as important historical records, collecting a diversity of voices, ranks and professions. Emphasising the significance of ordinary Australians’ writings and equating their collections to be as worthy as the ‘great names’ from the colonial period was a modern approach for the Library to make in 1919. To echo Piggott, ‘their letters and diaries collectively form the only substantial body of writing by the Australian working class.’<sup>33</sup>

The act of acquiring these for the collection elevated these ‘everymen’ diaries to become records worthy of preservation for posterity. Ifould was reflecting the sentiments felt in post-war Australian society, in a period where the ANZAC legend was taking root and flourishing. As he wrote in his first advertisement in early December 1918, these diaries were ‘written by the men who gave Australia a place on the scroll of Fame.’<sup>34</sup> By establishing the collecting drive and purchasing these ‘everyday’ accounts with their local colour and personal viewpoints, the Library was privileging this material, and elevating and recasting these diarists as national heroes in the post-war period. In the same vein as the great 19th century explorers and statesmen whose journals were already held by the Library, the exploits of the Australians in the service of the British Empire, were elevated beyond their humble beginnings as they took their place in the grand narrative of Australian nationhood.

### Selection criteria

A small team of Mitchell Library staff members assessed each collection and were selective in their purchases, rejecting those that were too brief or merely copies.<sup>35</sup> During the height of the collecting campaign, from the beginning of 1919 through to September 1921, some 63 offers were rejected.<sup>36</sup> These were found to be too brief, indecipherable, merely travelogues, or narratives written up after the event.

Ifould estimated that purchase prices would vary from £5 to £50. In fact, the highest amount paid for a collection was that written by Major-General Charles Rosenthal who received £75 for his collection.

Significance and value were given to diaries which provided detailed military and strategic accounts, accurate dates and place names, or specific areas of expertise, such as medical histories, military tactics or developments in new technologies. Staff composed brief summary notes for each collection on offer, recommending accounts that were of high enough quality to be purchased, and for how much. The Library’s own archive holds these assessment notes along with the Mitchell Library’s Out-letters which reveal what the Library was willing to purchase, and what was ‘out of scope’. These were mostly written by Hugh Wright for the Principal Librarian. A letter to Mr. B. H. Bryer from Marrickville in September 1919 is an example of a rejection letter, thanking him for submitting his narrative of war experiences, but explaining why they were being returned to him:

it is not the class of material that the Library is buying. Your account is more suitable for reading to your friends or at a meeting of a literary and debating society, or for publication in your local newspaper. It really contains less information than was published in the daily press whilst the war was on.<sup>37</sup>

Another rejection was a New Testament belonging to an A. J. Dobson who had used it as a diary while on active service. The volume was rejected as ‘the entries are too brief and too few to be of any historical value to this Library.’<sup>38</sup>

In a lengthy reply to a Miss A. A. Brewster regarding her brother’s account of his war service, the Mitchell Librarian explained:

‘Accounts written up on the men’s return are not specially wanted. Original diaries written up from day to day, or at short intervals, recording events as they happened, were advertised



for and are being bought. Accounts written up long after events took place may be influenced by the experiences of others, by newspaper reports, and so on, and you will readily understand that such have not the same monetary value as those made at the moment or on the spot as soon as was convenient. Your brother's narrative to him is of much value ... but to the historian, its absence of dates considerably reduces its importance.'<sup>39</sup>

Men who had been taken as prisoners of war submitted their accounts, though there was a reluctance on the part of the staff to spend too much on these less-detailed descriptions. In a letter to L. D. Richardson, the Mitchell Librarian wrote:

'I thank you for submitting the typed account of your experiences as a prisoner of war in Germany, for which the Library offers one guinea. I wish you were able to add some manuscript notes that you kept whilst a prisoner of war or some official papers that you may have collected whilst in that unfortunate position. If you had been able to do so it would have enhanced the value of your narrative.'<sup>40</sup>

Leslie Duncan Richardson, a signaller with the 1st Light Horse Regiment had actually been taken as prisoner by Turkish forces in August 1916 and described in his account a harrowing desert march across the Sinai, through Aleppo and Damascus to Afion Kara Hissar, the main concentration camp where Australian soldiers were imprisoned (and where Richardson contracted malaria). The discrepancy between Richardson's account and Hugh Wright's letter in September 1919, at the height of the collecting campaign, suggests staff were inundated with collections to assess and respond to and perhaps any typed account written after the fact was viewed as an inferior product in the eyes of the Mitchell assessment team.

Two collections deemed to be of high quality for which the Library offered £50 each, were those written by Aubrey Roy Liddon Wiltshire, a bank officer from Melbourne who produced 27 volumes of diaries during his service from 1915 to 1919;<sup>41</sup> and David Whitehead, a professional army officer.<sup>42</sup> Both men served on the Western Front and were highly decorated by the end of their service, including receiving the Military Cross. Wiltshire's diaries are highly detailed, with a sense of immediacy. Wiltshire enlisted with the 22nd Battalion, D Company and was promoted throughout his time on the Western Front, from captain in May 1916 to major in October 1916 and lieutenant-colonel in June 1917. David Whitehead's collection did not consist of personal diaries as such, but did include notes on the 9th Infantry Brigade, the 9th Machine Gun Company intelligence reports and the war diary of the 23rd Machine Gun Company, along with a large number of trench maps, barrage and target maps and maps used during the 1918 offensives along the Hindenburg Line.

For Ifould and Wright, this was the ideal type of material: detailed military accounts written up at the time, full of descriptions of military strategy, specific brigades and operations and military documentation produced on the field. It was these types of accounts that Ifould and Wright presupposed historians would be seeking in decades to come, when future generations of researchers would write up the histories of Australian participation in the European war. The idea that a woman's experience would be sought by historians of the future may not have occurred to the Mitchell Library staff in 1919 and 1920. Only two collections written by women were purchased as part of the collecting project. One of these was Sister Anne Donnell's account.<sup>43</sup> South



Australian Anne Donnell was a nursing sister with the 3rd Australian General Hospital. Her diary and letters are a rich source of social history and a rare perspective of a woman's account of warfare. She served on the island of Lemnos during the latter half of 1915 and then in England and on the Western Front. Her diary records her time working at a casualty clearing station in Northern France, the struggles with her health, her frustrations with British nursing staff, and her grief in losing friends and homesickness; and paints a very personal and emotional response to the war. She writes openly about her emotions, her war weariness and the physical toll that war service was taking on her body. However detailed and *full of sentiment* Donnell's letters and diary are, the Library officer's assessment notes 'marked down' Donnell's collection as it lacked a detailed medical account of the war: 'Interesting letters but hardly enough of military and medical matters to be of much value to us.'<sup>44</sup> They were not viewed by Wright or possibly his staff, as particularly significant in 1920 and it was recommended that Sister Donnell receive £5 for her collection. There may have been some disagreement amongst staff about the value of Donnell's collection, however, since the final offer put forward in correspondence from the Mitchell Librarian to Anne Donnell was for £10 for her diary and letter collection.<sup>45</sup>

The assessments made, and the prices paid for collections illustrate the mindset of those in collecting institutions at the time and the importance placed on traditional modes of historical inquiry and writing histories. Several diary collections were purchased for relatively low amounts due to lack of dates or place names mentioned in the accounts. 'It would be more valuable if there were more dates' is a critique often annotated in the appraisal notes.

Diaries were judged as having 'more personal information than historical',<sup>46</sup> and therefore, viewed as less significant and purchased for low amounts (£5 or less), which seems to contradict Ifould's advertisements and original criteria for acquisition: 'the personal feelings, doings and relationships, their thoughts and actions'. Once Library staff got down to the business of assessment, with the ever-present pressures of time to appraise and negotiate with the owners of the collections, conventional modes of valuation, appraisal and traditional understandings of historical significance seemed to take precedence.

Nevertheless, collections which expressed personal feelings, those who wrote about the emotional toll of the war, were acquired, though a number were purchased for lower amounts.<sup>47</sup>

Some collections (primarily letter collections) were donated. These were collections offered by family members grieving the deaths of their servicemen. In such cases, Wright and his team accepted material not of the same quality as those being purchased, perhaps as a way to ease family grief:

I beg to acknowledge the receipt of a typed copy of the war diary of your late brother and I shall be glad to add it to the collection of war diaries ... if you will present it. It is not the class of material that the Trustees are purchasing ... occasionally copies are presented so that their brave boys' service may be on record in the Library. Will you make the presentation suggested?<sup>48</sup>

These donated collections were not included in the formed European War Collecting Project, but still made accessible to researchers.

All these accounts, purchased or donated, have been accessed in recent decades by researchers interested in interrogating language, humour, attitudes to war, the enemy, the local people, time spent on leave and the impact of the war on personal faith and beliefs.

Overall, there are not many diaries detailing military strategy, nor many diarists who wrote distinct or overall accounts of a battle or campaign that Library officers may have been searching for. Instead, the diarists describe the war from their own viewpoints – what they saw, whether it was the build-up to battle, or the disastrous consequences after a barrage, usually naming those injured or killed.

## The diary collection

The diaries record the names of French women met behind the lines, rates of pay and who owed them money. There are lists of brands of cigarettes smoked. Some admit to homesickness, some to the horror of trench warfare and conditions in the trenches. They attempt to describe the landscape and the sounds of the battlefields of the Western Front. Some admit to not being able to carry on and the relief they feel when they are stretchered off to hospital in England. Some are more prosaic and write about their horses and what they cooked for breakfast.

These accounts take in all theatres of war where Australians served and include diaries written by members of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Australian Flying Corps and medical corps. There are those who served in non-combat services, such as signallers, stretcher-bearers, chaplains and war artists.

The men who were appraising and acquiring these collections were selecting according to their own understandings and worldviews. Nesmith writes about the formation of archives and, 'contrary to the conventional idea that archivists simply receive and house vast quantities of records, which merely reflect society, they actually co-create and shape the knowledge in records, and thus help form society's memory.'<sup>49</sup> When re-examined through a post-modern lens, the Library's process of acquisition of these war diaries and the staff's methodology of appraisal and their understanding of significance can be understood as limited, resulting in the raising up of some collections and the marginalisation of others. Nesmith argues that archivists own 'personal backgrounds and social affiliations, and their professional norms, self-understanding, and public standing, shape and are shaped by their participation in this process.'<sup>50</sup>

These overwhelmingly male diarists, who hailed from diverse social and economic backgrounds were recast as national heroes in this collecting project. Like the great 19th century European explorers and statesmen whose journals were being acquired by the Library in this same period, a small fragment of the countless diaries written during the First World War were elevated beyond their humble beginnings as their authors took their place in the grand narrative of Australian nationhood.

These personal accounts form a large, national collection that documents the first major war that Australians served in as a nation. Ifould and Wright understood them to be worthy of preservation and original sources for future historians, thereby repositioning them and elevating the diaries to the status of archival sources. There does not seem to be a formal evaluation of the success of the collecting drive by Ifould or Wright, apart from a brief paragraph in the 1918 annual report of Library Trustees:

Special efforts were made to acquire for the Mitchell Library manuscript and printed material relating to the share of Australia in the great war. Letters and diaries of soldiers, trench newspapers, books and pamphlets, and miscellanea of all descriptions relating to the war were procured by purchase and donation, and the collection is already a large and valuable one.<sup>51</sup>

Nesmith writes about the elevation of some records to ‘treasures’:

This very act of placing certain records on the pedestal of national progress, sacred memory, civilization, history, culture, democracy, or societal necessity often raises records which were once thought quite ordinary to this new special status as “archives”, or, for some records, even higher yet, as archival “treasures.”<sup>52</sup>

The authors of these diaries assumed that their accounts would be received, read and shared amongst an intimate audience of family and friends. Soldier Archie Barwick wrote in the first volume of his diary: ‘I hope all at home will find something of interest in it for them, for that is the reason why I wrote it.’<sup>53</sup> Once acquired by the Library however, these diaries were elevated to significant, publicly accessible historical documents in the years after the war. Their authors were recast as national heroes in the spirit of the great explorers of the colonial age.

## Conclusion

This paper has explored the process by which the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales set about acquiring the personal diaries from those who served in the First World War. This case study underscores recent archival debate which has re-assessed the role of archivists in assessment, appraisal, preservation (and privileging) of some collections over others and argues that archivists mediate and consequently shape the collections in their institutions, according to their own societal, cultural and prevailing values. A comparative analysis could be undertaken as further study, to assess the World War I collections held by the Mitchell Library and the State Library of Victoria to ascertain any clear differences in the types of material selected and acquired by these institutions – to determine a change in collecting priorities between 1919 and 1974.

William Ifould’s European War Collecting Project did acquire significant personal accounts written overwhelmingly by men who served in the First World War. However, despite his early aspirations to capture the intimate and personal accounts of the average serviceman, ‘their thoughts and feelings’; subsequent assessments by Library staff appeared to place more importance on military detail, dates and locations, with some personal accounts purchased for less, or sometimes rejected completely. Perhaps Ifould’s collecting project was not as revolutionary as it might have been; the Library was not acquiring material written by average Australians who documented the home front, or by those who protested the war, or by Aboriginal servicemen or women. The Library did not necessarily value every Australian’s experience, just those who served overseas and contributed to the ANZAC legend.

A century on, these collections are accessed and interpreted by a wide range of researchers as key primary documents of Australians experiences in the First World War. Like any archival collection, new questions continue to be framed, new areas of study open the collections up to new modes of storytelling and analysis, as succeeding generations continue to make sense of the Great War. However, in accessing and

interrogating this collection, it is important to understand the context of how this collection was formed, the aims and priorities the creators of the archive had in its creation and the voices that are not heard.

## Notes

1. T Nesmith, 'Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the changing intellectual place of archives', *The American Archivist*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2002, pp. 24–41.
2. This paper considers the original collections of personal papers and organisational records held within the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales as archival collections, sharing many of the same functions of collecting, arrangement, preservation and access that archives encompass.
3. J Sassoon, 'Phantoms of remembrance: libraries and archives as "the collective memory"', *Public History Review*, vol. 10, 2003, pp. 55–6.
4. *ibid.*, pp. 40–60.
5. JM Schwartz and T Cook, 'Archives, records, and power: the making of modern memory', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, pp. 1–19.
6. *ibid.*, p. 13.
7. R McIntosh, 'The Great War, archives, and modern memory', *Archivaria*, vol. 46, 1998, pp. 1–31.
8. Public Library of New South Wales Trustees, Minutes from 624th meeting, 18 November 1918, State Library of New South Wales records, File number 39630.
9. M Piggott, 'Towards a history of Australian diary keeping', *Archivaria*, vol. 60, 2005, pp. 145–66.
10. *ibid.*, p. 146.
11. *ibid.*, p. 147.
12. *ibid.*, p. 162.
13. *ibid.*
14. B Fletcher, *Magnificent obsession: the story of the Mitchell Library*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, 2007, pp. 55.
15. *ibid.*, 54.
16. WH Ifould, 'Australasian soldiers' private diaries', *British Australasian*, 7 August 1919, p. 5.
17. A Condé, 'Capturing the records of war: collecting at the Mitchell Library and the Australian War Memorial', *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 125, 2005, pp. 134–52.
18. J Lack, S Kafkaris and W Struve, '"A universal collection of literature on the European war?" State Library Victoria's Great War pamphlets', *La Trobe Journal*, vol. 98, 2016, p. 85.
19. Public Library of New South Wales, *Report of the Trustees of the Public Library of NSW for the year 1917*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1917.
20. S Dewar, 'From the bottom of a wardrobe: collecting World War I personal papers at State Library Victoria', *La Trobe journal*, vol. 98, 2016, p. 153.
21. *ibid.*, p. 154.
22. In addition to acquiring original papers and diaries from returned soldiers, Adam-Smith also completed some 300 oral history interviews of WWI veterans, J Murphy, 'Library profile: Patsy Adam-Smith', *La Trobe Journal*, vol. 69, 2002, pp. 70–1.
23. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Mr S.J. Stutley, 7 February 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1919/71.
24. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to J.C.S. King, 6 March 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1919/168.
25. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Mr C.J. Fitzpatrick, 16 December 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1919/287.
26. Diaries and letters from the Library's European war collecting project have been accessed and extracts published in a large number of histories on World War I, including landmark works published in the 1970s, for example: Bill Gammage, *The broken years: Australian*

*soldiers in the Great War* in 1974; and Patsy Adam-Smith, *The ANZACS* in 1978. These two publications were amongst the first to focus on the narrative of the private soldier, a move which began in the 1960s and 1970s as traditional military history approaches gave way to social histories of the war.

27. WH Ifould, 'Soldiers' diaries', 6 December 1918, State Library of New South Wales records File number 34224-1, Original file: NPL 242.
28. WH Ifould, Material which the Trustees of the Mitchell Library desire Mr Southwell to purchase for the Collection, [Memorandum to H.H. Southwell], 26 March 1919, File number 34224-1, original file no. NPL 242.
29. Fletcher, p. 59.
30. Ifould, W.H. Memorandum to H.H. Southwell.
31. In the years before and after the war, the Library was continuing to acquire significant collections of archives created by some of the great names in European discovery and settlement of Australia, such as Governor Lachlan Macquarie's papers in 1914, navigator Matthew Flinders papers and logbook in 1922, and original watercolours by John Webber, artist of Captain Cook's third voyage to the Pacific, also acquired in the same decade.
32. WH Ifould, 'The Mitchell Library, Sydney', *Observer*, 28 June 1919, p. 30.
33. Piggott, p. 162.
34. Ifould, 'Soldiers' diaries'.
35. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to A. Douglas, 25 June 1920, State Library of NSW Out-letters ML1920/169.
36. 236 diary collections were purchased as a result of the European War Collecting project, the bulk of purchases being made in 1919 and 1920. By 1921, offers of material had slowed, with only small numbers (single digits) of collections being purchased. By the mid-1920s, collecting had ceased.
37. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to B.H. Bryer, 2 September 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters ML1919/595.
38. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to A.J. Dobson, 30 June 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters ML1919/373.
39. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Miss A.A. Brewster, 22 April 1920, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters ML1920/39.
40. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to L.D. Richardson], 2 September 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters ML1919/602.
41. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to A.R. Wiltshire, 17 December 1919, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1919/290).
42. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Captain Whitehead, 6 February 1920, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1920/418.
43. The second collection received was from Mrs Britomarte James of Melbourne, mother of two sons in the Australian army who travelled to England in September 1916 when her eldest son was wounded. There she joined the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps on its formation, and was a Unit Administrator in Nottingham, then in Boulogne in France. In May 1918 she returned to England, arranged her discharge and went back to Australia, arriving in Melbourne in August 1918. Despite it being a typed reminiscence, which Ifould stated was not required, Mrs James received £3.4.0 for her account.
44. [Wright, H.?], Library staff assessment notes relating to Sister Anne Donnell's collection, ca. 1919, State Library of New South Wales records.
45. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Anne Donnell, 14 January 1920, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters, ML1920/348.
46. [Wright, H.?], Library staff assessment notes relating to J.E Bell collection, State Library of New South Wales records, ca. 1919.
47. Collection such as Richardson war narrative, 1916–1918, MLDOC 2447, and Balme letter and diary, 29 April 1918, MLDOC 1286.
48. Mitchell Librarian, Letter to Miss A.H.P. Bell, 5 March 1920, State Library of New South Wales, Out-letters ML1920/503.

49. Nesmith, p. 27.
50. *ibid.*, p. 30.
51. Public Library of New South Wales, *Report of the Trustees for the year 1918*, Government Printer, Sydney, 1918.
52. Nesmith, p. 33.
53. AA Barwick, Archie Barwick diary, 1914–1915, European war collecting project, State Library of New South Wales, MLMSS 1493/Box 1/Item 1.

## Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

## Notes on contributor

*Elise Edmonds* is a senior curator at the State Library of New South Wales. With a background in Australian history and Museum Studies, Elise received a staff fellowship in 2009 to research and scope the Library's First World War collections which included analysing the large collection of personal diaries written by servicemen and women during the war, and planning the Library's approach to digitisation and online access to this nationally significant collection. As a result of this research, she has curated a suite of First World War exhibitions at the State Library including *Life Interrupted: personal diaries from World War I* in 2014, *Colour in Darkness: images from the First World War* in 2016 and *Quick March! The Children of World War One* in 2019.

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