

PRICING OURSELVES OUT OF HISTORY?

G. L. Fischer

The market for Australiana is at present largely concerned with printed material. But there have been some valuable and important manuscript sales in comparatively recent years and it can be predicted that this kind of material will be increasingly offered on the market, both in Australia and overseas. For libraries and archival institutions concerned to preserve this material, this situation is of considerable interest and some concern. The two most important aspects of it are the high prices which items — especially abroad — are likely to bring, as well as the possible loss to Australia of material to America and elsewhere where these prices are unflinchingly met. I want here to discuss what I think archivists and librarians can do, or at least try to do, to ameliorate these conditions. In the play of the market, of course, it will never be possible to produce wholly favourable conditions.

It is an axiom of certain branches of selling — notably the second-hand market in all fields — that an article is worth what it will bring. In any given circumstances this principle does, in fact, produce some very queer results. It may be, on the one hand, possible to pick up a valuable collection for the price of a few tin deed boxes, simply because the owner has not the faintest idea of the price it might bring if other buyers could be brought into the picture. On the other hand, a high price may be obtained because the purchaser or his agent is equally ignorant of the true historical value of an item.

All this might suggest that over a period the matter would even out like the swings and roundabouts. It is a comforting thought, but it ignores questions of morality and justice in relation to sellers and buyers alike. I am not unconcerned about the position of the seller, but in this article I am concerned more with the hurt to libraries and archives by high prices. For with a growing market in Australian manuscripts I believe that high prices will tend to become the norm, since most items offered for sale publicly will have been acquired by dealers or sale rooms where good business is high prices.

It is here that the danger lies. Paying a high price, or running up to a high price at auction, may sometimes be necessary. But is it always? One of the most used justifications for a high price when it has been paid is that the item is unique. Sometimes prestige is involved — an institution feels it must have the item rather than see it go to another institution. Another reason for a high price paid may be that an institution is so well endowed that it does not need to reck the cost. Or perhaps there may be the eminently worthy motive of keeping an item in the country. But every one of these criteria, I suggest, is likely to push up the price to the seller's joy and the institution's eventual sorrow. Nor should the role of the private collector be overlooked in this sorry business. Some of these buy merely for the sake of possession, and we are unlikely to be able to appeal successfully to these people to co-operate in keeping prices down. If, however, a private collector is acting on behalf of an institution, an appeal might be made to that institution.

A somewhat neglected yardstick for buying an item and for assessing its value in money is, I suggest, the item's research value considered in relation to the whole field of research material (both official and private) already available in institutions. Agents and owners do not, as a rule, ask high prices for what is clearly worthless historically. But when an item of some interest appears, the sky seems to be the limit however slight or already well known the information may be. Because it is old, because it has some associations, because the item is an original, prudence is given scant regard and a high price is not felt to be an embarrassment.

It is a very short-term view which will have the effect of inflating prices so much that really worthwhile items, not to mention archival groups, will be quite out of reach of deserving institutions.

An approach to prices based on the research value of an item, however, is not easy to make, but its long term results — and short term ones — surely justify an attempt at it. Such an approach, for example, at once implies an informed opinion on the part of the person negotiating the purchase. It implies at least a wide knowledge of the relevant state or national collection, a more than nodding acquaintance with all other collections in Australia, and especially some real knowledge of official government records. Clearly this task is beyond the private collector, dealer or auctioneer — indeed, these people are probably not interested in such a method. For them, uniqueness and association are everything and research value may not even enter the matter. That a document should merely have been written by an historic personality is often enough to set the enthusiastic collector in hot pursuit of the historically worthless.

The value of a document, or an archival group, for a research collection, is surely to be gauged not in its uniqueness (or at least very rarely so), but rather in the information it contains — whether it is hitherto unknown information, whether it will advance research in some field, and whether and how much it adds anything to material, both official and private, already held. It is, therefore, fatal to leave distant buying to anyone not generally conversant with the holdings of Australian institutions. (By the criterion I have outlined here, I do not intend to exclude the bizarre from purchase, but the price of such items should at least bear some relation to this criterion).

If all institutions concerned in collecting historical and literary materials were to adopt this approach to the purchase of items, they would, since they are probably the largest buyers, considerably influence the prices asked for and obtained. It would also lead to some close and valuable liaison between various institutions when enquiries were made to find out just what material exists on a particular subject. I am not advocating that the various institutions form a “ring” and divide the spoils after the sale, but only that whatever prices they do consider be sensibly and primarily based on the criterion I have proposed. Since it is in all institutions’ interests to adopt such a co-operative approach, they would surely all be prepared to provide details of relevant holdings in given instances. On occasions the machinery for this might be too slow, but not often, and hardly ever so in the case of a widely advertised item. Here particularly it is surely worthwhile to delay a little so that the price is the item’s true research use and not just what the avid are likely to pay.

It is clearly in the institutions’ own interests to adopt some such approach as this, for if uninformed buying is allowed to set the price standard, then institutions may well find that they simply cannot afford to buy more than one or two items a year. It is easy to see, too, how a shrewd dealer who has come by a series of letters, or even a whole group of papers, will be encouraged to sell them off one at a time when he realised what a bonanza he has struck in high prices.

This very serious question of the vandalism of breaking up a group of papers for sale, suggests a second way that institutions may help to keep prices down. So far as practicable, institutions should seek out and try to obtain at all times the complete group of papers of any individual, society, or business undertaking. In always adopting this approach they will have some advantage of the private collector since the sheer bulk of some groups of papers is quite beyond the resources of the private collector to house. At the same time, it is dangerous, both to the integrity of the group and for the situation it might create, to select “gems” for purchase. At a later date the residue might be offered at exorbitant prices and an institution might feel forced to pay these prices in order to obtain the entire group

and historical completeness. In obtaining the whole group, of course, the same criterion of research value is valid: the price should be related to the significance of the material and its creator, and to associated material already held in institutions. And again, co-operation between institutions would be a good thing.

The point at which an institution makes its bid to obtain the group is also important. This should be as quickly as possible after the papers are known or deemed to be available. By careful cultivation of public relations and by a courteous approach to likely societies and businesses it is often possible to acquire many of these groups as gifts. Many societies, for example, are glad to deposit their records in an institution for safe-keeping and reference, and they should be given every encouragement to do so (e.g., by offers of arranging, listing, and the provision of loan arrangements where a society may feel it necessary to refer to its records over an extended period). In the case of private papers, beneficiaries and executors should quite properly be encouraged to see the presentation of historical papers as an honour in adding to the various national collections. Where purchase is inevitable, attempts should be made to negotiate it as soon as possible after the papers become available, since the lapse of time may cause them to appreciate in value or see their physical deterioration or loss.

So far as private personal papers are concerned it may be possible to ensure that the papers come to an institution during the creator's lifetime, or are bequeathed in his will. Institutions, being interested only in the research value of the papers, are in a specially favoured position to negotiate these arrangements, but the method raises some problems of its own, and circumstances will certainly alter cases. Where the material is quite unlikely to contain any embarrassing items, where assurances about restricted access can be given and accepted, or where the person concerned is not emotional about the matter — in all these cases appropriate formal arrangements can be made and an approach during the creator's life-time is quite a wise thing.

Politicians, however, or successful businessmen, are in a different position. If approached during their lifetimes they may co-operate, but so edit and expurgate their papers as to make them worthless. Archivists, indeed, are usually at some pains to prevent this reticence or bias occurring even in public records which by law cannot be destroyed, and they may agree to conditions of restricted access over a long period in order to ensure the co-operation of the departmental officers and the unselfconsciousness of the records. But it is doubtful, I think, if such a similar undertaking made to the originator or owner of some private records would be so effective in ensuring candour. But at least it should be tried. Collecting programmes should not, therefore, be too vigorously pursued in every instance. It may be more historically significant to have one or two candid letters of a person than to have neat series of cuttings books, letters and photographs which reflect his career only in terms of success and congratulations.

In cases where owners regard the gift of papers as an honour, the question of payment for them will hardly occur. However, an incautious approach for papers during a subject's life-time may not only prejudice or inhibit the material as noted above, but it may too readily encourage the creator himself — or his executors or beneficiaries — to see a monetary value in the material from which he or they might profit for themselves. This point has been made in a rather light-hearted, but still earnest, way by Kenneth Hopkins in an article in the London *Spectator* of 20th July, 1962, called "*What about the envelopes?*" His opening remarks are a dismal enough forecast for Australia when he says

of recent years, as everybody knows, a splendid new industry has grown up — the buying and selling in bulk of papers, documents, manuscripts, letters, diaries and the rest — which we on the inside of the industry call "research material". The principal buyers of this material are the universities of the United States; the principal providers, the writers (es-

pecially the lesser writers) of England and America. If you have sixty letters of T. S. Eliot, you can practically retire from active authorship yourself, and live at ease : so long as you are prepared to sell them.

Hopkins then goes on to point out how writers might be encouraged by astute people to write long letters on diverse topics, the letters then being sold off by the recipient. Though he treats all this rather humorously he concludes prophetically that it is only a matter of time before the writer himself starts looking for his price for these things, and he (Hopkins) ends by soliciting offers for all the material—carbon typescript, letter, editor's letter of acceptance, galley proofs (with author's corrections), copy of issue of periodical in which the item appeared, and the envelopes — arising from that very *Spectator* article !

Perhaps we may take comfort from the fact that Hopkins sees only the "lesser writers" getting up to this kind of mercenary haggling. People and publishers seriously interested in writing for its own sake will never stoop to this kind of market-place atmosphere. But the message for all collecting institutions is plain enough. A market for physical literary wares is developing, and inevitably the chase for material will result in prices going up and up.

At present, no doubt, the going is good — in many cases, perhaps most, authors and publishers are being extremely generous with this kind of material. Everything, therefore, should be done to encourage this position and to consolidate it, e.g., in helpful reference service to writers and publishers alike. And naturally we want to see this kind of material preserved in manuscript repositories. But when the time comes when we find we are forced to buy some, or perhaps most of it, then we must look again to the criterion of its value as literary or historical research material and to its relation to material already held in institutions. So far as the loss of Australian records *from Australia* to overseas institutions is concerned, we might look to the Australian Government to make legislation prohibiting this kind of export. If we see fit to protect our fauna in a similar way surely here is sufficient precedent to protect our historical and literary records.⁽¹⁾

Libraries and other collecting institutions might also consider observing spheres of legitimate interest where records up for sale are clearly in the field of a particular institution. This kind of co-operation, either for traditional or administrative reasons, may not be easy to secure, but so far as it can be achieved, it will certainly rebound to the credit — in every sense of the word — of all collecting authorities.

In all of the various ways that I have suggested in this article that prices for original historical and literary records might be kept down to a sensible level, the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia could, perhaps, give a useful lead.

⁽¹⁾ In an A.B.C. broadcast on 2nd Nov., 1962 (from Tasmania) the National Librarian (Mr. H. L. White) stated that approaches had been made to the Commonwealth Government in this regard.