

Australian Literary Manuscripts and Libraries: Some Reflections Based on Collection-Building in the National Library of Australia

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It has become apparent over the past few years that the resources for study and research in the field of Australian literature are scattered and divided between library collections in various parts of the country. No natural order or logic determines the location of materials and there is no clear dividing line between what may be described as the national collection and state or regional holdings of manuscripts of and relating to Australian writers.

Scholars of Australian literature will be only too well aware of the rich holdings of primary source material held in such widely distant centres as Sydney (in the Mitchell Library), Brisbane (in the Fryer Library), Melbourne (in the La Trobe Collection of the State Library of Victoria) and Canberra (in the National Library of Australia). This division takes no account of the remaining states or of such significant "one-off" collections as the substantial archive of Clem Christesen's *Meanjin* which is now held by the Baillieu Library in the University of Melbourne. Geoffrey Blainey's admirable phrase "the tyranny of distance", coined in a different context, has become an unpleasant cliché for scholars faced with the prospect of tapping the resources of manuscript and archive collections in Australia, not only in the field of literary studies but in other disciplines as well. In so large a country as Australia, where travel and accommodation costs are high, this situation may be regretted; at the

same time, it must be understood that however strong our urge to rationalise and centralise, it is almost impossible to prescribe a plan for the orderly development of collections. The best we can hope for is that there should be a free flow of information about holdings through such reference tools as the *Guide to collections of manuscripts relating to Australia*, through such high quality catalogues as the Fryer Library's *Catalogue of manuscripts from the Hayes Collection* or through the medium of regular accession lists of the kind which appear each year in the *La Trobe Library Journal* or the *Acquisitions Newsletter* of the National Library of Australia.

It is the purpose of this paper to do two things: first to focus on the resources for Australian literary studies held in one particular collection — that of the National Library — and second, to undertake the more difficult and sensitive task of outlining the general criteria which the Library applies in developing its research collections and particularly when appraising collections for acquisition by purchase. There may seem to be a considerable distance between these two subjects — on the one hand the safe ground of description of holdings which must appeal primarily to scholars pursuing research, and on the other, the more problematical ground of the literary market-place where the monetary value of manuscript materials is now a question of keen interest both to librarians and writers. It is apparent that the market for Australian literary manuscripts has assumed, in a remarkably short time, a volatile character which perhaps owes more to the United States than to Britain where a greater reserve seems to have prevailed for longer than may have seemed possible in a country which regularly records spectacular prices for all kinds of materials in the celebrated auction rooms of Sothebys or Christies. This question of monetary values must also have an interest for scholars since the steady accumulation by libraries of the resource materials necessary for original research is possible today only where there exists some consensus about what may be described as the dynamics of the market-place.

In building up its collections of research materials, the National Library is directed and guided by legislation which provides, amongst other things, for the institution to maintain and develop a national collection of library material relating to Australia and the Australian people. While the *National Library Act* has operated only since 1960, the Library has been actively collecting manuscripts, since the early years of the century, moving from an emphasis on the early discovery, exploration and settlement of Australia to the broadly based collection which exists today, notable for strengths in such fields as politics, diplomacy, administration, women's studies and literature. The criterion applied in developing these collections is that the records acquired should, as a first priority, be those of national figures and organizations and of developments on a national scale or affecting national policies.

The Library does not collect official records, nor business or trade union material which is regarded as the field of the specialist archives which have been developed in some of the Australian universities. It does not collect, in depth, records of state or local significance (with the exception of materials relating to Canberra and the A.C.T. region) which are regarded as the responsibility of state libraries, public libraries and historical societies.

In stating its preoccupation with men and women who have pursued a career of national significance, the Library has for many years recognized the difficulties inherent in defining this term. What is a national figure? How does one reconcile the claims which both Queensland and Victorian libraries may have to Vance and Nettie Palmer or which Victoria alone may have to Henry Handel Richardson or, to take a more recent and topical example, which Queensland and New South Wales may have to Roger McDonald, the author of the award-winning novel *1915*? As a former deputy National Librarian, C. A. Burmester, stated some years ago, the names could be multiplied but the answer would be no clearer. "No two judgements would be the same. Most people whose activities are not confined by constitutional limitations are making a contribution to Australian development. Sometimes that contribution is of more significance than that to their state or local community. Sometimes the reverse is the case."¹ This statement of the problem recognizes that there can be a basis for conflict and disagreement between institutions in as much as there will be papers to which more than one library or archive may make claims of substance. In developing its collections, the National Library has sought, as far as it is possible to define so broad an interest, the papers of individuals who have achieved a national reputation. In the political and literary fields it is probably easier to achieve some broad consensus about reputations though even so there will probably always be grounds for arguing the toss.

In literature, as in a number of other fields, the National Library's holdings of Australian creative writers are extensive. It is a field in which the Library aims to achieve as broad a coverage as possible and as deep. Scholars will be familiar with the summary of holdings provided by Fred Lock and Alan Lawson in *Australian literature: a reference guide*, which was originally published in 1977 but has now appeared in a revised and up-dated second edition. Another valuable tool is C. A. Burmester's *Guide to the Collections of the National Library of Australia*, two volumes of which have been published while a third and fourth volume are now in the final stages of preparation. This guide offers a description and evaluation of the Library's resources for advanced study and research in many categories; it has been pointed out that few libraries in the world can offer such a comprehensive view of their collections.²

When it comes to identifying particular writers represented in the

collection, it needs to be stated that in almost every case, no group of papers can be comprehensive since most of the collections of literary manuscripts which have been developed in Australian libraries dovetail and overlap. In some cases, collections are divided between libraries and writers may sometimes be represented by separate deposits of material in as many as three or four libraries. Sometimes the two sides of a literary correspondence will be preserved in two separate libraries. While there is little real value in presenting a roll call of names, the following list of writers represented in the National Library by substantial collections of personal papers is intended to indicate something of the range and variety of a collection which has achieved remarkable growth in recent years. The Library now holds papers of Robert Adamson, Dymphna Cusack, Rosemary Dobson, Michael Dransfield, Dame Mary Gilmore, Jack Hibberd, A. D. Hope, Henry Kendall, Roger McDonald, Alan Marshall, Frank Moorehouse, Les Murray, John Shaw Neilson, Barry Oakley, the Palmers, Henry Handel Richardson, Philip Roberts (a collection which includes the substantial records of the Island Press), David Rowbotham, Kenneth Slessor, Douglas Stewart and Judah Waten. There are, of course, many more. The Library also houses an extensive pictorial collection which includes representations of many Australian writers; and there is an oral history collection which includes interviews with Australians from many walks of life, including artists, writers, poets and musicians.

While such collections may offer the basis for scholarly and critical research into methodologies, roles, influences and inter-relationships, it should not be forgotten that the Manuscript Collection also includes a wealth of documentary material which can itself provide the raw material for creative writers seeking to achieve an understanding of Australian values and mores and the responses felt by generations of Australians to landscape, to distance and isolation, to the experience of immigration and settlement in a new land, to war, to urban life and to political and social change.

In Australia, little detailed attention has been given to an examination of the problems which libraries face in acquiring or developing collections of primary source material. No accounts of substance have been provided in the professional journals of librarianship or in the more specialized literature relating to archives and manuscripts, of the actual processes of acquisition of materials, of the changing rhythms of manuscript collecting over a period of time or of the current trends which are leading collectors to adjust to the new reality of an unpredictable market, particularly when dealing with contemporary literary material. The reasons for such reticence may be understood — libraries generally have had limited resources to devote to the development of special collections and this situation has led, over the years, to an unwillingness to embrace too openly the idea that collections should actually be paid

for. It seems now that the wisdom of maintaining too deep a silence about matters which are coming under increasing scrutiny may be questioned, if only as part of an effort to bring some objectivity to an issue which has been obscured by rumour, speculation and a certain amount of ignorance of the ways in which libraries operate.

For almost ten years, I have been professionally concerned with acquiring manuscript materials for library collections, first in Melbourne in the State Library of Victoria and more recently in Canberra in the National Library. During this period it seems clear that a change has occurred in a field where libraries have hoped or expected to acquire the majority of their collections of manuscripts by gift or bequest. It is true that a market of sorts has existed since the time Australian libraries first began the active collection of manuscript resources. Libraries have always been prepared to pay for the really important items or collections which come up for sale in the auction rooms or which pass through the hands of the antiquarian book-dealers. There are, too, many instances going back through the eighty years since federation when libraries, particularly the Mitchell Library with the generous backing of David Scott Mitchell's great endowment, have been prepared to pay individuals or families for collections of papers.³

What is not always appreciated, is that in many instances purchases have had to be made from appropriations specially secured for the purpose or, more usually, from the slender funds which have been voted to support the ordinary acquisition of books and to pay for the remaining library services. Not every Australian library has enjoyed the backing of endowment funds which, in the case of the Mitchell Library, "relieved the finances of the General Reference Library by providing for the acquisition of much Australiana which must otherwise have been a charge on the statutory endowment".⁴ This fact led to a situation where, over a long period, the bulk of manuscript materials becoming available tended to gravitate to the Mitchell, enabling that Library to develop, most notably for the foundation years of settlement and for the nineteenth century, what must be seen as the finest collection of Australiana in existence. Elsewhere in Australia, circumstances have forced libraries to be somewhat reserved in their attitude to purchasing, though from an early stage what is now the National Library appears to have accepted, in a manner similar to the Mitchell, that manuscripts had a price as did every other kind of library material. There was a time when individuals or families holding manuscript material held no expectations of a financial return for papers which they transferred to library collections. Many generous gifts have been made to libraries in a spirit of public benefaction and Australian collections today could not be as rich as many of them are without such generosity. However, we seem to have entered a new era when even the best intentioned of people may no longer be in a position to afford the luxury of presenting collections of

papers to libraries. In certain situations, it must be stressed, acquisition of papers by gift may still be regarded as normal, particularly in the case of individuals who have worked in politics or some other area of public life and who see the gift of papers to a library as a further act of public service. Writers, on the other hand, if they have been disposed to retain their manuscripts, their working papers and their correspondence, may find a genuine difficulty in doing other than consider the sale of their materials to a collecting institution.

In the case of literary collections, the approach has probably always been a little different largely because it has been recognized, however grudgingly it may sometimes have seemed, that a writer or a writer's family can quite legitimately expect to place a monetary value on the products of a literary career which may have been pursued with little in the way of material return. While this paper is not intended to contribute to the debate about the level of support which our society extends to creative writers, it is important nevertheless, to state the positive view which libraries now hold, namely that literary materials are recognized as negotiable assets. Because a sufficient number of libraries, most notably the Fryer Library, the Mitchell Library and the National Library have in recent years been prepared to purchase collections of papers from writers, the market for literary manuscripts has become competitive. The introduction during 1978 of a scheme offering taxation incentives for gifts to institutions such as galleries and libraries has also confirmed an official recognition of the commercial nature of the materials which libraries now seek for their collections.

This brings me to the difficult question concerning the consideration given by libraries to the purchase of contemporary literary manuscripts. Both in Australia and Britain, information about this subject is sparse largely because, as the English poet and librarian Philip Larkin has observed, the buying or selling of modern literary manuscripts "must often take place privately and personally, for undisclosed prices". It is generally the case, as Larkin suggests, that "unless one is extremely interested, who paid how much for what is hard to discover."⁵ In Australia this may only be partly true for while there is no manuscript equivalent of *Australian Book Auction Records*, it seems that in what is still a small and reasonably tightly-knit literary world, there is a fairly lively trade by writers in information about the sale of literary manuscripts. Certainly, it has seemed to us in the National Library that writers make no particular secret in their discussions with each other, of the prices which institutions have been prepared to pay for collections of papers. The trap here is that while there may seem to be similarities between writers or in the kind of material which is being offered for sale, the differences between collections are often so great as to rule out any satisfactory basis for comparison. On the basis of hearsay, an individual writer negotiating with a library may in fact begin to feel dissatisfied

because he or she knows of someone else who has received what seems to be a better offer for a collection of papers; such a belief can complicate or upset negotiations and may lead to a situation where a writer feels that more than one institution should be approached. From the writer's point of view, it is understandable that the best price should be sought; from the point of view of a library negotiating for papers, it is disconcerting to find that material may be withdrawn because of an ill founded belief that a contemporary has received a "better" price elsewhere.

There is undoubtedly a new awareness by Australian writers of the monetary value of literary manuscripts, an awareness which is being sharpened by reminders which are being offered through publications such as the *Australian Book Review*⁶ or the *Australian Author*, sometimes in rather crude terms,⁷ and sometimes in ways which can only mislead and confuse. A recent article published in the *Australian Book Review* suggested, indeed, that Literature Boards may now be coming to hold the view that the return which a writer may receive from the sale of a collection of manuscripts should be regarded as another kind of grant.⁸ I am advised, on good authority, that this is not the view of the present Australian Literature Board.⁹ Libraries, and this is emphatically the case with the National Library, do not see themselves as simply another kind of funding agency offering, in the guise of a purchase price, an unofficial grant. It is no doubt true that writers themselves may welcome the sale of their manuscripts as a means of achieving, for a few months more, a degree of financial independence which gives them the freedom to continue writing on a full time basis. That decision, however, is the writer's own. The role of libraries, if they are in the market for literary manuscripts, is to offer a price which is as fair, objective and reasonable as possible.

What, then, do libraries look for? Philip Larkin reminds us that when we talk of manuscripts we are likely to mean several different things. Primarily we mean "texts produced by the author before a work reaches publication, in a form that shows its genesis and evolution." Included in this definition may be manuscripts, typescripts and corrected proofs. There may also be diaries, notebooks, letters to and from, even photographs and recorded tapes: anything, says Larkin, "that makes up the archive of a creative writer's life and constitutes the background of his works".¹⁰ In advancing this definition, Larkin makes the important observation, echoed recently by Michele Field in an article in the *Australian Book Review*,¹¹ that all literary manuscripts have two kinds of value: what might be called the magical value and the meaningful value. The magical value is the older and more universal: "this is the paper he wrote on, these are the words as he wrote them, emerging for the first time in this particular miraculous combination."¹² This appeal is certainly a potent one and it is difficult to avoid its influence when valuing or assessing collections of literary manuscripts.

The meaningful value, however, is of course the more realistic and is the one which should, and does, carry the greatest weight in any consideration given by libraries to the building of research collections for use by scholars. In assessing a collection for purchase, the librarian will certainly ask how effectively does a manuscript or a set of papers help to enlarge our knowledge and understanding of a writer's life and work. Larkin sums it up best when he says: "A manuscript can show the cancellations, the substitutions, the shifting towards the ultimate form and final meaning. A notebook simply by being a fixed sequence of pages can supply evidence of chronology. Unpublished work, unfinished work, even notes towards unwritten work all contribute towards our knowledge of a writer's intentions; his letters and diaries add to what we know of his life and the circumstances in which he wrote".¹³

Generally speaking, this statement identifies the criteria applied by the National Library when evaluating and considering for purchase collections of modern literary manuscripts. In determining a purchase price, the Library will also take into account the extent to which a collection adds to existing strengths and consolidates, complements or extends its overall holdings. One factor which may influence the Library in its consideration, is whether a substantial holding of papers of a particular writer is located elsewhere. In such a situation, there may be little point in expending from limited resources a sum which could be spent more effectively in acquiring a complete collection of papers.

Alternatively, the Library may prefer to make a smaller offer possibly incurring some displeasure from the writer who may at best feel disappointed and at worst insulted.

In dealing with contemporary material or work of relatively recent origin, the manuscript librarian must sometimes feel reservations about determining values since in order to arrive at a figure he or she must finally come face to face with the subject of literary evaluation, traditionally an academic concern. However sensitive one is, however literate, however well read, up-to-date and knowledgeable one is about modern Australian writing, the fact remains that a purchase price has to be determined which must take into account and balance the reputation of the writer, the short and long term research value of the papers in question and the literary importance of the material which is being offered. Writers and scholars both may ask what qualifications, what judgements are brought to bear in dealing with these problems. In answer, it must be stated that there is, after all, a general consensus about which writers are thought to be good. Librarians do rely on the critical reviews published in the press and in the literary magazines and academic journals; and a real effort is made to be guided by the interests and requirements of writers themselves and of research scholars and, if doubt remains, to seek the expert opinion and counsel of academic advisers who frequently prove generous and wise in the support and

advice they give. To set a value in monetary terms is in any case a crude undertaking and one which must at times offend the sensibilities of the writer whose work is being offered for sale. It is easiest, cleanest and more objective when the reputation of the writer is securely established or when life is extinct but the work remains; it is hardest of all when a career stands at mid-term and the writer's work has not yet reached a point where it may be judged with ease or certainty.

It is difficult, obviously, to refer to specific negotiations conducted by the National Library since we take the view that these are of a personal nature and should remain, for the present, private and confidential. Each purchase, however, is carefully documented and a record is kept on file of the arguments considered either for or against the acquisition of collections of papers. In time, these official records of the Library will come to serve as some kind of indicator of how well or badly several generations of librarians performed in applying their judgements, and of how fair minded and generous the institution itself was in applying its resources to the acquisition of materials which, in their sum, constitute part of the artistic and cultural heritage of our country. In the long term, one hopes, the collections themselves will stand to reflect and reveal the quality and the character of our national literature and to be a fair and true and representative record of the variety and diversity of Australian writing.

FOOTNOTES

1. C. A. Burmester, "The collection of Australian historical records", *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 2 No. 2 (December 1961), 25-26.
2. Robert B. Downs, *Australian and New Zealand Library Resources* (London, Mansell, 1979), p. 18.
3. Note the view expressed by the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales in 1916: "The splendid endowment of the Mitchell Library has so far proved ample for requirements. It has enabled the Trustees to continue the collection of Australian books, pamphlets etc., and to purchase whatever suitable manuscripts have been offered at reasonable prices". In 1916 the Library recorded the purchase of "A large collection of Marcus Clarke's MSS. and a collection MS Poems, Letters etc. of Adam Lindsay Gordon." *Annual Report*, 1916 p. 2. In March 1927 the Library Committee of the Commonwealth National Library secured the manuscripts of the poet Henry Kendall for the sum of £220.0.0. See Minutes of meeting of the Library Committee, 17 March 1927.
4. *Annual Report*, 1916 p. 2.
5. Philip Larkin "A neglected responsibility: contemporary literary MSS", *Encounter*, July 1979, 33.
6. See, for example, Michele Field, "Abandonments, magic papers and dogs with bones", *Australian Book Review*, June 1980, 17-18.
7. See, for example, *The Australian Author*, Vol. 12 No. 3. (July 1980), 9.
8. Field *op. cit.*, p. 18.
9. Personal conversation with Dr R. F. Brissenden, Chairman of the Literature Board of the Australia Council, June, 1980.
10. Larkin, *op. cit.*, p. 33.
11. Field *op. cit.*, p. 18.
12. Larkin *op. cit.*, pp. 33-34.
13. *Ibid.*, p. 34.