

Co-operation for the Future: the Manuscripts Programme at the Battye Library

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The Battye Library, in Perth, is responsible (among other things) for government and private archives, and administering legal deposit requirement in Western Australia. Although a vigorous solicitation programme is pursued in private archives, staff can no longer cope with the vast increase in manuscripts from individuals, organisations, societies etc, which have come to light due to the increased interest in history engendered by Western Australia's sesquicentenary in 1979. This article examines the development of the manuscripts programme and deals with collecting policy and the need for greater co-operation between institutions at a local level and raises the idea of community involvement.

A State institution cannot expect to single-handedly collect, arrange and preserve all historically important documents. Changes in research trends, requiring a broader collecting policy than in the past, and a growing historical awareness among organizations, are contributory factors to this state of affairs. If people and organizations are prepared to arrange and preserve significant documents that are unlikely ever to be deposited in an archival institution then they must be offered all necessary encouragement and professional advice. This article examines the development of the manuscripts programme in the Battye Library in the light of these issues. It deals with collecting policy and the need for greater co-operation between institutions at a local level.

The J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History and State Archives, as its name implies, is responsible for the government and private archives, and also functions as a legal deposit library for material published within the State. In several of the other Australian States, separate institutions have come to be responsible for government and private archives respectively; South Australia has been the latest to follow this trend.¹ In Western Australia, the Battye Library sees advantages in providing both original and published sources to researchers. The demands on staff under

this combined operations system (library procedures and archival principles being practised in an integrated service) are considerable. For staff to be able to offer a thorough reference service they need some knowledge of collections, as well as knowledge of particular sources. Staff are also expected to be aware of the objectives of The Library Board of Western Australia (the Battye Library being one division of this organisation).

Mollie Lukis² in 1956 and Margaret Medcalf³ in 1967 have both discussed the historical development of the Battye Library and the private archives collection. Most early deposits were of local personal papers, but approaches made to business firms, institutions, societies, trade unions, pastoral station lessees and decendants (in England and elsewhere) of pioneer officials also brought in considerable material. Records relating to regional and local history were acquired by means of country trips. At the time these subject areas were felt to be the most significant. Such records were either accepted as donations or borrowed for copying onto microfilm. Descriptions of these early acquisitions are to be found in *The Records of Western Australia*,⁴ *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia*⁵ and articles by F. Crowley⁶ and M. Lukis⁷ in *University Studies in History*.

Until the late 1970's private organizations and individuals in Western Australia showed little interest in their own history. All too often records long kept in back rooms were eventually destroyed, given to interested individuals, or on rare occasions deposited in the Battye Library. This situation improved greatly in 1979 with Western Australia's sesquicentennial celebrations causing a great surge of interest in history at all levels; individual, family, local, business, society and governmental.

The Battye Library's role is more than just that of collector and preserver. While the staff always encourage the owners of records to deposit them in the Battye Library, the staff are also regularly called upon for advice by individuals and organizations who want to establish their own archives. With the limited resources available to the Library it is unable to identify, list and preserve all historically important documents in Western Australia. That would be an impossible task for any single institution. The Library acts as co-ordinator and adviser to businesses, churches, societies and local museums who wish to preserve their own archives or collections of records.

According to F.G. Ham "Awareness, education and training are basic ingredients"⁸ for such a role. An increasing amount of staff time is spent in discussion with representatives of organizations wishing to arrange their records. This is augmented by the meetings and workshops conducted by the local branch of the Australian Society of Archivists. Some organizations are willing to undertake the responsibility of an archives;⁹

others, after discussion, decide to deposit their records in the Battye Library. For those who do establish their own archives advice is provided on the arrangement and storage of printed material, original documents, photographs, maps, oral history and conservation principles.

There is a close working relationship between library staff and the staff of the Western Australian Museum, who are able to offer advice to amateur archivists about the preservation and arrangement of artifacts and the display of this type of material. Library staff participate in seminars for country museums which are organized by the Western Australian Museum. The historical record of a business, society or individual often takes many forms, and it is very convenient to have the expertise regarding these arrangements and preservation of these disparate items centralized within the two institutions which, as an added advantage, are physically next door to one another.

With increasing frequency advice is being given to businesses on records management and the scheduling of records to ensure their systematic transfer to archives. A number of long-established Western Australian businesses began operations in a small way and gradually increased in size. No commensurate evolution in the records systems has occurred and the systems are generally still operating as they would have done fifty years ago. With the growth of the businesses the old records systems can no longer cope effectively and storage has become a problem. To plan and implement an adequate system requires far more time than can be spared by Battye Library personnel. These staff can offer general advice on records management but in most cases there is also need for a consultant.

As stated earlier the structure of the Battye Library within The Library Board of Western Australia poses some problems. The structure also has its strong points. For example staff within the Board have regular contact with public libraries throughout the State, the Business Information Centre explains the Board's services to local businesses, and the Community Information Project officers have built up a large resource file. All staff are aware of the functions of each division and are able to promote its services. This information about the Battye Library's role and services is broadcast far more widely than would be possible if it operated independently.

Private archives are unique and vulnerable. The policy of the Battye Library has always been to accept material of archival value, even if it cannot be processed on arrival. In the absence of concomitant staff growth, inevitably this practice led to backlog. In order to provide basic documentary control on such deposits a simple but effective card system is maintained. Called COMAP (Checklist of Manuscripts Awaiting Processing) it provides access to each group of unprocessed records by donor or subject. At present the Battye Library holds 733 linear metres of

processed private archives (not including microfilm) and 107 metres of unprocessed private archives. The following table shows the inadequacy of staff resources in relation to the increased acquisitions.

YEAR	Record groups deposited	Quantity processed (in linear metres)	Professional staff, full-time positions
1977	*	19.0	1/2
1978	*	19.3	1/2
1979	110	16.8	3/4
1980	115	14.3	3/4
1981	153	30.3	+1 1/4

* Statistics were not compiled prior to 1979

+ From 1 July 1982, due to staff constraints, there is once again only 3/4 of a professional staff position devoted to this collection.

A collecting policy and a soliciting programme are both essential for efficient planning. The Battye Library has a very broad collecting policy, that is, it is interested in any historically important document relating to Western Australia. With the development of local, society and business archives, a steadily increasing quantity of material is being preserved and made available to researchers. Small archives generally make the more important documents in their collections available to the Battye Library for microfilming, thus ensuring that one copy is preserved in the event of the other's loss. The library has always had a solicitation programme but it had fallen into arrears and only since August 1981 has it been formally reinstated and is presently concerned with following up contacts already on file. Contact is made by a letter or telephone call followed by a personal visit. By these means it is possible to ascertain whether or not the records have been destroyed or dispersed and whether the owners are willing to deposit the surviving records with the Library. Unfortunately letters soliciting records are rarely answered, and so personal contact is essential. The solicitation files are an important source of information for researchers and help staff in planning for the future.

In the past acquisition policies have perforce been centred on collecting the papers of prominent people, reflecting the research trends of the time. Today's collecting policies need to ensure the retention of the records of a broader spectrum of society. The State institution now finds itself in a situation where it alone cannot collect, arrange and preserve all historically important documents. A huge injection of funds might make this feasible, but, given today's economic climate it is extremely unlikely. Even if the finance was available, this would not necessarily be the ideal solution. A better alternative would be the utilization of what may be termed

community involvement. A group of enthusiastic and competent amateurs exists within reach and with guidance they could arrange collections that would not otherwise be available to researchers. This issue of community involvement is one that all State libraries and archives should be addressing. There is need for more co-operation between organizations in such areas as records surveys, collecting policies, the exchange of information regarding collections and the development and sharing of compatible finding aids.

FOOTNOTES

1. See South Australiana Library, in *Media Release*, Vol 2, No. 5, September 1982.
2. Lukis, M.F.F. A note on the treatment of manuscripts in the Archives Branch of the State Library, Perth, Western Australia, *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 1, No.2, June 1956, p. 6-9.
3. Medcalf, M., The Battye Library: Two decades of development, *Library Association of Australia, 14th Biennial Conference, 21-25 August 1967*, p. 255-272.
4. Crowley, F.K. *Records of Western Australia*. Perth, University of Western Australia, 1953.
5. National Library of Australia. *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia*. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1965.
6. Crowley, F.K. Western Australian History, 1952-64, *University Studies in History*, Vol 4, No. 2, 1963-64, p. 9-34.
7. Lukis, M.F.F. Western Australian Records, 1949-64, *University Studies in History*, Vol 4, No. 2, 1963-64, p. 35-46.
8. Ham, F.G. Wisconsin: governmental archives in an academic environment; *Government Publications Review*, 8A 1981, p. 303-309.
9. In relation to government archives, *The Library Board of Western Australia Act 1951-1974*, Section 26 (1) reads: 'The Board may enter into an agreement under the provisions of this Act with a public office for any or all of the State Archives of that public office to remain in the custody of that public office.' Two State institutions operate under agreements made with the Board. They are the Rural and Industries Bank and the University of Western Australia.