

Knowing Our Own History, A Further Dimension

Marjorie Jacobs*

Phyllis Mander-Jones had retired as Mitchell Librarian by the time the Archives Act of 1960 made provision for an Archives Office separate from the Public Library of New South Wales. For more than a decade before her retirement she had sought to create a greater awareness among readers of the riches of the Mitchell Library's holdings in public and private records and had done much to create an environment in which their scholarly value came to be more widely known. As I look back on those years and the interest we shared in the archives of the state, I think of two aspects of her work which particularly impressed me as a user of the Mitchell Library: her involvement in the administration of the state's archives in a chain of responsibilities which, I must admit, were never quite clear to me; and, more broadly, the awareness of archives, private as well as public, which she sought to encourage outside her profession.

By virtue of her appointment as Mitchell Librarian, Phyllis Mander-Jones had responsibility for the administration of the archives of New South Wales, which in 1946 were housed in scattered bays of the Library. The linking of library and archives was of long standing. As long ago as 1914 the Premier directed departments to transfer to the Mitchell Library records which were deemed to be of permanent value. Reissued from time to time such instructions were the basis on which attempts to prevent destruction of old files rested. Chiefly at the instigation of the preceding Mitchell Librarian, Ida Leeson, major transfers of the records of the pre-1856 period occurred between 1933 and 1937. Before the outbreak of war prevented further action, it appears to have been the intention of the government that the Mitchell Library would become 'the unofficial repository of Government records', but when Phyllis-Mander Jones took over in 1946 there was no professional archivist on the staff and the work of listing and description by trained staff had barely begun. A major breakthrough came a few years later, when Gordon Richardson¹ completed his survey of the Colonial Secretary's papers to 1856 as a postgraduate thesis in the University of Sydney, but there were other series to be opened to scholars and disused files to be located in the departments.

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Moreover the problem was growing. Pressure on departments to dispose of records grew with the wartime and postwar accumulation of papers at a time when space was at a premium. Some major transfers to the Mitchell Library occurred as the new Mitchell Librarian established contacts with departments, notable among them the valuable Supreme Court papers whose importance for the early years of the colony Phyllis Mander-Jones immediately recognised and whose transfer, I understand, she had sought.

My association with the archives, and my friendship with Phyllis which I was to value till her death, began in 1950 when I approached her with a proposal for a survey of departmental records already transferred to the Mitchell Library and for the location of others still retained in the departments. I was chiefly concerned about the availability of archival materials for use in theses and research, having returned not long before from a long spell of working in the Public Record Office in London. Familiar with scholarly use of the Public Record Office she was equally anxious to increase access to the New South Wales archives and welcomed the proposal. With a research assistant provided by the University of Sydney and unrestricted access to the Mitchell Library stacks, the project continued until the creation of an Archives Department within the Public Library and the assignment of staff to archival work rendered further surveys of the type I had undertaken redundant. For her, of course, the creation of an Archives Department did not mean the end of her responsibilities, for the state archives continued to be housed and used in the Mitchell Library.

Throughout those years Phyllis Mander-Jones was constantly interested in our work and constantly helpful. Invariably loyal and sensitive to any comment that might be taken to imply criticism of the Mitchell Library, she had the generosity of spirit and breadth of understanding to allow our friendship and her support to remain unaffected when I became convinced that it was necessary to establish an independent archival institution and expressed views that must have conflicted with those which she held by virtue of her position, if not through strong personal conviction. In fact I never knew how she really felt about the issue.

Phyllis Mander-Jones had an unusual ability to act quickly and wisely in situations which called for immediate decision, especially involving the location or preservation of manuscripts. I recall particularly the occasion when I reported to her that an enquiry at the Treasury about records missing from those transferred to the Mitchell Library had led to my being directed to Goldsborough House, a warehouse belonging to Goldsborough Mort & Co., a short distance from the Mitchell Library, which had become a dumping place for older departmental records. My description, written at the time, may serve as a reminder of conditions that prevailed at the time she worked to effect improvements —

It was an amazing place... On entering, one was confronted with a littered pile of papers and letter-books on the floor, and then, in semi-darkness, row upon row of shelves reaching to the ceiling stacked untidily with massive account books and records from the Treasury. Dust and the all too pressing evidence of rats and spiders added to the impression of neglect. Beyond this section were areas marked off by wire netting for other departments. Perhaps the most interesting feature was the pile of papers collected near a goods lift towards the back awaiting removal to the paper mills, for it was the practice as space was needed for incoming records to create it by the simple expedient of sending older accumulations to be pulped.

Disturbing as the discovery was for an historian, I recall now that it never occurred to me to do more than report the discovery to Phyllis Mander-Jones, confident that she would act quickly and effectively.

The support which I enjoyed was typical of her approach to research and her enthusiastic interest in scholarship. 'We are,' she told the Royal Australian Historical Society about this time, 'at the beginning of a long road if we are to be adequately equipped to know our own history'. The location of manuscripts overseas and the Joint Copying Project, and at home the extension of manuscript sources through additions to the collections of private papers as well as improved control over government records were different routes to this goal. Her unceasing energy, accessibility, and friendly interest in the users of the Mitchell Library were qualities recognised and valued by students and distinguished scholars alike. She shared in the intellectual excitement of their research and their delight in an unexpected discovery or a new dimension given to a subject by the location of material previously overlooked.

The range of her interests was impressive. Nor was it confined to Australian history. She had a sensitive appreciation of book illustration, revealed, for example, in her interest in Westall's drawings and Lewin's illustrations, and a great love of the countryside whether it was the bush around Sydney or the charming garden she and her sister shared in England. As I write I think of her as I last saw her, a patient in a private hospital in Sydney after a sudden illness had delayed her return to Adelaide, sketch book in hand, a creditable drawing of wildflowers just completed, and speaking of her dissatisfaction with her attempt to capture the elusive and fragile quality of the flowers.

These qualities of personality and intellect won her much respect outside her profession, and when she took the lead in recruiting members in Sydney for the newly formed Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia she found a ready response among historians who joined the Association and regularly attended meetings of the Section while she was active in it. That she saw the Archives Section as a meeting place of those who were professionally qualified members of the Association and those whose interest was in the use of libraries and archives for their own

research, was typical of her outlook on scholarship and of her own experience. She was both scholar and librarian as her work on overseas manuscripts was to illustrate.

NOTES

1. Later Principal Librarian, Public Library N.S.W., and Principal Archivist, Archives Office of N.S.W.

A Most Productive Career and Retirement

Allan Horton*

There must be something about the ambience of the Mitchell Library which preserves the body and the mind. When I was a young junior clerk, forty years ago at the then Public Library of New South Wales, Hugh Wright, Mitchell Librarian from 1909 to 1932, was pointed out to me by older colleagues as the despair of the State Superannuation Board actuaries. Ida Leeson, another Mitchell Librarian, was another long liver. Phyllis Mander-Jones who succeeded her, and with whom I had the good fortune to work as a colleague despite my inexperience and youth, was yet another Mitchell Librarian who had a long and most productive career and an extraordinarily scholarly retirement.

Through good chance John Metcalfe, the Principal Librarian, had asked me to become Archives Officer of the Public Library of New South Wales when in 1953 the Public Service Board agreed that it would be the Library's task to be responsible for the management of the State's archives, and to set up a limbo for little used non-current records. This appointment led me into close contact with Miss Mander-Jones for the Mitchell Library continued its responsibility for reference service from State archives.

It is worth commenting at this point that the records already in the Mitchell Library included material from the first days of the Colony such as the early convict indents, the surviving records of the Secretary to the Governor, the invaluable Colonial Secretary's files and the records of the Courts of both Civil and Criminal Judicature. These had survived in something like the original order, only because of the Mitchell Library's interest and care. There are hair raising stories of the Court records being

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