

Identifying Needs, Selecting Persons

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Every now and then, sometimes decades apart, you meet a person who makes a deep, lasting impression on you. The encounter, whether short or long, remains part of your experience — you become a person with new insights, new awareness. And if this encounter happens at a critical time of your life the effect of it is even more decisive: the direction of your life is changed.

I joined the staff of the Public Library of New South Wales in March 1951, having just escaped the last few months of my labouring contract exacted from me by the Department of Immigration for having arrived as a Displaced Person refugee in July 1949. The marble palace in Macquarie Street — after twenty months in brickworks and textile factories — was a great relief: my dream from early adulthood was a career meandering 'twixt libraries and academia.

For ten months I worked at the reference desk. My English, which I began learning on the ship, was still halting. Whenever the inquirers' telephone rang, I picked it up with the mixed feeling of dread and daring: the ordeal by telephone had to be faced and overcome. Yet, however satisfying it was to surmount difficulties and master librarianship in a foreign language, it was not quite what I had hoped for: I longed to be involved in the subject field of a collection, to become part of it, not only as a dispenser, but also as a scholar.

At the beginning of 1952, after ten months in the General Reference Department, I was told to report to Miss Mander-Jones. I was transferred to the Mitchell Library which being the Holy of Holies was until then almost out of bounds to me.

My initial impression did not change in the years which followed, it only became amplified with familiarity and a growing affection. The firm, but kind head of a department, courteous at all times, revealed herself as a lady of letters, a passionate devotee of Australiana, a tireless worker and a wise senior.

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I had already spent a year in the Mitchell Library, working at the desk, and becoming involved in ever larger indexing and organisational projects, when one day she called me into her office. Unheralded, and unexpected, she took a large bundle of papers from the lower cupboard of her desk. The neatly tied-up pile was about ten inches high and, as I later found out, contained notes and memoranda going back some twenty years. She told me that for long years past renewed inquiries were made on what to do about maps, which at that time lay uncatalogued in odd corners in the Library, or, to make them amenable to book-discipline, were cut up and boxed to look like monographs. She emphasised how important historical maps were and told me that she realised the difficulties involved. But she would like me to have a look at them and report back later.

I took the bundle and during the months which followed I devised a system which became in due course the foundation on which Australian map librarianship was built.¹

To identify a need, to select a person who can answer it, to encourage and motivate was as much typical of Phyllis Mander-Jones as it was that once the person became involved, and the project took off, she supervised it only from a distance, encouraging, never interfering, yet ensuring that staff and materials will be available. It was this combination of her scholarly stature, astute matching of available staff and tasks, her ability to inspire and obtain loyalty, which enabled her to solve during her stewardship two of the most pressing organisational problems of the Mitchell Library: through Suzanne Mourot the handling of pictures and manuscripts, and through me the organisation of maps. With both Suzanne and myself becoming foundation lecturers in special materials at John Metcalfe's School of Librarianship at the University of New South Wales, the patterns set at Phyllis Mander-Jones' instigation at the Mitchell Library became standards in most Australian libraries.

By selecting me to work on maps Phyllis Mander-Jones opened for me a unique chance for advancement. Yet her subtle influence went much deeper. She opened my eyes to the fascination of Australian history and the value of Australiana. I become reborn in the scholarly atmosphere which she generated around herself, and which I had missed so much since my arrival. Though speaking with an accent, I was made to feel, and felt at home in Phyllis Mander-Jones' Mitchell Library where eventually it fell to me to become the custodian of the most hallowed manuscripts and maps of my new homeland.

Memories of Phyllis Mander-Jones. A few weeks after presenting my map report, a group of historical society members from a country town visited the Mitchell Library. Miss Mander-Jones decided to talk to them in the galleries and asked me if I would give a lecturette, too. It was only three years since I had started to learn English. She must have known what it would mean to my self-esteem, nay, to my future. It was one of her wise and

kind deeds, full of insight. Thirty years later, when I gave a lecture to the Australian Academy of Social Sciences in Canberra, I remembered that little lecturette.

Elsie was a cataloguer in the Mitchell Library. It was hard to keep a secret: staff and readers saw us together inside and outside the Library. We decided to announce our engagement to Miss Mander-Jones the day before it became official. We walked up to her door, I knocked, and having received a call, let Elsie go ahead, following behind. Miss Mander-Jones sat at her desk, and lowering her glasses looked at both of us with surprise — ‘But Dr Kunz, cannot you see that Miss Thompson came in first, please leave until I’ve talked to her’. Busy as ever, and completely absorbed in her work through the weeks and months which passed by, she was the only one who did not know. Just as well we told her.

I am probably biased, but I think that I was privileged to work in the Mitchell Library when it reached its apogee. The manuscripts, picture and map collections became organised, and the reading room, where another Mander-Jones appointee, Margaret MacDonald, was in charge, was every day bedecked with flowers, mostly brought by grateful readers.

As the mid-fifties arrived, Miss Mander-Jones became visibly older, tired and often drained. She worked on her bibliographic projects, she tried to defend the Mitchell Library against encroachments by other parts of the Library, she corresponded unceasingly to secure donations, and she ran, as the executive member, the Mitchell Library Committee. Yet, however overlaid with work, she was always ready to receive inquirers, donors and staff; attentive, ladylike, somewhat severe but always kind.

Her road led her to London, and later to Adelaide. We went to live in Canberra. But whenever she happened to come there, Phyllis, as she became to us, always visited the Kunz household. We received her with affection and looked at her with the reverence that she so thoroughly deserved.

FOOTNOTE

1. For a brief account of Dr Kunz’s work in organising the map collection, see his paper ‘Providing the reader with maps’ in *Library resources for the nation*, Papers of the Eleventh Bi-ennial Conference of the L.A.A., Melbourne, 1961, pp. 142-144.