

Illusory Enemy

H.J. Gibbney*

After three months experience in the archival profession, I became the Sydney manager for the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library in 1952. Used to the relatively primitive conditions then prevalent in Canberra, I found myself and a pleasant young lady typist sharing what seemed at first sight to be a luxury office suite lined with plywood panelling in the Grace Building on York Street. Experience soon showed that the beauty was no more than skin deep. The office was on street level and all of the immense flood of traffic entering Sydney from the Harbour Bridge passed within ten feet of my desk, while the cacophony was further complicated by the fact that the electric train tunnels, directly beneath the office, were prone to rumble loudly at regular intervals.

In my secondary role as Sydney representative of the National Library I decided that I must pay some courtesy calls since my position was not unlike that of a naval officer far from his home base. I knew where the Public Library of New South Wales was and I seem to remember presenting myself to the Principal Librarian, Mr John Metcalfe, who duly passed me on to Miss Mander-Jones. Whether I received a first impression, or whether I derived a composite picture from later meetings, I do not really know, but a mental image does remain of a rather old-fashioned office with much woodwork,¹ and many pictures, all of which served to set off a thin, elderly woman with very direct eyes, a mouth which seemed severe until she smiled — not infrequently — and a musical contralto voice. The voice remains my principal memory. Memory says she favoured light-coloured clothing.

I probably met Miss Mander-Jones a number of times during my two and a half years in Sydney but, despite her invariable old-fashioned courtesy, I never really got past the stage of occasional acquaintance. This was due in part at least to the fact that in archival politics I was decidedly on the left wing. Brainwashed by Ian Maclean,² I resented the subordination

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of archivists to librarians and saw Miss Mander-Jones as a prominent member of the enemy camp. I occasionally spent an evening in the Mitchell Library on work of my own and, from the depths of my limited experience, looked contemptuously at the old Mitchell Library card catalogue of manuscripts and probably associated Miss Mander-Jones with it. I had attended the foundation meeting of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia in Melbourne in 1951 but, as I was not then working in archives as such, I remember little about it except the fact that H.L. White (later Sir Harold White) the Commonwealth National Librarian was prominent.³ By 1952 I saw the Library Association as something to be avoided and preferred the unofficial group of Sydney archivists which Allan Horton and I established.

I was married in Melbourne at the end of 1954 and my wife and I returned for a month in Sydney before settling in Canberra. Anxious to show off my bride, I decided to introduce her formally to Miss Mander-Jones and discovered that, though a librarian, she was by no means an enemy. She spent a great deal of time in personally conducting us all over the Library, gave us lunch and, with great pride, displayed the view from the roof. Why David Macmillan, the University of Sydney Archivist, was with the party I do not remember, but he too had nothing but praise for the courtesy of Miss Mander-Jones. Even so, I was not particularly pleased on my return from the New Guinea archival survey in April 1955, to discover that in my absence the *Bulletin for Australian Archivists*⁴ had been handed to the Archives Section and renamed *Archives and Manuscripts*.⁵

I do not remember seeing Miss Mander-Jones again until probably 1963 or 1964 when I met her in the corridor of the old Archives Division Annexe in Canberra where she had called on somebody, probably Maclean. I was quite horrified by the change in her. A woman who might once have been described as statuesque was now suffering from some condition which had so distorted her spine that she was forced to walk in a crouched position. Still, the old pleasant smile and courtesy remained. I was on my way home and I walked with her up the dusty road which led from the Annexe to the nearest sealed road behind the Foreign Affairs Department building. There we parted and I never saw her again.

I never really knew Miss Mander-Jones well but I respected her invariable kindly courtesy and eventually learned enough of her work to respect that, too. I think both the archival and library professions have suffered from the loss of the sort of scholarship that she represented.

FOOTNOTES

1. With its impressive partly stained-glass entrance doors, the office of the Mitchell Librarian remains much the same today.
2. Chief Archivist of the Archives Division.

3. At this meeting Phyllis Mander-Jones was elected as the Archives Section Representative Councillor on the L.A.A. Council.
4. An informal publication begun in 1954 by Gibbney and Horton. (See *Archives and Manuscripts* vol. 6, no. 5, Nov. 1975, pp. 193-194, and vol. 13, no. 2, Nov. 1985, pp. 113-115.) Gibbney, nevertheless, became one of the first editors of *Archives and Manuscripts*.
5. At the suggestion of Miss Mander-Jones. See *Archives and Manuscripts* vol. 6, no. 5, p.194.

An Intense Interest in the World About Her

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When I joined the staff of the Mitchell Library in 1954 Phyllis Mander-Jones was in her last few years as Mitchell Librarian. It was her knowledge and enthusiasm and her devotion to the vast collection of Australiana under her care that brought Australian history to life for me.

In November 1956 she left for London and became, in 1957, the Library Liaison Officer for the Public Library of New South Wales and later the Australian Joint Copying Project Officer. Apart from a brief meeting in 1958 when I visited London, I did not see her again until towards the end of 1964 when she came back to London to begin work on the guide to *Manuscripts in the British Isles relating to Australia, New Zealand and the Pacific*. She had returned to Australia in 1963 to do some preliminary work for the guide just as I was on my way to London to take up the post of Library Liaison Officer.

The Institute of Commonwealth Studies in Russell Square made a room available to her for her work, and later she moved to an office near Australia House. She lived in a room in London during the week, and at weekends she returned home to the cottage at Dorchester-on-Thames which she shared with her sister Mildred. It was just over an hour's coach ride from London.

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