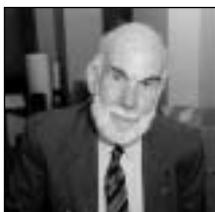


Drawing on more than fifty years of experience, an Australian historian charts the development of library and archival resources in Australia during that period and looks at changes in the nature of the demands which have been made of these resources. He looks at some of the issues arising from the revolution in information technology in recent decades and speculates on the adaptations which will be expected of both libraries and their users in promoting the national research endeavour in the early 21st century.

CONFESSIONS OF A LIBRARY USER



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Having accepted an invitation to present a paper on the importance of Australian resources and of collections such as the Mitchell Library to the National Research Endeavour, I was gripped with doubt when I came to the drafting stage. Their importance seemed so self-evident. One might as well talk for half-an-hour to prove the proposition that Shane Warne is a tolerably competent bowler or that Sydney Harbour contains a lot of water. Reflection suggested that my self-evident truth may be your dogma and his or her superstitious belief. Although in this audience the importance of libraries and archives to the National Research Endeavour might be taken for granted, the case needs to be made for a wider public. Though the measurers and quantifiers who allocate research funding have insatiable appetites for the kind of evidence which can be encapsulated in ticked boxes there are other arguments worth exploring. I ask your indulgence for approaching these arguments autobiographically.

I do not quite remember the period when books were chained to their shelves and researchers used quill pens, but when I became an undergraduate at the University of Western Australia in 1948 my introduction to the use of the University library was confined to an hour during orientation - itself at that time a fairly newfangled concept. We were shown how to interpret the Dewey system and how to apply for reserved books and little more. The University library was one of the only two important repositories of non-fiction for more than two thousand kilometres. The other was the State Library of Western Australia, then in its sixth decade of administration by Dr James Sykes Battye. In his first twenty years of service under the benign chairmanship of Sir Winthrop Hackett, Battye had acquired books and serials from many sources, but following Hackett's death he had yielded to the policies of State Governments obsessed with agricultural development, and accepted a

pitifully inadequate annual grant. It was a recipe for stagnation. The library staff, decent, unambitious men secure in a government job, would not accept telephoned inquiries and paid little attention to the users who came in person. So it was that I was able to spend more time than I ought exploring the stacks, and so it was that elderly pensioners looking for a sheltered environment could doze for hours at the less conspicuous tables. Some of them favoured the newspaper room, where seekers after the perfect system for beating the odds at the races were apt to bring razor blades to excise the sporting pages in the *West Australian* and the *Daily News*.

The liveliest corner of the establishment was the recently established State Archives, where the modern-minded Mollie Lukis was addressing herself to the task of bringing order to more than a century of government documents while at the same time encouraging private donors to lodge their papers with the State Library. She had to proceed cautiously, as it was only a decade since the death of the last Western Australian convict, and many families did not want it known that grandfather had not paid his own fare to the colony. There was not the destruction of convict records which is alleged to have taken place in Tasmania, but there was a fairly widespread conviction, shared by Dr Battyé himself, that the convict interlude was an unfortunate episode best hurried past while Western Australians concentrated on the pioneering virtues of the 1829 settlers or the striking achievements of Sir John Forrest and the gold rush era.

My undergraduate experience was of course mostly with the University Library, and I remember it affectionately on several counts. Perhaps academic routine was less demanding

than it is in our own era of quality control, but there was time for a student to explore outside his or her own subjects. So it was that I came to a smattering of American literature, Freudian psychology and Greek philosophy, of course in translation; none of it particularly relevant to my choice of career or to the strengthening of Australia's national income, but enormously invigorating in stretching the horizons of a young Western Australian. I wonder whether the measurers and quantifiers who hold the purse strings for Australia's libraries today give enough thought to the intellectual and psychic stimulus which results when young people have time and opportunity to explore as free-range undergraduates rather than intellectual battery chickens who must be fattened for their careers in the shortest possible time.

The professor of English at the University of Western Australia at that time was Allan Edwards. A North Country lad, he won a scholarship to Cambridge in the early 1930's and became a star pupil of the formidable literary critic, F R Leavis; but he married young and had to find academic employment in the colonies, where he became a disappointed and (in terms of research publication) unproductive cynic. In compensation he developed an active and discerning taste in the fine arts, and was eventually to be responsible for facing down criticism and enabling the University to acquire a fine collection of early Sydney Nolan paintings long before fashion sent the prices into the stratosphere. Within the Library he was responsible for the acquisition of many fine examples of English book production. These specimens of the work of the Hogarth Press, the Golden Cockerel Press and the

school of Eric Gill were housed in a special room, partly because some of them depicted nudes with greater precision than was customary around 1950. Senior students who proved worthy were admitted to browse; and so it was that the University Library taught me the value of books as cultural artefacts in which artistic and technological skills might be united to produce something beautiful. I would like to think it possible that libraries can still communicate this sense of the potential beauty as well as the utility of books.

Having graduated I began to use libraries for research. My timing, though I did not realise it then, was fortunate. A few years earlier the University of Melbourne had become the first in Australia to establish the doctorate of philosophy as an advanced research degree. Its Department of History under RM Crawford was quick to adopt the new postgraduate degree, impressing on its candidates the importance of using primary sources in historical research. The first postgraduate to gain his PhD, Frank Crowley, was appointed to a lectureship at the University of Western Australia in 1949 and there forged an alliance with Mollie Lukis at the State Archives. Within four years Crowley compiled a massive guide to the historical records of Western Australia, the first bibliography of its kind and extent anywhere in Australia.

Crowley supervised my Master of Arts thesis on the history of the Kimberley pastoral industry, and encouraged me to look out during my fieldwork for material which ought to find a safe home in Mollie Lukis' archives. It turned out that on several pastoral properties there were ledgers, letter books, correspondence and accounts going back in

some cases to the earliest years of colonisation in the 1890s. Sometimes these were carefully shelved and looked after, but in other cases it was a race with the white ants. The owners were usually surprised to know that anyone was interested in preserving the old documents, and happy to cooperate in shipping them to the State Library. Thus I learned about another role which libraries could fulfil. They were not merely repositories, but they could take a pro-active role in ensuring the recovery and preservation of materials which would otherwise be lost.

Between 1954 and 1958 I was away at Oxford, at first undertaking undergraduate units and later a doctorate on 18th Century Irish history. As might have been expected I was suitably impressed by such temples of the written word as the Bodleian Library at Oxford and was prepared to accept the discipline of waiting for three-quarters of an hour or more while written slips were transformed into the apparition of a short-tempered attendant with the books you required. It was only later in life that I got to know the Cambridge University Library, where readers enjoy access to a remarkably high proportion of its holdings on open shelves. In London the British Library was then still housed in the British Museum and readers were accommodated in Panizzi's Round Room. There it was easy to believe the story of the American scholar who wanted to see the desk where Karl Marx had studied, to which the attendant replied: "Oh yes, sir, now that Mr Marx. He hasn't been in for quite a while". Not all the Old World libraries were treated kindly by age. When the time came for me to undertake doctoral research at the National Library of Ireland in Dublin readers were once or twice inconvenienced because in

heavy rain the roof leaked. More than forty years later I went back there, and although the library was smartly re-decorated and heavily computerised the roof still leaked.

On returning to Australia in 1958 I went to a research fellowship at the Australian National University, and thus belatedly became acquainted with the libraries and archives of eastern Australia. Thanks to the munificence of David Scott Mitchell the Mitchell Library was already long established as the paradigm of an excellent research resource. The State Library of Victoria still bore the imprint of that 'golden age' between 1850 and 1890, when Sir Redmond Barry had felt able to lay its foundations by ordering every text mentioned in the footnotes to Gibbon's *Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*. Elsewhere conditions were inferior. The National Library of Australia was housed in a couple of Nissan huts in a green corner of the Molonglo Valley. The newspaper collection of the Queensland Parliamentary Library was housed in an outbuilding which I believe had formed part of the stables. Supervision was lax and although I appreciated the opportunity of exploring at liberty the heavy bound files of the *Cooktown Herald* and the *Mackay Mercury* it was evident that a moderately competent arsonist could have destroyed the lot without compunction.

Outside the libraries the arsonists were still at work. In 1957 the last editor-proprietor of the *Wild River Times* died intestate. For fifty years the *Wild River Times* had been the weekly newspaper for the tin-mining centre of Herberton in northern Queensland, but the 1930's Depression had brought an end to its publication and the editor lived on in the old

offices, his main possessions the newspaper's files and a Stanley steamer car. On his death the local Council hired a man to burn all the files of the *Wild River Times* although the Stanley steamer car was still intact when I visited Herberton two years later. As it happens an incomplete set of files still survives in the State Library of Victoria, but nobody at the time seems to have thought that an irreplaceable record of significant mining community had been doomed to destruction.

Of course things have improved greatly since the 1950s. The National Library of Australia is now handsomely housed and handsomely managed. Each of the state libraries has been rebuilt and extended, and their collections of monographs and primary sources have greatly grown, although they have not always been provided with the means to classify and index their holdings adequately. In most States legislation ensures the preservation of official records, and for the most part this legislation is complied with diligently. In my own state of Western Australia the post mortems which followed the 'WA Inc' scandals resulted in carefully designed procedures to ensure that no government records might be destroyed without the sanction of a well qualified committee attached to the Library Board of Western Australia. This committee takes cognisance of both paper and electronic records, and the State Records Office of Western Australia has built trust and cooperation with most departments, including some such as the Police Service who were originally sceptical of the exercise. But lapses still happen. The State Ministry for Fair Trading is currently under investigation for its actions, or lack of action, regarding the dealings of mortgage brokers. Somehow more

than one hundred boxes of relevant files have gone missing. In general, however, it is likely that the historian of the later 20th century is more likely to complain of becoming overwhelmed by the available material than of not being able to find any.

It is worth making this point, because some scholars have expressed pessimism about the consequences of the recent revolution in information technology. They argue that the art of letter writing is in decline as more and more people use email for personal and business communication without preserving hard copy for the benefit of future archives. It may well be that the use of electronic media will shape the language in which communications are written. There is a different empathy between the mind of the writer and the hand that wields a pen than there is between the mind of the writer and the fingers on a keyboard, but that is something which has been with us since the invention of the typewriter. But it doesn't seem a very original thought to say that the sensibility of one generation differs from the sensibility of its grandchildren, and that this sensibility is in part influenced by the available technology and media. We have only to consider the way in which popular music has evolved from the drawing room ballads of the Victorian era to the hard rock of our own time. Or we might take up a 19th Century volume of *Punch* with so many of the jokes dawdling feebly towards an unsurprising punch-line, and contrast its humour with the wisecracking repartee of television comedians whose impact must be immediate. The question for us is how much of our culture will be preserved for the future - how much should be preserved out of the never ending input available on television, on the internet, on all the media of the early 21st Century?

Let me dispose of one bogey which haunts some historians. I do not believe that much significant information is lost to posterity because it is communicated by telephone or email instead of in writing on paper. Paper is easy to destroy although many historians have experienced the frisson which comes of reading the correspondence of past generations and finding the postscript "Burn this letter". The absence of paper sometimes leads to controversy. To take one example: in 1966 Geoffrey Blainey published *The Tyranny of Distance* in which he advanced the theory that New South Wales was colonised in 1788 less as a penitentiary for convicts than as a potential source of flax and timber for British shipping. Alan Shaw and I, who had each worked in late 18th century British archives, disputed Blainey's theory on the grounds that most of the surviving written and printed evidence seemed to give priority to convict transportation as a motive. To this Blainey replied that the commercial factors underpinning British colonial policy were so thoroughly understood and taken for granted by politicians and civil servants that they would not have felt any necessity to spell them out on paper.

Now it would have been agreeable for all of us if a letter had survived dated somewhere around the middle of August 1786 in which William Pitt wrote to Lord Sydney:

I have been reflecting recently on the subject of convict transportation, and would suggest the eligibility of Botany Bay for the following reasons..

Unfortunately such a letter no longer survives, or if it does, has not been discovered. But the

search for such evidence has sent several first-class historians such as Alan Frost and Alan Atkinson quarrying the libraries and archives for background material about the foundation of New South Wales. Consequently we now have a reasonably acceptable and much subtler interpretation of the reasons for British settlement in Australia. Convict transportation was certainly an important motive force, but so were Britain's commercial and strategic interests. Australia can see itself not simply as a dumping ground for Britain's unwanted but as a source of strength and potential prosperity. However little value practical creators of wealth may place on historical research, it is surely important for a nation to have a clear view of its ultimate origins. I do not believe that Blainey and I and the others were wasting our time, or wasting the public investment in universities, when we debated that controversy, and we could not have advanced the understanding of the issues without the backup of good libraries and well managed archives.

Just as we do not possess written evidence for the point at which the Pitt ministry decided to send the convicts to Botany Bay, so we do not possess a record of the telephone conversation between the late Sir John Kerr and Mr Malcolm Fraser on the morning of 11 November 1975, shortly before Sir John as Governor General dismissed the Whitlam Government and invited Fraser to form a caretaker ministry. Sir John consistently asserted that he had said nothing to disclose his intentions to Malcolm Fraser. Fraser on the other hand, according to his biographer Philip Ayres, formed the impression that his invitation to go to Government House later that morning might lead to a vice-regal

commission. No doubt it would be good to have an accurate account of the conversation, but in most practical respects it does not matter. We know that Kerr thought that his powers as Head of State included the right to dismiss the Prime Minister without prior warning. We know that the Australian electorate subsequently endorsed the Fraser Government. For the purpose of serious constitutional debate, including the question of whether Australia should become a republic, that is all we need to know. One telephone conversation more or less despite its potential piquancy in detail, does not spoil our capacity to make judgements for the future properly informed by past experience.

In my experience as a library user the current revolution in information technology raises three debatable issues. One is the content of the material electronically delivered to researchers and students. Another is the issue of equitable access to this material. The third and perhaps the most practical for a conference like this one, concerns the shaping of priorities in a way which brings most benefit to Australia's research endeavour.

My concern about content takes a number of forms but one bears directly on the education of Australian tertiary students. Fifty years ago those of us among the minority of students who chose to specialise in the humanities and the social sciences would have seen our major competition as emerging from the classical physical sciences – chemistry, physics, mathematics. These were essential prerequisites for careers such as medicine, engineering, and agricultural science. Besides in the optimistic atmosphere of the early atomic period it was possible to hope that if we

did not destroy ourselves in a third world war, we might use nuclear power to make the Australian desert blossom and to bring an end to the dirty and dangerous labours of the coalminers. Bright young students did science. Fifty years later, Australia in common with much of the western world is finding that students are deserting the physical sciences even faster than they are deserting english and history. The trendy disciplines today are those in which students believe they will qualify to make a good deal of money quickly: business, information technology, law and medicine.

It could be argued that most of those disciplines are fields in which it is possible to communicate much of the necessary education through electronic media. The physical sciences still require an irreducible amount of time spent in laboratories engaged in hands-on experimentation. The humanities and the social sciences still involve an irreducible amount of time spent reading books, because books have the advantage of portability and the human intelligence is programmed so that many still find it easier to absorb information from the printed page rather than from successive instalments on the visual display unit. But business, law, information technology, even medicine all lend themselves to electronic communication. As demand for these courses continues to grow, we may well expect programmes to be produced which will facilitate the expansion in electronic education hailed by such authorities as Dr Dale Spender. Some will tend, as Dr Spender does, to see the use of electronic media as the answer to educational needs.

Doubts persist. In the teaching of my own subject, Australian history, for instance, it

would be comparatively easy to devise an educational package based on the well matured insights of Professor Geoffrey Bolton. But that would be to deny the students access to the different but equally valid insights of authors such as Geoffrey Blainey, Marilyn Lake, Stuart Macintyre, Jill Roe and many more whose interpretations although not seriously in dispute with mine at the factual level, would tell different stories and emphasise different factors. Of course a package could be devised encapsulating different points of view on, let us say, the significance of Eureka Stockade or the motives which led to women having the vote, but it would not really be an adequate substitute for the original books and articles in which historians advanced their views. There is a real risk that the programme will result in a homogenised product privileging one interpretation of the materials over others.

Traditional libraries in the Western world have served as storehouses of the materials from which a diversity of interpretations may be drawn. They are nurseries of the pluralism which we consider to be one of the hallmarks of a healthy society, and this tradition reaches very far in the world of librarianship. I was a member of a small academic party who in 1975 visited Beijing University. We visited the main library and were shown a quite extensive area of closed stacks in which were housed a large number of American publications in the humanities and social sciences from the 1920s and the 1930s. We were given to understand that although these publications from the home of western capitalism were not made available to students, they had not been destroyed and were adequately preserved. The Chinese were not barbarians hostile to literacy, even perverse and heretical literacy. Whatever

the party line on political correctness - and Mao Zhe Dong was still alive and at the head of government in China - the librarians were in the business of conservation. Perhaps they were taking out insurance against a future day when the thoughts of Chairman Mao no longer provided a dominant orthodoxy. I would like to think that the librarians were preserving to the best of their capacity, the concept of the library as a nursery of pluralism.

In advocating pluralism I shall touch for the last time on my own discipline, Australian history. In that subject, as in most scholarly disciplines, fashions inevitably change. Fifty years ago we placed emphasis on political history and the history of economic development. Today Aborigines, migrants, women, the household, the workplace, have all crowded to the fore as subjects demanding the attention of historians. At the same time there has been an enormous increase of interest among the general public outside the academy in family history and local history. Fifty years ago nobody could have foreseen these changes or anticipated the research materials which would be demanded. Dynamic intellectual progress creates never-ending challenges for libraries and archives.

In recent years the constriction of government funding for libraries and universities has created a different but related problem which I can best illustrate by a concrete example. A colleague of mine at the University of Queensland was perhaps Australia's leading authority on modern German history, and for many years he ordered books and serials in that field for the University Library. When he retired he was replaced by someone specialising in an entirely different area of European

history. This left the library with a collection of German materials which would gradually fossilise because there was now no call for its replenishment. I know that librarians across Australia are trying to concentrate their policies of specialist ordering, especially where there are several universities in one city, but more could be done by the funding authorities to facilitate this process.

Far from feeling that the electronic mode of presentation might have a narrowing or homogenising influence on an education, many would argue that through access to the internet readers can sample a much richer range of materials than most conventional libraries could hope to encompass. When I spoke a few minutes ago of my stimulation in browsing the University of Western Australia Library I was mindful of the current phrase 'browsing the internet' - a term which I prefer to the alternative 'surfing'. The surfer cuts a fine figure but invariably returns to the place where he or she began, waiting to catch the next wave, but not progressing anywhere. The browser does not follow a linear or predetermined path but nibbles along to the areas which provide the greatest nourishment. I do not know whether enough is done in Australia's schools and universities to educate students in the purposeful or the browsing use of the internet, but I do know that more needs to be done to enable the older generation to use the internet with maximum efficiency.

This presents difficulties in an environment where all education is increasingly tied to the 'user pays' principle so that the worker wishing to update her or his skills or the retiree seeking cultural and intellectual growth can achieve it only at financial cost. Believing with Adam

Smith that education is a human necessity I would hope soon to see a concentrated government drive towards improving computer accessibility for older generations at minimal cost to the learner. The rewards in social benefit and even productivity would be well worth while. Australia's libraries might well be one of the major agencies through which such a process of education could be implemented. Nevertheless in most disciplines, at least for the foreseeable future, we shall require both the printed monograph and electronic communication.

Some libraries have already addressed this issue. In the library of the new University of the Sunshine Coast - a library which merits attention as an excellent example of public architecture for a sub-tropical environment — the policy has been followed of intermixing books and CDs on the same shelves according to Library of Congress classification. The librarians recognised that the student body comprised a roughly equal mix of school leavers who have grown up knowing about computers from infancy and mature age students of an older generation who tended to find printed books less intimidating. It was hoped, and the hope was realistic, that over time the mature age students would familiarise themselves with the electronic media and accustom themselves to using them, while the younger students would respond to the unaccustomed pleasure of reading books. This seems the way of the future. The electronic presentation will not supplant the book, but libraries will school themselves to cater for a versatile readership at home in both media.

In terms of contributing to Australia's research productivity one priority stands out, and that

is the provision of adequate databases and bibliographies. Experience suggests that this is not a very high priority for grant-giving bodies such as the Australian Research Council. Databases and bibliographies can seldom be presented as cutting-edge research, and yet without these essential building blocks for research much time can be lost and much unnecessary duplication occur in the planning of research projects at all levels. Cataloguing has always been something of a poor relation in library management and even with the coming of computerisation improvement is still possible. We all have our stories of difficulties encountered because of the lack of standardisation among library catalogues.

I think of my attempt at a major university library to locate W K Hancock's classic *Australia*. The catalogue knew of no W K Hancock. I tried his full name, William Keith Hancock; no result. As the historian seldom used his first name I then sought him as 'Keith Hancock' but was directed only to the works of the economist of that name. Then I called a librarian, who pointed out that the computer had been programmed to respect English titles of nobility. Let me ask for Sir William Keith Hancock and all would be revealed. Fair enough, but I would have got to my destination far quicker by using an old-fashioned card index.

This is not to take a luddite stance towards information technology. On the contrary I would like to see more standardised and comprehensive cataloguing – and would note in passing that in my experience some of the most effective and user-friendly examples of computerised cataloguing are to be found in some of the more peripheral library and

information services, such as the Northern Territory Archives. As databases accumulate we must ensure that they are made available as widely as possible throughout Australia. I think here of remote Aboriginal communities, some of which have already shown an impressive readiness to come to terms with recent information technology, but it is also important for all the rural communities. Yes we are constantly told a sense of alienation has grown up between the bush and the city; one important way of overcoming the feelings of disadvantage experienced by rural Australians is to provide them as far as possible with equal access to electronic media. Some country towns are already experimenting with the concept of encouraging businesses based on electronic information technology, and it may be that state and federal governments should be exploring the possibilities more systematically.

At the end of the day, for rural and urban Australians alike, the benefits of improved information technology will depend on the quality of the information communicated. Inevitably many people will want to use their computers mainly for shopping and many others for playing computer games or for the dubious pleasures of pornography. Our task will be to ensure that computer technology is harnessed to creative scholarship in all its disciplines and dimensions. By so doing we shall serve Australia's future potential for research productivity. Even more important, we shall ensure that 21st Century Australians share in a civilised culture where perspectives are neither parochial nor inward-looking.