Abstract

In 2013 I contributed a chapter to the book Constructing the heritage of cultures: a modern history of world librarianship. To write this chapter I needed to determine what was distinctive about librarianship in Australia and New Zealand. I identified four themes:

- Distinctive patterns of practice
- A reputation in Australia and New Zealand for innovation and early adoption of new ideas and technologies
- A high level of cooperation and convergence
- Developing new multicultural national identities that combine indigenous knowledge systems with those of migrants.

This paper examines these themes in more detail.

Genesis

In 2013 I contributed a chapter to A History of modern librarianship: constructing the heritage of Western cultures, edited by American library historians Wayne Wiegand and Marija Dalbello and to be published by Libraries Unlimited in 2015. Each chapter, covering a region of the world, starts with the contention that Anglo-American librarianship is the basis of each region’s practice, then examines how Anglo-American librarianship has diverged from its roots to adapt to local conditions in each region. My chapter covers Australasia.

To what extent can one talk about Australasian practice? Australia and New Zealand have much in common: for example,

- Both are recently settled by immigrants, initially European but increasingly from Asia and the Pacific
- Both are sparsely populated compared with the United States and the United Kingdom
- Both countries were British colonies and remain within the British Commonwealth
- They are increasingly aware of their geopolitical location in Asia and the Pacific
- They are increasingly aware of their indigenous populations.
What’s distinctive?

To write this chapter I needed to determine what was distinctive about librarianship in Australia and New Zealand. On the surface a visitor from North America or the UK would find libraries in Australia and New Zealand very familiar, but closer scrutiny would reveal different library operations and services. I identified four themes:

1. Distinctive patterns of practice based on professional understandings and outlooks of settlers from many traditions and on the traditional knowledge of the colonized
2. A reputation in Australia and New Zealand for innovation and early adoption of new ideas and technologies, arising from challenges imposed by distance
3. A high level of cooperation and convergence, shaped initially by the drive towards federation and eventually, for Australia, by the reality of federation from 1901
4. Developing new multicultural national identities that combine, in Australia, ancient indigenous knowledge systems with those of migrants since 1788, and, in New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Islander knowledge systems with those of migrants since the 1820s.

Australians and New Zealanders were initially shaped by their British origins. Distinctive characteristics were becoming apparent by 1900 and by the 1930s individual national identities were evident. These national identities were further modified during World War II, notably through America’s intervention in the Pacific which widened the horizons of Australians and New Zealanders. Economic dependence on Britain and Europe was severed and greater engagement with Asia and the US began from the 1970s.

British colonizers brought to Australia the book-based traditions and practices of their homeland, importing an infrastructure of libraries and scholarship wholesale. In New Zealand, early settlers were avid readers who actively established libraries as an essential component of their new settlements. Between 1872 and 1884 there were 116 public libraries and athenaeums in the Otago region, which had a population in 1881 of 135,023. 

Theme 1. Distinctive patterns of practice

Distinctive patterns of practice based on professional understandings and outlooks of settlers from many traditions and on the traditional knowledge of the colonized.

One example, education for librarianship, illustrates distinctive patterns of practice in both Australia and New Zealand.

Education for librarianship in Australia clearly illustrates divergence from Anglo-American models. A hybrid tradition developed, in which professional status could be claimed by holders of a Library Association of Australia-administered certificate, a three- or four-year undergraduate degree, a one-year postgraduate diploma, a masters in library and information studies, or a library technician program.

Before university-based graduate qualifications were established in the 1960s, the model in place was characterized by professional associations acting as examination rather than accreditation bodies – a British model. North American qualifications in librarianship were not initially valued as highly as those from Britain, but this changed as the Carnegie
Corporation’s influence in Australia increased from the 1930s. The Corporation’s influence, grafted onto the British tradition, resulted in a vision for education in Australia that combined British with North American practices, modified for Australia. North American influences were seen in the library schools established in state libraries. From 1944 a British model was endorsed in the Australian Institute of Librarians’ examination system. This was the British Library Association model, where the association recognized an individual’s achievement, not the North American model, where the association accredited library schools.

A hybrid version of education for librarianship is especially evident in New Zealand. British Library Association correspondence courses were supplemented by local training from the 1930s. The New Zealand Library School, based in the National Library of New Zealand, offered graduate diplomas from 1946. It was strongly influenced by US education, its first director, an American, having come to New Zealand as US Information Services Librarian.

The New Zealand Library Association (NZLA) developed and offered its own Certificate from 1942, it being run by the New Zealand Library School in 1952. In the NZLA Certificate students employed in New Zealand libraries attended three six-week block courses over two years. This certificate, described as a system of training peculiar to New Zealand, addressed local needs by training the many unqualified personnel staffing small local authority public libraries.

**Theme 2. Reputation for innovation and early adoption**

*An reputation in Australia and New Zealand for innovation and early adoption of new ideas and technologies, arising from challenges imposed by distance, both within a very large country (Australia) and from major centers of practice.*

Library services to sparsely populated areas in Australia illustrates this theme.

Responses to the challenges of distance resulted in distinctive patterns of how public library services to the sparsely populated hinterland were offered in Australia. Book boxes were used to provide books to rural libraries, implemented in the 1870s in South Australia and Victoria and later in New South Wales. The example of Western Australia from the 1950s provides another example. Western Australia’s tiny population was spread over a very large area. McColvin’s 1947 report noted very few institutes and no municipal libraries in Western Australia. Grassroots efforts advocating for better services culminated in legislation being passed in 1951. Ali Sharr, from the UK, was appointed in 1953 to develop a state-wide public library network. Sharr developed a model for public library provision based on loans from a central collection in the State Library. From a tiny number of isolated institute libraries, one subscription library and some free children's libraries operated by volunteers in 1953, public library services were available in every local authority in Western Australia by 1982.

**Theme 3. Cooperation and convergence**

*A high level of cooperation and convergence, shaped initially by the drive towards federation and eventually, for Australia, by the reality of federation from 1901.*
One reason for the energetic expansion of library services in Australia and New Zealand after World War II was a high level of inter-library cooperation. National cooperative schemes implemented in both countries flourished in the 1960s. Two Australian examples of cooperation are noted: AACOBS, and Trove.

**AACOBS (the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services)**

The Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services (AACOBS) exemplified this high level of cooperation in Australia. AACOBS was established in 1956 to coordinate bibliographical services in all Australian libraries, and to cooperate with international bodies. It was a response to two issues significant for Australian libraries: the small number of large, comprehensive library collections; and the difficulties of providing library resources and services to a small population widely dispersed over a large landmass.

A national approach to providing library services was implemented to address these issues. This approach was based on the concept of a national collection comprising all library stock, strong bibliographical services to locate resources, and a robust inter-library lending scheme. Membership of AACOBS was initially restricted to major libraries, but by 1960 it had been expanded to include university libraries, and later it became more inclusive still. One activity of AACOBS was the National Book Resources Development Committee, whose aim was to reduce duplication of holdings of expensive resources by coordinating purchases. In 1986 the Australian Council of Library and Information Services (ACLIS) replaced AACOBS and another group, ALIC. By 1998, when ACLIS disbanded, national cooperation was firmly embedded in Australian librarianship.

**Trove**

The National Library of Australia played a major role in coordinating cooperative activities. For example, it was instrumental in developing the national bibliographic infrastructure that was needed to provide access to Australia’s library collections, the key example being ABN, the Australian Bibliographic Network. The National Library assumed responsibility for managing the online service Libraries Australia, which enables resource sharing among libraries by supplying bibliographic records for publications, resource discovery, and inter-library loan through a web interface. It also developed the federated search engines Picture Australia and (in conjunction with the National Film and Sound Archive) Music Australia, providing access to online and print music resources throughout Australia. Picture Australia and Music Australia, plus several other collaborative specialized search services, were made searchable from a single interface, Trove, providing online access to an unprecedented range of resources. Trove is internationally acknowledged for its innovation and continues to innovate, for example collaborating with state libraries to provide access to Australian newspapers online, using crowdsourcing to correct the digitized versions.

4. **New multicultural national identities**

*Developing new multicultural national identities that combine, in Australia, ancient indigenous knowledge systems with those of migrants since 1788, and, in New Zealand, Maori and Pacific Islander knowledge systems with those of migrants since the 1820s.*
Immigrants to Australia and New Zealand from Europe after World War II changed both countries, moving them from their British orientations towards a more cosmopolitan outlook. Public libraries responded by developing services to assist new migrants to assimilate into their new homes. However, Pickering and Modra’s 1973 report advised that migrants were not using libraries because they held little material in languages other than English. To encourage assimilation of migrants the report recommended a substantial increase in foreign-language book stock (especially information about services, education, Australian law, and Australian customs and attitudes), an increase in the number of bilingual librarians and library assistants, and funding from the Commonwealth government rather than from local authorities.

Pickering and Modra’s 1973 report also noted that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples saw libraries as forbidding places of authority, hostile because of public racism. Solutions need to come, they concluded, from within Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander communities, with libraries staffed by indigenous librarians.

Library services to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples have improved since 1973. During the 1990s awareness of needs increased in response to concern about their alienation from libraries, the offensive nature of much material about them in libraries, demeaning subject headings, and access issues. Recommendations for how library services should interact with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and for handling materials with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander content were provided in the 1995 *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders protocols for libraries, archives and information services*. In the early twenty-first century, the *Protocols* were being revised, adopted and implemented in many libraries. Other events in the 1990s also brought improvements. An example was the establishment of Libraries and Knowledge Centres in the Northern Territory, combining traditional library models with indigenous knowledge concepts determined by local communities.

In New Zealand in the 1970s the Maori language was again taught in schools, prompting improvements in library services and a renaissance in Maori-language publishing. A series of discussions about how to further develop library services to Maori began in the 1990s. Te Rōpū Whakahau, an organization supporting Maori working in libraries and promoting library services to Maori, was founded in 1992, and in 1993 LIANZA (Library and Information Association of New Zealand Aotearoa) initiated a project to promote biculturalism in library services. Changes were made to library services, examples being the provision of a community space for Maori, Maori speaking staff, separate Maori collections, bilingual interfaces in library catalogs, and bilingual signage. Te Wananga o Raukawa, a university based on traditional Maori learning practices, offered Diploma in Information Management and Bachelor in Information Management programs. Maori information practices sometimes challenged Anglo-American traditions of access to all. For example, the *kaitiaki* (guardians) of *taonga* (treasured things) placed in library collections for safekeeping may place restrictions on who accesses them.

**Conclusion**

Librarianship and library services in Australia and New Zealand are, at the start of the twenty-first century, highly professional. Although firmly based on Anglo-American traditions, distinctive practices of librarianship have been developed. Influences from the UK,
the US, Europe, and later from Asia and the Pacific and from indigenous communities, have influenced local practices. One contemporary cultural commentator noted that ‘Australia has cherry-picked the best and weeded out the worst’ to become a culturally rich and diverse country as successive waves of immigrants have made it their home, and library practice has benefited from the cherry-picking.5

The reasons why Australian and New Zealand library services have developed a reputation of being innovators and early adopters of new ideas and technologies must remain conjectural. Perhaps the challenge of distance is one catalyst. Another may be the freedom from inherited conservative traditions and ideologies that resulted from the circumstances of how both countries were settled, leading to independence of practice and a ‘Jack’s as good as his master’ outlook. Collaboration and information sharing to ensure that limited information resources reach those who need them are not mere rhetoric in Australia and New Zealand. Whatever the reasons, innovation in library practice in both countries is closely observed elsewhere.

Notes

4 Alex Byrne, Alana Garwood, Heather Moorcroft and Alan Barries, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander protocols for libraries, archives and information services, Canberra, Australian Library and Information Association Press, 1995.

The author

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