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A Collecting legacy

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The State Library of New South Wales collection of First World War diaries

This paper was delivered as part of a panel of three papers, the other two were delivered by staff from the National Library of Australia and the National Archives of Australia. Focus was on First World War collections held in these institutions.

Just seven days after the signing of the Armistice, the Principal Librarian of the then Public Library of NSW, William Ifould, recommended at a Library Trustees meeting that;

'the Mitchell Trustees should decide to act independently of the Federal authorities in obtaining miscellaneous material for the Mitchell Library and that he be authorised to take the necessary steps to advertise widely that the Trustees desired to purchase or acquire by donation all such material' (Public Library of NSW Trustees' Minute books, 18 November 1918).

The Trustees adopted this recommendation and the Library's 'European War Collecting Project' commenced with advertisements published in Australian and New Zealand newspapers from early December 1918. These advertisements ran for six months in urban and regional newspapers along with several British newspapers.

An advertisement in the *British Australasian* in August 1919 began: *'Australasian soldiers who have kept diaries at the Front are notified that the Mitchell Library, Sydney, desires to purchase suitable ones for preservation in the State Archives. Good prices for good material.'*

The Library wanted to acquire detailed and descriptive accounts from all theatres of war where Australians had served. Accounts were sought from soldiers, sailors, airmen and nurses of all ranks. Each diary collection was appraised and suitable collections purchased. Ifould estimated that purchase prices would vary from £5 to £50. In fact, the most expensive purchase was for Major-General Charles Rosenthal's diaries (£75).

Whilst the advertisements published in the press varied, each placed significance in collecting personal diaries. He wanted collections which provided an insight into the men who served: *their thoughts, feelings and their relationships with each other*. This was the point of distinction from the collecting activities of the Australian War

Memorial who began collecting unit histories, memoranda and official records after the war.

One of the advertisements in a South Australian newspaper emphasized this;

SOLDIERS' DIARIES

... for the personal feelings, doings, and relationships of the men, their thoughts and actions, the diaries or journals kept by the men themselves will be of the greatest value. The Trustees of the Mitchell Library recognise the importance of collecting and preserving these records ... which is the treasure-house of Australia for choice manuscripts and rarest books...

SOLDIERS' DIARIES. (1918, December 21). The Register (Adelaide, SA : 1901 - 1929), p. 10.

Correspondence between Ifould and Southwell, his agent in London, revealed Ifould's criteria for acquisition;

*'The value of such diaries must be judged from the extent of the period covered ... the fullness of the entries, the value of the entries to future historians ... The record from a psychological view is of some importance as is also the record from a sentimental point of view ... whilst a diarist might not have been in a position to obtain information of any value to historians from strategic or tactical points of view, yet **the daily and intimate** records of individual men, their hopes and fears and feelings generally, their expressions of opinions concerning their officers, their mention of other men by name ... all these things must be taken into consideration in estimating value.'*

This is a curated collection. Library staff were selective in their acquisitions and purchased material which complied with agreed criteria. Not many diarists reveal detailed strategic accounts of battles, but they do describe preparing for battles, what it was like in the middle of a barrage, the work of stretcher-bearers rescuing wounded from no man's land. A number of diarists mention friends and acquaintances met behind the lines.

The Library holds correspondence between Library staff and the servicemen and women or family members acknowledging the purchase of the material, the price the material was purchased for and correspondence rejecting some collections as being too brief, merely copies made from originals or written after the event and therefore not required.

Material continued to be purchased into the 1920s. By 1924/25 the drive had slowed and by the end of the 1920s, ceased.

These accounts, acquired soon after the end of the war, take in all theatres of war where Australians served. There are diary and letter collections written by soldiers and

sailors who served in New Guinea in September 1914 and witnessed some of the first Australian confrontations and casualties of the war.

The formation of the AIF and the departure of the first contingent from Albany to Egypt is represented strongly in the diaries with descriptions of leaving home, life onboard troopships and arrival in Egypt, training in the desert, exploring Cairo and the historical sites. The diaries document not just military life but provide a rich social history of Australians abroad describing travels in the Middle East and Europe, interactions with locals and foreign troops and comparisons with home.

The diary collection holds a number of accounts of the landing at ANZAC Cove, as well as those who witnessed the landing from ships anchored off the coast. There are accounts from soldiers, signalers and members of the medical corps who treated the early casualties. There are accounts from those who arrived as part of the reinforcements and the collection also includes an account from nurse, Anne Donnell who was stationed at the Third Australian General Hospital on Lemnos Island where many of the wounded were treated.

The collection holds accounts of the arrival of Australian battalions in France in June 1916 and the early battles Australian served in on the Western Front, including Fromelles and Pozieres. The collection holds a number of significant diary collections written by stretcher-bearers who served at these battles and describe their duties of rescuing and treating the wounded.

The collection also holds diaries written by men of the various Light Horse regiments who served in the Middle East: the Sinai Peninsula and Palestine and also includes some who served in the Australian Flying Corps.

A number of diary accounts and narratives were purchased from men who had been prisoners of war in Germany. Diary accounts (mostly written up after the war) include those captured during the battle at Fromelles and Bullecourt.

These diaries provide general readers and historians with an extraordinary source of contemporary detail: of travelling to war, preparing for battle and how they were mentally and physically affected by warfare. They provide details of the various activities undertaken whilst on leave, the language and humour of the troops, their beliefs and their observations on foreign cultures. The accounts written by nurses detail their work undertaken in the war and a female response to the conflict.

Originally intended to be read by an intimate audience of family and friends, these diaries became publicly accessible historical documents when acquired by the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales after the war. What originally were private became public.

If I could view these diaries, written by ordinary Australians, as being just as historically significant as the journals and diaries of the great explorers, navigators and statesmen already held by the Library. He believed *'their names will be forever connected with the history of the Commonwealth'*.

This collecting drive was a type of memorialisation carried out by the Library. It occurred amidst a larger memorialisation that was taking place in Australia after the

Great War; the planning and construction of physical monuments in Australian cities and towns. Ifould wanted to collect the voices of those who had experienced this enormous upheaval, for them to be heard by readers down the centuries;

... Quite apart from the historical value of these things and the importance of bringing them together in one great collection ... it is a high honour for soldiers and the relatives of soldiers, and ... for their descendants ... to be able to refer to their soldier boys' diaries permanently preserved in the archives of the State of New South Wales...

SOLDIERS' DIARIES. (1919, June 28). *The Queenslander* (Brisbane, Qld. : 1866 - 1939), p. 3.

For almost 100 years, these diary collections have remained in the Library's stacks.

Many of these have been accessed and extracts published in a large number of histories on World War I, including the landmark work; *The broken years: Australian soldiers in the Great War* by Bill Gammage, 1974 (around 15 diary collections). This was one of the first publications to focus on the narrative and voice of the private soldier, as traditional military history approaches gave way to social histories of the war.

Researchers continue to access these collection, including Bruce Scates and his colleagues at Monash University for their research into soldiers at Gallipoli, as well as numerous publications that have been released over the past year or so, along with; *In Great spirits*, an edited version of soldier Archie Barwick's diaries, published by HarperCollins.

It has only been in the last couple of years that every diary and letter collection has been fully described onto our online catalogue and in the last 18 months, all the pages of the diaries and letters have been digitised as the Library prepared for the 100 year commemoration of the First World War.

As Library volunteers began the process of transcribing these hand-written accounts, the voices of the diarists revealed themselves. Individual voices: naïve or forthright, many funny, some heart-breaking. Some were plainly written, some, aware of the importance of events, felt inclined to write in high, flowery language.

One hundred years on, these collections are being released to an even larger audience than Ifould could have imagined; digitised, transcribed and displayed in online and onsite exhibitions at the State Library of New South Wales as key primary documents of Australians experiences in World War I. The collection has recently been added to the Unesco Memory of the World register.

And as we at the Library began to promote these collections to the public, researchers and to the media, we knew there was a strong interest – a fascination in hearing these personal voices from 100 years ago. These diary accounts allow us to hear the war in the first person. They are accounts from people who were there, who witnessed these events.

One of the main ways of showcasing this collection was in an onsite exhibition in the Library's galleries in 2014. The Library's WWI exhibition was called *Life Interrupted:*

personal diaries from WWI and the aim was to reveal these voices via diary displays, along with supporting material: photographs, artworks, maps and objects.

Prior to the exhibition, the Library conducted audience research on what visitors might expect from a WWI exhibition at the Library, what they would like to see, how they think we might approach this topic. Three groups of around 10 people, some regular GLAM visitors, others not, answered questions about what they might expect to see in a WWI diary exhibition. Some of the feedback to come out of these sessions was quite revealing, especially the lack of interest in military campaigns, Gallipoli in particular.

Some of the feedback they as visitors wanted was to;

- Build a relationship with a diarist and be able to understand more about WWI, to learn unknown aspects of WWI.
- There was little interest in military history, military strategy or battle formations.
- People wanted to form an emotional connection with the diarists.

The challenge was to allow the visitor to know and understand how individuals felt at that time about the war, about their lives. They wanted to see a photo of the diarist, know what happened to their family and what they did before the war. Did they survive the war? How did they die?

Visitors wanted these diarists to come alive – they wanted to experience and be part of the diarist's life;

'See the world through their eyes.'

'The libraries role is not to make them heroes but to make them REAL.'

"I have a feeling this is about the people, not the war"

The visitors wanted to experience, love, excitement, tragedy, despair, disappointment and pain.

"These are people from 100 years ago. I need some form of connection to them."

It is interesting, this desire for a personal connection to an unknown serviceman/woman from 100 years ago.

We set about planning and selecting collection material and designing a space that would allow for a personal experience of these collections, including contemplative spaces that would allow the voices from the diaries to be heard.

We wanted a dramatic visual focus at the beginning of the exhibition that would relate back to Ifould's original collecting drive. We displayed as many volumes of diaries as we could on one of the walls – like an art installation, emphasising the size of the collection, show the various sizes of diaries and to communicate to visitors that these were personal items, often carried by the men in their pockets. These were precious items for their owners and also precious to the families who received volumes in the mail.

We recorded a number of actors reading brief excerpts from diaries and visitors could hear these when they stood in front of the diary wall.

A number of visitors commented that they were emotionally moved by this display;

'I found the wall of diaries completely overwhelming and touching. The thought that those diaries lived in the soldiers' pockets'

'The wall of journals/diaries is a sight I will hold in mind forever. Truly heartbreaking.'

The main audience feedback emphasised interest in the non-campaign aspects. The military campaigns were seen as the backdrop. For example, there was not a strong desire to hear about Gallipoli (having it as a section title apparently drove some visitors away from the exhibition altogether). This reaction was felt in all the groups: a really strong reaction against 'Gallipoli'.

Every group indicated that they felt they knew about this campaign.

"Try to keep the focus away from the ANZACs there were three other years of fighting."

On both the topic of Gallipoli and the Western Front came the comments;

"We know the basic history, the appeal is to hear the personal accounts – as we haven't heard it before."

Therefore the way we wrote the introductory text to the Gallipoli section and the way we designed the panels was primarily using the diarist's own words; the words they used when they were describing landing, what they wrote when they witnessed a friend being killed, what they ate, the language they used. We also included many photographs of the men at Gallipoli, focusing on images which provided detail of the men's faces, what they were wearing, how they were relating to each other.

Likewise when telling the story of the Western Front, we included diary entries of the arrival of troops to France in spring where they delighted in the beauty of the countryside, wrote about French women and French country life. Trench warfare was introduced via stretcher-bearers accounts at Fromelles. Art works - watercolours and drawings produced by the men were also included, again to emphasise the personal and to illustrate what some of the men did when they were away from the front lines.

The Middle East campaign was one aspect of the war that most had little knowledge of. The interest was again related to what the servicemen were doing and thinking not related to specific attacks and fighting. There was interest in and little knowledge that the men visited Jerusalem and other parts of the Middle East.

"I had no idea that they were in Jerusalem – that interests me."

The light horsemen's stories were also of interest. There was curiosity in all aspects: how they entered the war, were they all skilled horseman? They wanted information about their training and time with the horses.

We wanted to include humour where appropriate and included a section about the entertainment troupe, the Anzac Coves, including posters advertising a tour they did

through the UK in 1918, along with some great photographs of the Coves, some in drag, just behind the front lines.

Likewise we featured a diary written by a young Light Horseman serving in the Middle East who writes about his horse, Bernhard, how much he was feeding him up prior to the battle of Beersheba and the process of searching for water for Bernhard once they were in Beersheba.

There was also strong feedback that visitors did not want to leave exhibition feeling sad and depressed. Participants wanted to know about positive experiences. They wanted to hear about those who survived the war – what became of them? What were their successes?

And they wanted to hear about the joy and relief of families being re-united.

“I don’t want to walk out depressed”

We resolved the ending of the exhibition by listing the names of all of the diarists in our collections. There are now over 550 collections of WWI diaries and correspondence held in the Library. We printed out all of these names onto the end wall, echoing the design of a memorial wall. One piece of feedback from a visitor; *‘I took great pride ensuring I read every soldier’s name’*.

The focus on the individual diarists and their experiences, in their own words, proved successful for visitors. Many responded emotionally to the items and the diary quotes, in some cases with tears or feeling that they had connected with a serviceman/woman. Some of the visitor comments are extraordinary - visitors felt they indeed knew these people and some almost grieving at their loss;

I was surprised by how moving the entire experience was. It was definitely a different look at the war, from a perspective not often, if ever heard from, that of the actual heroes. The wall of journals/diaries is a sight I will hold in mind forever. Truly heartbreaking....

The diaries made the exhibition incredibly personal. Like I was a close friend of every soldier. In saying that, the respect I gained from this is indescribable.

So moving, almost lost for words. How brave... You can feel their souls in each. I can only hope they know how they are missed and appreciated. Our love and hearts go out to them always in our prayers...

It touched me deeply, to tears a number of times.

There were a number of high school groups who visited the exhibition, who also responded to the items and we asked specifically for feedback from these groups. An interesting observation was made by Library staff as teenage boys in particular walked around the exhibition. Older visitors engaged with them and on a number of occasions encouraged them never to fight in wars (!) Clearly the futility of trench warfare and the tragic stories of youthful fatalities affected older visitors.

The Library is continuing to contribute to WWI commemorations. We have created a WWI website and have released all of the completed transcriptions of the diaries and letters online.

A recently built 'transcription tool' allows keyword searching across the entire collection of transcribed items. Those diaries not yet transcribed have been released onto our Transcription tool to be transcribed by the crowd. Interested researchers can login and begin transcribing a WWI diary or letter straight away.

This ability to search across the collection of WWI diaries will allow researchers to track individuals, interrogate language, to map key terms/locations/names, emotions, study of food, weather, 'tourism' and travel, e.g. of searching on the terms London to read what they did on leave. Psychological and medical language.

There is potential use of this collection by digital humanities scholars as well as traditional historical inquiry, perhaps in a collaboration to look at these collections in a new way.

The recently held Gov Hack (this past weekend) focused on digitised WWI collections across many Australian and New Zealand repositories, encouraging coders, digital historians to explore the links and relationships across these data. The State Library hosted one of these events, and in our small location we had projects around sourcing and linking data relating to Welsh people serving in the AIF, locating troops who served from the Indian Subcontinent and a tool kit visualising the connectedness of collections.

William Ifould's legacy still resonates today. The Library continues to remember those men and women whose diary and letter collections were acquired almost 100 years ago. A kind of living memorial, this collection remains significant and powerful for Australians today, demonstrated through visitor feedback from the exhibition, these collections can provoke strong emotions in people living a century on from when the writers recorded their words.