*Library History Forum, SLNSW, 18-19 November 2014*

*75th Anniversary of the NSW Library Act 1939*

Institutional memory and memory institutions

### Alex Byrne[[1]](#footnote-1)

### State Library of New South Wales

**Abstract**

Memory institutions including libraries transmit experience and creativity across the borders of time and space, language and custom, tribe and individuality. As institutions they have their own memories, enshrined in their collections and buildings and as mutable as human memory. Those memories echo through the institutions, shaping expectations and possibilities. Tracing its history back nearly two centuries, the State Library of NSW has its own deep memories which condition its present and contribute to its future. This paper offers a case study of that Library to explore the nature and consequences of institutional memory in memory institutions.

I acknowledge the traditional owners of the land on which we meet, the Gadigal of the Eora nation, and pay my respects to their elders past and present; I acknowledge our shared freedoms and responsibilities, inherited from Magna Carta through the common law; and I acknowledge our welcoming of the peoples and cultures of the world; all three elements shaping our Australia.

That is a very important statement for those of us who create and cherish institutions devoted to preserving heritage: our galleries, libraries, archives and museums, the “GLAMs” as we now know them. The widespread adoption of the traditional Indigenous protocol of acknowledging and welcoming to country across Australia has been a most desirable development and a daily repeated sign of genuine commitment to reconciliation. It acknowledges that this land was, is and always will be Indigenous and offers respect to elders and, through them, to the continuity of knowledge systems. In the expanded form I have expressed today, it also acknowledges Australia’s linguistic, cultural and legal heritage from Europe and especially the British Isles including most vitally our fundamental rights and responsibilities which we can trace back to the sealing of Magna Carta on 15 June 1215. And it acknowledges the third warp of our national tapestry, our welcoming of the peoples and cultures of the world, whose peaceful joining together has been an extraordinary achievement.

It is that threefold heritage which we record and make available in our GLAMs including this great library, the State Library of New South Wales, through our magnificent collections. And this is what makes us a ‘memory institution’ because we preserve and feed memory in the broadest sense.

**Memory**

According to the *Oxford English Dictionary*, memory is the “action of remembering; recollection, remembrance”, “a representation in the memory, a recollection”, a “person or thing held in remembrance”, or the “perpetuated knowledge or recollection (of something); that which is remembered of a person, object, or event”.

It is also the “faculty by which things are remembered; the capacity for retaining, perpetuating, or reviving the thought of things past” and something that perpetuates remembrance or stimulates the memory. And remembrance can reside “in the awareness or consciousness of a particular individual or group”. And, of course, in this digital age, we think of computer memory both active and permanent. In a performative sense, we speak of ‘making memory of’, meaning to commemorate or to preserve a record or memorial of something, which brings us to our role.

**Memory institutions**

Galleries, libraries, archives and museums – the GLAMs – transmit experience and creativity across the borders of time and space, language and custom, people and individuality. As memory institutions they extend from personal archives and local museums and libraries to great collecting institutions like the State Library of New South Wales and its international counterparts.

They are aptly considered memory institutions as noted by Hjerppe (1994). Defining such institutions broadly, he included “libraries, archives, museums, heritage (monuments and sites) institutions, and aquaria and arboreta, zoological and botanical gardens and identified their business to be the holding of *documents*. Those documents are interpreted as that ”which serves to show or prove something; evidence, proof. ... Something written, inscribed, etc., which furnishes evidence or information upon any subject, as a manuscript, title-deed, coin, etc” (*Shorter Oxford English Dictionary* 1973). In Hjerppe’s view, the items we hold – whatever their form – are documents which carry texts which can be read by readers with the necessary skills. Thus readers extend from those who read books and manuscripts in our libraries every day to those who can ‘read’ paintings, prints, artefacts, mineral and plant specimens, and the host of other materials – documents – found across the GLAMs. A wide ranging institution like the State Library of NSW collects across the spectrum of ‘document’ formats including “manuscript, title-deed, coin ...” and including digital objects – all of which are infused with memory which places them in context and gives meaning. This characterisation is more the transmission of information as an assemblage of facts (Hjørland 2000, Rayward 1994). It recognises that the meanings in the objects we collect, preserve and make available are to be interpreted and are thus contextual, contingent and – sometimes – controversial. Our GLAMs convey this complexity, carrying forward documents (in the broad sense) which will be understood diversely, interpreted and reinterpreted.

**Institutional memory**

As institutions the GLAMs have their own memories, enshrined in their collections, buildings and the traditions of their staff and visitors. Those memories are as changeable as human memory, evolving over time in response to professional imperatives, community expectations and opportunity. Legends abound of the Great Library of Alexandria, Ephesus and – closer to home – the Schools of Arts which illuminated Australian towns and suburbs and were satirised by Kenneth Slessor (1961) in his lines “At the School of Arts, a broadsheet lies / Sprayed with the sarcasm of flies: / … / Dated a year and a half ago, / But left there, less from carelessness / Than from a wish to seem polite”(*Country Towns*). Those memories echo through the GLAMs and their staff, supporters and readers, shaping expectations and possibilities.

The memories are visible in the buildings, furnishings and atmosphere of the institutions. They are enshrined in the collections, which embody the intentions of curators as well as the happenstance of collecting opportunity and the interests of collectors. Catalogues and records of acquisition and provenance provide the formal record of those processes, often offering insights into the personalities of the individuals involved. Memory is also transmitted through the methods and habits of staff and their recollections of colleagues and predecessors. Institutional memory takes the wider stage in community perceptions of the roles and importance of institutions, perceptions which can condition support for the institutions and understanding of their identities and ‘brands’.

However, those memories often lapse into myth and legend, extenuated from the original fact or occurrence but taking on the force of belief and ritual. In addition to its meaning as a traditional explanatory story, myth commonly means a “widespread but untrue or erroneous story or belief; a widely held misconception; a misrepresentation of the truth … something existing only in myth” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Institutional memory often lapses into such myth as stories are handed on from person to person, from generation to generation.

**The State Library of New South Wales as a memory institution**

Tracing its history back nearly two centuries, the State Library of NSW has its own deep memories which condition its present and contribute to its future. The premier library for the colonial history of Australia and its region, the Library is a memory institution par excellence. Tracing its history to the Australian Subscription Library established in 1826, the State Library is the country’s oldest library and has incomparable collections, valued at $2.145 billion in 2010, which include:

* an estimated 6.3 million items
* some 1.5 million photographs
* 12 linear km of manuscripts
* 234,000 prints, drawings, paintings and maps
* 114,000 architectural plans
* oral history, postage stamps, coins and books
* the first book ever printed in Australia (*NSW General Standing Orders*, 1802) and the first Australian newspaper (*Sydney Gazette and New South Wales Advertiser*, 1803)
* the death mask, hat, pipe and pen of Henry Lawson, a major Australian writer
* a rich collection of more than 1100 personal diaries of Australians who served in the First World War, some 180,000 pages which have been digitised and were exhibited earlier this year in our *Life Interrupted: personal diaries from WWI* exhibition, curated by Elise Edmonds
* and a rapidly growing digital corpus including both born and made digital content.

Laid end to end our shelves would stretch 120 km from the Library in Sydney’s centre to Mount Victoria, the pass in the mountains that it took the early colonists 25 years to cross. The collections grow by some 2 km a year, twice the length of the Sydney Harbour Bridge.

These are impressive dimensions but much more impressive are the stories embodied in these collections. They include the records in maps, journals and sketches of those who imagined a great southern continent, found it and settled it, intruding – often violently – on the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples who already owned the land and seas. The State Library’s collections include items of major importance to Australia’s history, such as Joseph Banks’ *Endeavour* journal from the voyage which first mapped the east coast of Australia, defining the long sought southern continent, and 9 of the 11 known journals kept on the ships of the First Fleet which brought the first European colonists in 1788.

The stories extend to the personal accounts of the colonisers and the colonised, of those who settled the land and those who built the towns and cities, of those who went to war and those who stayed at home. They include the records of government, church and business and the imaginative creations and re-creations of our great writers and artists. Traces of long gone languages of Australian Aboriginal peoples sit side by side with vibrant works by today’s Indigenous writers.

This is indeed the stuff of memory. It is the memory of a continent and the surrounding seas, of a nation and its constituent states, territories, towns and country, of peoples who cherished and managed the land for 50,000 to 60,000 years (Morwood 2002) and those from every nation on earth who have since made it their home. And, because the collection is based on human memory, it is incomplete, fallible, sometimes biased or tendentious, contestable. These qualities make it a rich resource for scholars and students who seek to interrogate our past and present and suggest our future. Our collection has fed the intellect and imagination of great historians and writers, whose works have then been added to the collection’s corpus, and who may in turn be challenged by their successor’s insights and interpretations. It is much more than a body of knowledge and information to be transmitted but, rather, a living library of memories, of stories.

**Institutional memory at the State Library of New South Wales**

Having worked in many institutions and visited and consulted at many others, I am very conscious of institutional culture and memory. As the foundation university librarian at Charles Darwin University (then Northern Territory University) many hastened to tell me of the chief librarians at the preceding colleges who had come and gone within a few years while the ‘old hands’ stayed on. When I moved to the University of Technology, Sydney (UTS) eleven years later, I was told of injustices perpetrated when Kuring-gai College of Advanced Education (KCAE) was merged into the two year old UTS in 1990 and, conversely, of the ways in which the KCAE ‘mafia’ had taken over the merged university. Another eleven years on, my arrival at the State Library invited more confidences about the Library’s past and its personages.

*Memory in buildings, furnishings and ambience*

Carved into the sandstone vestibule of the Mitchell Library Building are words from Carlyle’s 1840 lecture, ‘The Hero as Man of Letters’: “In books lies the whole Past Time, the articulate audible voice of the Past, when the body and material substance of it has altogether vanished like a dream”. A bold reminder to visitors to the newly completed vestibule and grand reading room of the Public Library of New South Wales in 1942, a century after they were uttered, these words continue to remind us of the importance of transmitting memory. But they also remind us of the intentions of the creators of the Public Library and those who endowed its magnificent Mitchell Library building, the intention to create an imposing and effective vehicle to ensure that ‘the Past’ would be audible in this antipodean setting. The words thus visibly project the Library’s institutional memory.

Many features of the building remind us of the Library’s role and history, including:

* its status as one of Sydney’s first air conditioned buildings and the glass floored stack, a late nineteenth/ early twentieth century innovation in library storage technology, both of which remind us of the Library’s long standing commitment to innovation and the application of new technologies
* the original Mitchell Library building which forms the north west corner of the completed building and incorporates the original Mitchell Reading Room and Galleries celebrating the signal endowment by David Scott Mitchell and its confirmation as the premier library for the study of Australia’s exploration and colonisation
* the bronze doors and stained glass windows endowed by Sir William Dixson and others which tell of the long history philanthropy supporting the Library
* the grand Mitchell Library Reading Room which was opened in 1942 as the Public Library Reading Room and which was deliberately created as a rectangular, book-lined reading room by Principal Librarian WH Ifould who rejected Vernon’s original design of a panopticon-styled domed reading room modelled on that installed by Panizzi at the British Museum and copied at the Public (now State) Library of Victoria
* the reproduction of the 1644 Tasman Map in the Mitchell Library Vestibule and the Shakespeare Room (properly William Shakespeare Tercentenary Memorial Library) that remind us of the focus and extent of the collections which record both the history of Australia and its cultural roots in Europe.

*Memory enshrined in collections*

The extensive collections of the State Library embody the intentions of curators and librarians who have purposefully selected publications and other materials over nearly two centuries. We continue to make strategic acquisitions, such as the recently purchased journal of Rose de Freycinet, the first woman to circumnavigate the world, and to devise and implement strategies to build as complete a record as possible, including the current collecting of social media and work to extend legal deposit to the digital realm.

That collecting is at once purposeful and opportunistic as we take advantage of items coming onto the market as well as seeking out particular materials. It is extended through donations which reflect the interests of collectors as well as relationships which we foster but often have an element of chance about them. The Richardson Collection, to take just one example, consists of 289 volumes, mainly of early texts of the English Bible together with some early printed books, herbals and medieval manuscripts, bequeathed to the Public Library of NSW in 1926 by Nelson Moore Richardson. It was bequeathed in appreciation of Australia’s help during the First World War because Mr and Mrs Richardson has been so impressed by the officers and men at an Australian Army camp on land near their residence at Weymouth, England. The previously mentioned Tasman Map came to us from Prince Roland Bonaparte through similar chance connections supported by curatorial persistence.

The stories of those items and collections and their acquisition, and earlier provenance, are a rich source of institutional memory, sometimes romanticised but sometimes even more incredible in reality than we might have imagined.

*Staff memory*

At the core of institutional memory lies the memory of the staff members who have worked, work or will work in the institution. Some spend their working lives in the institution from early appointment to retirement, others come for a while and go, sometimes to return. We are reminded of the line in an Osborne play (2000):

*You know the one about the professor who'd heard that there was still a very old attendant at the British Museum who remembered Karl Marx going into the Reading ... Then, one day, he didn't turn up and - and he never came in again! Never. Funny thing. And nobody's heard anything of him ever since!*

Much of the ‘corporate knowledge’ transmitted through the methods and habits of staff and their recollections of colleagues and predecessors is similarly reliable. It often consists of myth and legend handed from one staff member to another, distorted, sometimes exaggerated, sometimes imagined.

Corporate memory consists of the tacit knowledge of ‘how things are done’ and recollections of previous experience, including the ‘hard cases’ which both challenge and inform policy and practice. In GLAMs, they include deep understanding of the collections and programs and, above all, of context. Context includes the fields of expression relevant to the institution and its collection, internal knowledge of the institution and its collection, and the continuing relationship with communities of interest – the creators, collectors, collections, vendors, audiences and broader community reception.

*Public memory*

Another facet of institutional memory is the public perception of an institution which constitutes institutional memory ‘from the outside’. The counterpart of staff memory, this public memory is shaped by visitors’ and readers’ experiences with the institutions as well as the casual views of the person in the street. It is thus partly shaped by the views of staff and the ways in which they interact with clients. In turn, public views influence the perceptions of staff who are gratified by positive public feedback on the institution and encouraged to do better by criticism.

Public memory tends to move slowly, once established the image of an institution, its role and its reputation become crystallised and are changed with difficulty. This is well understood in the field of ‘brand management’ in which practitioners attempt to invest their brand with positive values and to dispel negative connotations usually at the price of oversimplification.

For libraries, which are positively regarded across the community, the most difficult aspect of public perception to change is that they are ‘just about books’ when the twenty first century library is so much more, as we know. The diverse attractions of the modern public library are well known to their regular users but little understood by non-users including some of their most fervent supporters and many decision makers.

For the State Library of NSW, the most difficult public memory that we need to address is the view that the much loved Mitchell Library building is a hallowed place with an extraordinary collection which may only be entered by an intellectual elite. We need to convince the community that it is a twenty first century library – with the extensive range of services, activities and capabilities for all that connotes – as well as being the treasure house of Australian history and culture.

*Memory and ownership*

These various dimensions of memory feed into a sense of ownership. People who never visit or use the institution may nevertheless value the fact that it exists and defend its continuation despite their lack of use and without any intention to use. This ‘existence value‘ does not require that utility be derived from direct use of a resource, its utility and hence value comes from simply knowing that it exists (Krutilla 1967, Armbrecht c2012).

Existence value has applied to all libraries. There is considerable evidence that community members value their public libraries even if they have never registered or used them. The libraries are often centrepieces of their communities, especially in English speaking nations. In NSW, that existence value has continued at least since the Free Public Library Movement in the 1930s and the passing of the Library Act in 1939. When they are perceived to be threatened with closure or cut-backs, community members – including non-users – vehemently defend them. That passion for libraries has infused the current campaign by the NSW Public Libraries Association in favour of increased and reformed state funding for public libraries.

University libraries have a similar symbolic value within their institutions even when many academics and research students seldom need to go the library building because their informational and documentary needs are met through the Library’s online subscriptions. However, existence value has diminished for special libraries in corporate environments, both business and government, as the resources have shifted online and modes of research and practice have changed. Even law firms, which long prided themselves on extensive collections of leather bound tomes, have largely discarded their collections. The *New York Times* recently quoted senior partner and trial lawyer Ira H Goldfarb, who said (Dunlap 2014): “The answer to your question is that they’re basically decoration. They’re an anachronism. We couldn’t give them away if we wanted to. We have an account with an online library. That’s all that’s used.”

Fortunately, this does not apply to the State Library of NSW. It is highly valued by the community for its existence. Almost everyone, including taxi drivers, knows and views positively the ‘Mitchell Library’, as they tend to call it. And there’s the rub: although the Mitchell Library building has had “Public Library of New South Wales” carved into its pediment for more than seven decades, the community at large has an ingrained belief that it is still ‘The Mitchell Library’ and for most community members its character is still that of the old library. This perception is very difficult to change: addressing it demands sophisticated marketing techniques underpinned by strong service values which continue our traditional commitments to heritage and scholarly inquiry but also engage the wider community which values the Library’s existence but seldom thinks to visit or use it.

**The Mitchell Renewal Controversy**

The history of this library is a tradition of generosity and continuing change. We have been built over nearly 200 years by the generous and thoughtful dedication of generations of librarians, collectors and researchers and supported by the public, both in spirit and through government funding, which has continued for nearly 150 years. The breadth, depth and variety of our collections owes much to determined collectors and philanthropists like DS Mitchell and Sir William Dixson but also to the skilled and even more determined librarians including Anderson, Ifould and Metcalfe.

In spite of their good intentions those who protested about the Mitchell earlier this year were misinformed and almost all reacted to alarmist allegations without checking their veracity or considering their plausibility, demonstrating the force of rumour fanned by social media. Even well regarded journalists and academics uncritically accepted and repeated rumour and innuendo with very few bothering to contact the Library to check the facts. Regrettably, some of the misinformation was communicated to clients by a few staff members who unprofessionally sought to stir up anger against changes to work practices with which they disagreed.

Among the allegations, it was suggested that collections were being removed or even discarded when no such idea had been contemplated. It was suggested that researchers would be relegated to a ‘small back room’ when it had been proposed to restore them to the original Mitchell Library Reading Room in response to complaints about noise and distraction. Even the working name for the restored room, ‘The Scholars’ Room’, which had been adopted to avoid confusion with the grand Mitchell Library Reading Room, was seen by some to be exclusive when we had thought it inclusive – some regular users felt that they were not ‘scholars’ and would therefore be excluded. Some flavour of the comments can be seen in an article by Farrelly (2014):

“The beautiful room where Manning Clark and Patrick White wrote will become a wi-fi hub for school-kids with backpacks and water bottles. Nothing sacred will remain. Just a few 20th-century books no-one wants to read. Scholars will be caged in a glass back-room, with barely space to spread a map.”

In this atmosphere of hysteria, it was very difficult to communicate the plans that were actually proposed although we ultimately succeeded in doing so and the refurbishment of the Mitchell Library Reading Room is nearing completion with the official opening date on 1 December. We did listen to the concerns and it became clear that the key issue was that researchers wished to continue to study rare books, manuscripts and other items in the Mitchell Library Reading Room so we abandoned the idea of providing them with a separate quiet study room in that historic location and committed to providing a larger, more secure and quieter special collections research area within the grand Reading Room. This still allowed the Library to introduce some expansions to service including enabling researchers to use both ‘Mitchell’ and ‘SRL’ publications in that area in association with special collections material (removing a long standing irritant from the separation of the collections) and being able to open the rest of Reading Room to all readers on Sundays for the first time.

Many of the comments were not only misinformed about the Library’s intentions but base on misperceptions of the Library’s history. For example, the “beautiful room where Manning Clark and Patrick White wrote” was not the Mitchell Library Reading Room but the original Mitchell Reading Room to which we had proposed to return researchers in response to their expressed concerns. As Greg Dening noted at the Library a decade ago (Ellis 2003)[[2]](#footnote-2):

I loved the walk down the corridor past the Librarian’s office to the old Reading Room [and] I treasure the memory of coming into that room and seeing the greats of Australian history in their seats: Manning Clark, A.G.L. Shaw, Lloyd Robson, Russell Ward, Keith Hancock, Geoffrey Serle …)

Further, as was noted above, the Mitchell Library Reading Room was built as the Public Library Reading Room to replace the reading room of the former Public Library of NSW building on the corner of Bent and Macquarie Streets. Principal Librarian Ifould’s determination to change the design of the grand Mitchell Library Reading Room from a domed panopticon to a rectangular, book-lined room was to signal the room’s purpose as a democratic space which would be open to all readers. However, some of the protesters in the controversy objected to its use by the public, arguing that it should be solely for an elite, contrary to its history and the core principle of free public libraries that they be open to all. The renewal to be delivered over the next few months meets the needs of both.

**Bibliostasis**

Many of the comments during the controversy implicitly, and sometimes explicitly, recalled a mythical time of ‘bibliostasis’ when libraries were held to be perfect and unchanging. This is of course tripe. From their earliest days, libraries have innovated and evolved. Collections have developed from piles of clay tablets to scrolls and block printed books, manuscripts and incunabula and then the vast expansion of mass printed codices. In recent decades we added audiovisual materials and now digital.

A typical public library will have an extensive range of printed books, newspapers and magazines, audio books, music and video, ebooks and e-audiobooks and, increasingly, digitised content as well as local history resources and materials in many languages. A library of record will be even more extensive, and a great library like the State Library of NSW – which is a GLAM in itself – preserves and makes available a huge range of formats from a sample Mesopotamian clay tablet to a 140 character message tweeted today. Not all of these materials are kept for ever, many meeting short term interests and needs while others document the heritage of the region, state or nation and must be preserved for ever. This is an enduring but not fixed responsibility as we work to ensure that we continue to capture and preserve the cultural expression – ‘high’ and ‘low’ – of today and tomorrow as well as preserving and making available that of yesterday.

Among the contributions to the controversy over the Mitchell Library renewal project was an article in the Sydney Review of Books by Michael Wilding (2014) who contended “The destruction of the libraries of the English speaking world has been underway for a quarter of a century” when this is far from the truth as today many libraries are being built, extended or replaced. This year has seen the opening of the enormous Birmingham Central Library and, in NSW, new and refurbished library buildings including Bankstown, Byron Bay, Burwood, Grafton, Kempsey, Howlong and Nyngan with more in progress.

Wilding went on to suggest that all of each library’s collection should be on open shelves, which is impractical and undesirable for many libraries. The State Library’s collections, excepting a very limited proportion, have never been on open shelves and could not be because of the vastly increased space and staffing that would be required to achieve that result and the ways in which it would conflict with our obligation to preserve our collection by making it vulnerable to variable environmental conditions, misplacement and loss. In that respect, the Library’s practice is the same as other great libraries including the National Library and the British Library. In fact, open access collections in large libraries are a relatively recent development and one which has been largely limited to the English speaking world. The key issue is to ensure unrestricted access, even if some time should be necessary for delivery from on site or outside stacks.

One of the benefits of open access is serendipity but while stimulating and sometimes satisfying it somewhat overrated because it is conditioned by the nature and extent of the library’s collection, the shelf ordering system, the absence of items on loan or otherwise, separation of formats, and so on. Considerable research is being invested to identify other methods of supporting serendipity more extensively by using digital capabilities.

Wilding also argued that libraries should preserve everything. However, library collections are created through a mixture of purposeful acquisition, serendipitous opportunity and chance. All library collections include the immaterial, the irrelevant and the unused; all library collections have gaps. Not all items in library collections are equal: some are of enduring importance, some of transient interest, some are sleepers which awaken to interest after languishing for extended periods, some are and remain rubbish. Wilding is quite correct that political and moral judgements should not shape collections, but the librarian's responsibility is to manage collections in accordance with the purposes of the library so as to preserve the precious, including the unacknowledged, provide but not preserve the transient, and help to obtain meaning out of aggregation.

Digital technologies have brought many benefits including the capacity to make materials much more readily available and in more easily useable formats. But like all new technologies, their introduction brings challenges. One of the big challenges that Wilding identified is the restrictive practices of some publishers in regard to ebooks and ejournals. The State Library and others are working to overcome those restrictions through a range of strategies including the open access movement, copyright reform, better contracts and technological innovation.

The perception of libraries as conforming to some previous ideal state is a myth, a “popular conception of a person or thing which exaggerates or idealizes the truth” (*Oxford English Dictionary*). Furthermore it is untrue to assume that libraries have in some way been unchanging until they allegedly began to be destroyed over the last quarter century.

**Innovation and the AJCP**

The pre-computer mid-twentieth century library was a creation of the nineteenth century elaborated by librarians including Panizzi, the famous Keeper of the British Museum Library, who invented the modern reference librarian and brought order to that wonderful collection, surmounting the earlier gibes of Carlyle. The ordering of collections and card catalogues emerged from the listings of private collections during the Enlightenment and their genius continues to inform our modern techniques which can do so much more thanks to digital technologies.

Following the early innovations – including the glass floored stacks built in the first stage of the Mitchell Library building and the original Fisher Library (Binns 1909) – the mid-twentieth century library was a place of innovation in which new technologies were rapidly adopted. For example, the novel technology of microfilm was quickly applied to expand and preserve collections. Although first invented in the nineteenth century, its adoption really took off from 1935 when Kodak began filming the *New York Times* and grew from 1938 when Harvard University Library began its Foreign Newspaper Project and University Microfilms Inc (now known as UMI) became a commercial enterprise known for microfilming doctoral dissertations (Southern Regional Library Facility, nd).

Australian librarians were quick to take advantage of this new technology. In May 1939 Commonwealth Parliamentary Librarian Kenneth Binns and NSW Principal Librarian William Ifould agreed to initiate the Australian Joint Copying Project. From the signing of the agreement in October 1945, immediately after the Second World War, the AJCP lasted 50 years and repatriated an immense quantity of Australia's foundational documents on 10,000 reels of microfilm, research fodder for the emerging field of the Australian humanities. Simultaneously, inter library loans developed as a result of an IFLA agreement in 1935.

Today, unfortunately, a number of libraries have had reluctantly to withdraw from use some of microfilm reels produced through the Australian Joint Copying Project. As a consequence of their age and the original means of production, some but not all have developed ‘vinegar syndrome’, an irreversible chemical change which makes them not only unusable but dangerous to use because they give off vinegary fumes. We are working to digitise the reels to overcome the vinegar syndrome problem but also to use the new technologies of today, 75 years from the inception of the AJCP, to re-present these invaluable materials in much more useable forms and in ways which will foster the emerging disciplines of the digital humanities, just as the original program fostered the post War growth of the discipline of Australian history.

**Our future memory**

A book is not a library, nor is a random accumulation of books. As Fromm (2004) noted:

*one water molecule is not fluid*

*one gold atom is not metallic*

*one neuron is not conscious*

*one amino acid is not alive*

A book I not a library. A library develops through building collections and services, creating of physical and digital places and involving people. As Kenneth Binns noted a century ago (1909):

“books alone do not comprise a library any more than a horde of people makes a society. They are but the raw material from which the cataloguer must build his palace of learning. How much the reader owes to the librarian only a librarian knows. From the reader's standpoint, better a few books scientifically catalogued than a British Museum without a catalogue. But buildings need plans, and libraries must have a system.”

Libraries are part of the ‘gift economy’ which offers value far and above that which can be calculated on an economic basis. Bourdieu (1997) has argued that society is moving away from the gift economy[[3]](#footnote-3) but libraries, and especially public libraries including grand public libraries like the State Library of NSW, are a continuing part of that economy. We are one of very few institutions that have at our heart the principle of being open to all and free to all. We operate in and support an economy of knowledge sharing. I am proud to be in a profession that does something so important for humanity and proud that our work is so valued for its existence alone although, of course, I celebrate those who use and demand more from our libraries. I am proud that we continue to maintain a gift economy for the luminaries of our nation and for its most vulnerable.

As memory institutions we not only look back to preserve the memories of the past and present but also look forward to the memory of the future. Our institutional memories should likewise energetically embrace our future and present as well as our past, remembering George Eliot’s comment (1854):

“Of course many silly myths are already afloat about me, in addition to the truth, which of itself would be thought matter for scandal.”

**References**

John Armbrecht (c2012), *The value of cultural institutions: measurement and description*, PhD Thesis, School of Business, Economics and Law, University of Gothenburg (Bokförlaget BAS, Göteborg, Sweden), <https://gupea.ub.gu.se/bitstream/2077/30684/3/gupea_2077_30684_3.pdf>. Accessed 7 November 2014.

Kenneth Binns (1909), ‘The Fisher Library’, *The Lone Hand*, 1 October 1909, <http://adc.library.usyd.edu.au/data-2/p00119.pdf>. Accessed 7 November 2014.

Pierre Bourdieu (1997), ‘Marginalia – Some Additional Notes on the Gift’, in Alan D Schrift (ed) *The logic of the gift: toward an ethic of generosity*, New York, Routledge, p 233.

Thomas Carlyle (1841), ‘Lecture V: The hero as man of letters’, in *On heroes, hero-worship, and the heroic in history,* London, James Fraser.

David W Dunlap (2014), ‘So little paper to chase in a law firm’s new library’, *New York Times* 22 October 2014, <http://www.nytimes.com/2014/10/23/nyregion/so-little-paper-to-chase-in-a-law-firms-new-library.html>. Accessed 7 November 2014.

George Eliot (1854), ‘Letter from Weimar to Charles Bray 23 October 1854’, in Joan Bennett, *George Eliot: Her Mind and Her Art*, CUP Archive, 1962, p 70.

Elizabeth Ellis (2003), ‘An ambitious endeavour: the Mitchell Library in the 21st Century’, *Upfront: Journal of the friends and supporters of the State Library of New South Wales* 15(1) p 6.

Elizabeth Farrelly (2014), ‘Mitchell Library malaise sign of a deeper struggle’. *Sydney Morning Herald* 6 March 2014, <http://www.smh.com.au/comment/mitchell-library-malaise-sign-of-a-deeper-struggle-20140305-347fd.html>. Accessed 6 March 2014.

Jochen Fromm (2004), *The emergence of complexity*, Kassel, Kassel University Press, p 19, [http://www.uni-kassel.de/upress/online/frei/978-3-89958-069-3.volltext.frei.pdf. Accessed 2 October 2014](http://www.uni-kassel.de/upress/online/frei/978-3-89958-069-3.volltext.frei.pdf.%20Accessed%202%20October%202014).

Roland Hjerppe (1994), ‘A framework for the description of generalised documents’, paper presented at ISKO ´94 Conference, June 21-24, 1994, Copenhagen, <http://www.academia.edu/3044416/A_framework_for_the_description_of_generalized_documents>. Accessed 15 April 2014.

Birger Hjørland (2000), Documents, memory institutions and information science, *Journal of Documentation* 56(1) pp 27 – 41.

John Krutilla (1967), ‘Conservation reconsidered’, in *The American Economic Review* 57(4), pp 777-786.

MJ Morwood (2002), *Visions from the past: the archaeology of Australian Aboriginal Art,* Washington, Smithsonian Institution Press, p 11.

John Osborne (2000), ‘The End of Me Old Cigar’, Act 2 in *Four Plays*, Oberon Books, p 109.

*The Oxford English dictionary online* [electronic resource]. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000- (accessed 1 October 2014 via State Library of NSW)

WB Rayward (1994), Visions of Xanadu: Paul Otlet (1868-1944) and hypertext, *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 45(4) pp 235-250.

*The Shorter Oxford English Dictionary: on historical principles* (1973), Oxford, Clarendon, p 589.

Kenneth Slessor (1961), ‘Country towns’, in Colin Thiele & Ian Mudie (eds) *Australian poets speak*, Adelaide, Rigby, pp 71-72.

Southern Regional Library Facility (nd), ‘Microfilm – a brief history’, in *The history of microfilm: 1893 to the present exhibition*, <http://www.srlf.ucla.edu/exhibit/text/BriefHistory.htm>. Accessed 15 October 2014.

Michael Wilding (2014), ‘Libraries under threat’, *Sydney Review of Books*, 7 March 2014, <http://www.sydneyreviewofbooks.com/libraries-under-threat>. Accessed 14 March 2014.

1. Dr Alex Byrne is the State Librarian and Chief Executive of the State Library of New South Wales following posts in library and university management at several Australian universities. He is also the Deputy Chair of National and State Libraries Australasia, a partnership of the National Library of New Zealand and the national and state libraries across Australia. Alex served for a decade in leadership positions with the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions including President from 2005 to 2007. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. I am indebted to Emeritus Professor Lesley Johnson for drawing my attention to this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. I am indebted to Emeritus Professor Lesley Johnson for also drawing my attention to this reference. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)