

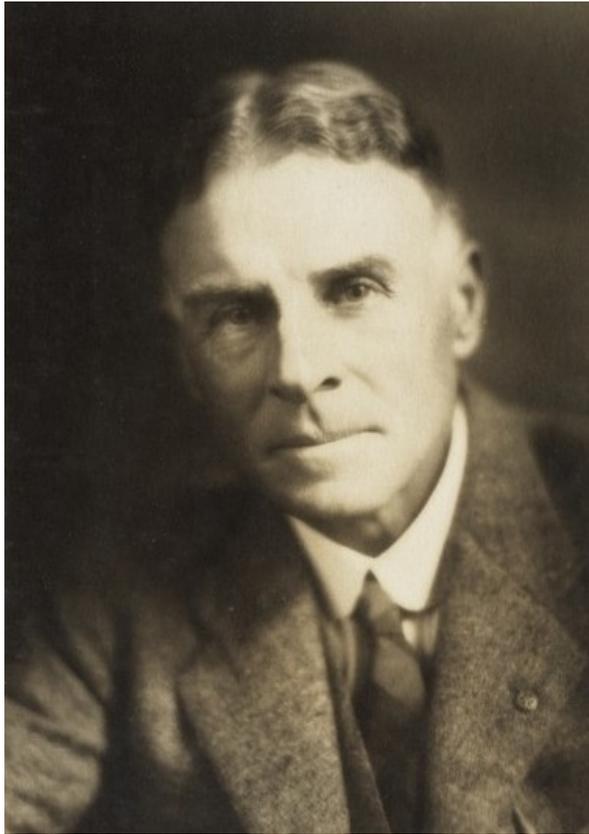
‘Of the greatest value’: the
European war collecting
project

Elise Edmonds
State Library of New South
Wales



This diary begun on the day of my departure for the front from Sydney is being written chiefly for the benefit of my loved ones at home as it will be nearly impossible to tell all in letters and this will be sent home from time to time as opportunity offers and my efforts will be concentrated in keeping it up to date.

Rudolph Cox



**AUSTRALASIAN
SOLDIERS' PRIVATE DIARIES.**

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.—Address, H. N. SOUTHWELL, c/o this office.

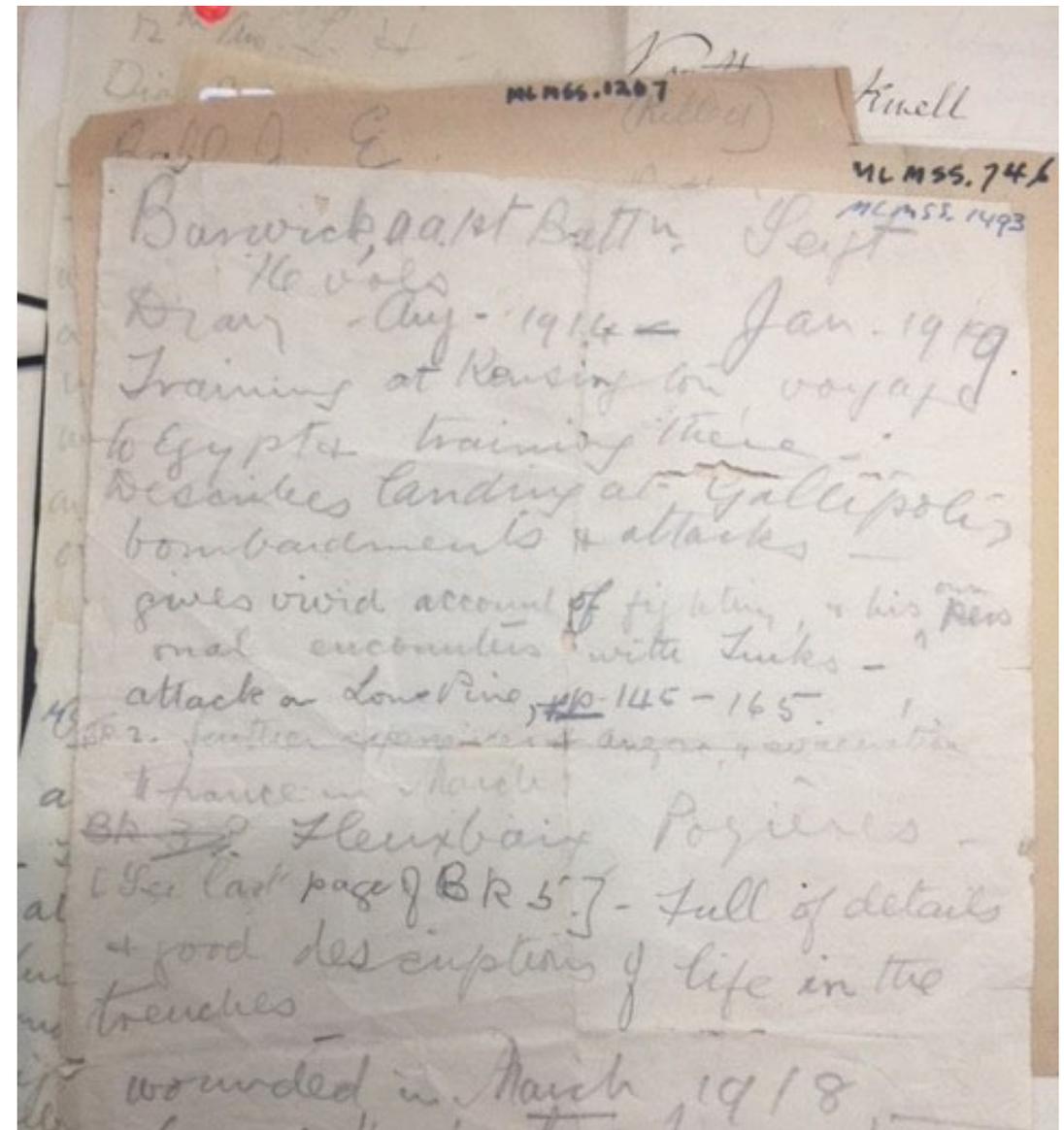
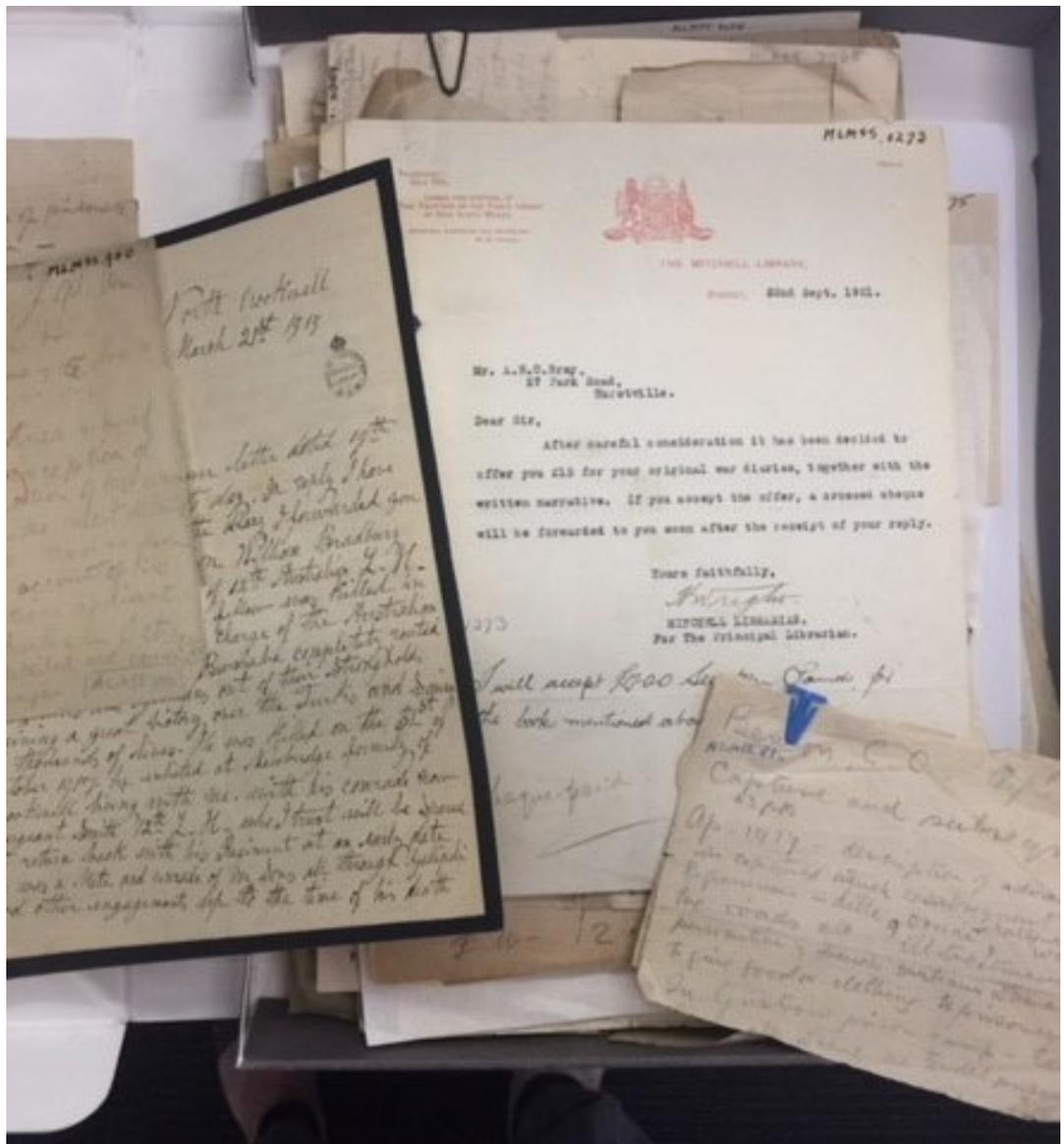
For the Trustees,—W. H. IFOULD,
Principal Librarian.

The famous Mitchell Library in Sydney, which is credited with having the greatest collection of historical records in the world, is anxious to buy the diaries of Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fought in the war. Good prices will be paid for suitable material, which will be preserved in the State archives, and communications on the subject should be sent to Mr. H. N. Southwell, c/o THE BRITISH-AUSTRALASIAN, who represents the Library in England. Some priceless information may be unearthed from these documents, especially if they are left uncensored. "The Digger," as we know him, should be a picturesque historian, and certainly a vigorous one. Both the Australian and New Zealand armies have produced a great deal of unsuspected literary talent, but probably this will be by no means one of the essential qualities of the diaries selected to live in Australasian history. The authorities will have to make a nice choice between the writers who have too much imagination and those who have none at all.

William Ifould

THE MITCHELL LIBRARY SYDNEY

This library has for some time been acquiring original diaries of Australian and New Zealand soldiers in the great war. Already a splendid collection of diaries, letters, photographs, and sketches has been obtained. The trustees are not collecting pure relics, but are desirous of obtaining manuscript, printed, and pictorial material of permanent value to future historians of the part taken by Australian soldiers in the war. The trustees are willing to pay soldiers and their relatives for this material and are offering good prices. Quite apart from the historical value of these things, and the importance of bringing them together in one great collection as soon as possible, **it is a high honour for soldiers, and the relatives of soldiers, and, in fact, for their descendants for future generations, to be able to refer to their soldier boys' diaries permanently preserved in the archives of the State of New South Wales, in this the greatest of Australian libraries. The Mitchell Library has a wonderful collection of Australian manuscript material, including the journals, log books, and diaries of the greatest of Australian navigators and explorers — Cook, Banks, Flinders, Bass, Sturt, Stuart, Leichhardt Burke and Wills, Eyre, Mitchell: of the great Australian statesmen — Wentworth, Parkes, &c., and it is surely a splendid thing that the diaries recording the experiences of our soldiers at the front should be carefully preserved in this collection, and made available for present and future generations.** The trustees ask that returned men and their relatives should not hesitate to submit the material asked for as every day that passes brings greater risks that the diaries and letters and other records will be lost or destroyed. It will be seen in the advertisement of the trustees in another column that all those who have the required material should forward it on approval, addressed to the Principal Librarian, Mitchell Library, Sydney.



Diary of No. 914. A. A. Barwick. C. Company, 1ST S

this journal I am going to forward to the best of my ability of my impressions, & experiences Joining the Army.

I will start first of all from the time I left "Surveyors Creek" New England, New South Wales. I was pleased I was, one fine Saturday, to find in the mailbox a letter bearing the Government stamp addressed to me. I was almost afraid to open it for fear it might be that I was unsuitable, for the letter, but I plucked up courage and opened it, & to my great joy & surprise, I was requested to report at once to Victoria Barracks Sydney for medical inspection, & I threw 2 or 3 somersaults,

when I finished reading, for we were all more or less that time, I was pretty sure to pass the Dr. as far as medical went, for I had just been through a fairly stiff examination for height, but I was not so sure about my height, so I took the precaution to write to Colonel Antill, if my height (5ft 4.) would do, & the note I had just received his answer.

On receipt of the note I immediately telephoned to Mr. [unclear] at Rutherglen telling him my decision, & that I would be down on that night's train (a passenger), & he said he would meet me that night at Danglem & Mrs Mitchell were going to



One would see men lying helpless & the nurses would know that before many hours were up, the poor man would be dead & yet we could do nothing for them. Its awful to see such sights, the men crave for things which we are not allowed to give them for instance a man hit in the stomach will ask for water if given he will vomit up almost immediately. Still I will not dwell on the sights one saw there. I had plenty of work to do & was kept busy. I had my blood tested to see if it was universal (fit for transfusion). The reply was yes so I had to wait for some poor man who wanted it, one came along badly wounded & lost a quantity of blood but the poor lad died whilst they were getting the table ready. I was given one bottle of stout. per day also an egg for breakfast five other men volunteered to give their blood so there were six of us ready in case we were wanted. At this time a great number of gas cases came through so we were kept working.

Benjamin Harris, MLMSS 2771/Item 2

We were alongside old much knocked about trenches & knew not our whereabouts, front or anything else. About one hour later wakened with great fear, fierce bombardment on all sides, guns of all sizes, & as light as day almost by the flash of the guns. I was absolutely afraid to move & curled myself up under great coat & tried to stop trembling from cold & fear as they must have warned us if in any danger. Prisoners passed through gully later.

25th. Tuesday.

Up at 6am to find I was sleeping on hand grenades some of ours & some of Fritz's in the dark I thought them only stones & the place was literally strewn with shrapnel shell cases & dud shells & such a ploughed up mess.

Donald MacDonald, MLMSS 1121/Item 4

The Kaiser has chucked his job & the war's over.

Had an inoculation for Influenza & as per usual much against my will.

November 11 Monday

The Armistice is signed – The guns went off at midday – There's a certain amount of quiet excitement with most of us – some are overjoyed – I wish I could feel happy – but I'm terribly depressed – am thinking of Ross & Stewart – & how things have changed –

Sister Anne Donnell, MLMSS 1022/Item 2

our/your WAR STORIES

The State Library of New South Wales holds a rich collection of resources on the Great War including diaries, letters, maps, photographs, artworks, posters and newspapers.

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Item 02: Henry Joseph Parsons war diary, 1 May 1918-31 May 1919 - Page 40

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November

The reports also show that we have taken two large town, Valenciennes and Tournay.

The weather is getting very cold lately, All...

Content type: Page

Collection: World War I Diaries

Item 02: Henry Joseph Parsons war diary, 1 May 1918-31 May 1919 - Page 44

[Page 44]

November

almost driven the German armies out of France.

The Germans have been advised as to our terms of an **Armistice**, They are...

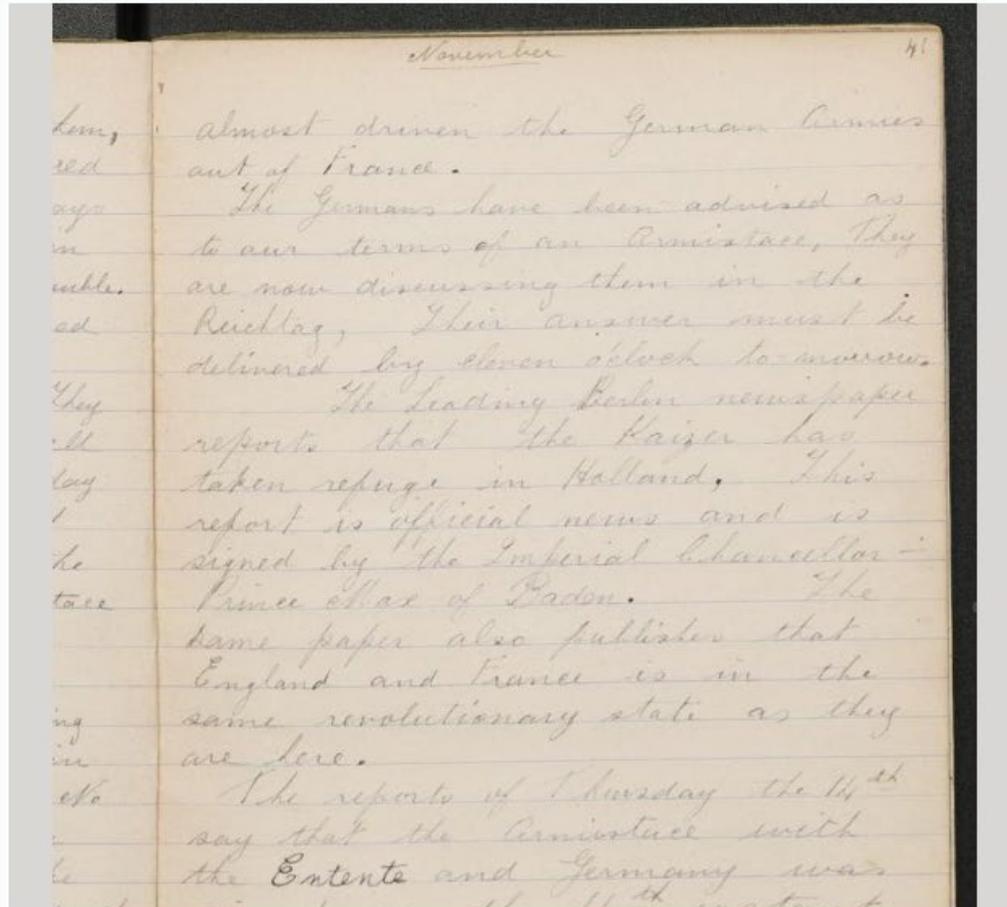
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TRANSCRIPTION

[Page 44]

November

almost driven the German armies out of France.

The Germans have been advised as to our terms of an Armistice, They are now discussing them in the Reichtag, Their answer must be delivered by eleven o'clock tomorrow.

The leading Berlin newspaper reports that the Kaiser has taken refuge in Holland, This report is official news and is signed by the Imperial Chancellor - Prince Max of Baden. The same paper also publishes that England and France is in the same revolutionary state as they are here.

The reports of Thursday the 14th say that the Armistice with the Entente and Germany was signed on the 11th instant.

The period is thirty days Armistice on all fronts. According to the

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Charles Hall's
DIARY
No 1

The Christian Comforts Fund's
GIFT DIARY 1812



... kindly called by ... statement started, then was "light up looking for fish ...

... steam for ...
... early next morning, I ...
... from the ...
... Sunday ...
... at 2:30 am ...
... number of ...
... them ...
... to the ...
... and ...

Of the greatest value: the European war collecting project

By Elise Edmonds

Senior Curator, State Library of New South Wales

"This diary begun on the day of my departure for the front from Sydney is being written chiefly for the benefit of my loved ones at home as it will be nearly impossible to tell all in letters and this will be sent home from time to time as opportunity offers and my efforts will be concentrated in keeping it up to date."

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Introduction

The Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, began acquiring the private war diaries of Australian servicemen and women after the Armistice was declared in November 1918. Principal Librarian, William Ifould, advertised in newspapers throughout Australia, New Zealand and the United Kingdom that the Library wished to purchase diaries from those who had served. The 'European war collecting project' was the first of its kind in Australia. 236 diary collections were acquired through this project, along with supporting material such as maps, artworks and photographs, revealing the voices and experiences of those who served, from all

sections of Australian society. This paper will outline the collecting project, the Library's intentions in acquiring this type of material, and will demonstrate that while collections may be acquired for a specific purpose, at a particular time, these same collections continue to be accessed, interrogated and interpreted in a myriad of ways, from generation to generation.

The European War Collecting project

Documented in the minutes of the Public Library of New South Wales Trustees' meeting of 18 November 1918, Principal Librarian Ifould recommended 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'. The Trustees adopted this recommendation.

William Ifould, well-resourced with a healthy acquisitions budget, acted immediately after the war to acquire the private war diaries and related materials of those who served. Ifould used to his advantage the national reputation of the Mitchell Library and its significant collections of Australiana to establish an international advertising campaign and procure detailed accounts from the war. No other Australian institution could act as quickly or as thoroughly as Ifould in this period.

The 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: *The Times*, *Daily Telegraph*, *Morning Post*, the *Daily Mail* and the *British Australasian*.

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.

Whilst the advertisements published in the press varied, emphasis was placed on collecting personal diaries of those who served, regardless of rank. The Library was seeking to acquire high quality, detailed and descriptive accounts from all theatres of war where Australians had served, written not just by soldiers, but also sailors, airmen and nurses.

Ifould wanted to acquire materials which revealed personal responses from those 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.

SOLDIERS' DIARIES

Thousands of volumes have already been published on the Great War and for some years to come thousands more will be issued. Some will be comprehensive, and others will deal with special phases or with the achievements of selected forces. When the part played by the Australians is written, the official despatches will furnish much useful data, but 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, and by advertisement in our columns announce their willingness to buy such manuscripts. Originals are wanted, not copies. Persons having in their possession such diaries are asked to make copies for their own use and offer the originals to the Mitchell Library, which is the treasure-house of Australia for choice manuscripts and rarest books and is the best depository for the diaries and important letters written by the men who gave Australia a place on the scroll of fame.

SOLDIERS' DIARIES, 21 December 1918, *The Register* (Adelaide), p. 10. Retrieved 21 May 2018, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article60531185>

This collecting drive marked a significant departure in the Library's acquisition philosophy. By deciding to purchase collections created by the average man (and some women), the Library and its Trustees were acknowledging the significance of ordinary people's writings and experiences. They were collecting accounts written by people from all ranks of life; farmers, brick-layers, carpenters, clerks, railway men, teachers, architects, journalists, artists, scientists, nurses. Their collections would reside alongside some of the great names in European-Australian history, those of the great explorers and statesmen; Cook, Banks, Flinders, Bass, Leichhardt, Burke and Wills, Wentworth and Parkes.

THE MITCHELL LIBRARY SYDNEY

This library has for some time been acquiring original diaries of Australian and New Zealand soldiers in the great war. Already a splendid collection of diaries, letters, photographs, and sketches has been obtained. The trustees are not collecting pure relics, but are desirous of obtaining manuscript, printed, and pictorial material of permanent value to future historians of the part taken by Australian soldiers in the war. The trustees are willing to pay soldiers and their relatives for this material and are offering good prices. Quite apart from the historical value of these things, and the importance of bringing them together in one great collection as soon as possible, it is a high honour for soldiers, and the relatives of soldiers, and, in fact, for their descendants for future generations, to be able to refer to their soldier boys' diaries permanently preserved in the archives of the State of New South Wales, in this the

greatest of Australian libraries. The Mitchell Library has a wonderful collection of Australian manuscript material, including the journals, log books, and diaries of the greatest of Australian navigators and explorers — Cook, Banks, Flinders, Bass, Sturt, Stuart, Leichhardt Burke and Wills, Eyre, Mitchell: of the great Australian statesmen — Wentworth, Parkes, &c., and it is surely a splendid thing that the diaries recording the experiences of our soldiers at the front should be carefully preserved in this collection, and made available for present and future generations. The trustees ask that returned men and their relatives should not hesitate to submit the material asked for as every day that passes brings greater risks that the diaries and letters and other records will be lost or destroyed. It will be seen in the advertisement of the trustees in another column that all those who have the required material should forward it on approval, addressed to the Principal Librarian, Mitchell Library, Sydney.

THE MITCHELL LIBRARY, SYDNEY, Saturday 28 June 1919, *Observer*, (Adelaide), page 30. Retrieved 21 May 2018, <http://nla.gov.au/nla.news-article164134660>

Ifould's collecting project may seem a radical one for 1919, given the humble origins of many of the authors and the small, unpretentious volumes of notebooks, written up in indelible pencil, smudged and dirty from their travels. Was this an instance of collecting histories 'written from below', acknowledging the historical significance of social history and valuing the diversity of voices as valid historical sources? Possibly, though Ifould did not seem interested in collecting material produced by everyday Australians who were not participating in the war effort.

These personal accounts of war service were of interest to the Library as the authors were being recast as heroes in this post-war period, perhaps in the same vein as the great 19th century explorers whose journals were already held by the Library. The brave exploits of the Australians, in the service of the British Empire, elevated these accounts beyond their humble beginnings as they took their place in the grand narrative of Australian nationhood.

Selection criteria

Library staff assessed each collection and were selective in their acquisitions; rejecting those that were too brief, or merely copies. Memoirs or narratives written after the war were not required. Ifould believed these may lack immediacy or authenticity and might have been influenced by experiences of others or by press reporting. Importance was placed in material which described the 'doings of the men, their hopes and fears and feelings generally'. Ifould outlined some of the criteria to the Library's London agent;

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 – especially those coming from particular districts who refer to the doings of men of their own districts; all these things must be taken into consideration in estimating value.

Correspondence from William Ifould to H.H. Southwell, 26 March 1919, State Library records

Ifould estimated that purchase prices would vary from £5 to £50. In fact, the highest amount paid for a collection was that written by Major-General Charles Rosenthal who received £75 for his collection.

It is interesting to note Ifould's focus on collecting the intimate, daily accounts that recorded the feelings, hopes and relationships of the men. Again, this aspiration feels very modern, placing significance on the emotional, the personal, the psychological record of those who served. Yet, when diary collections began to arrive at the Library, staff commenced the appraisal process and seemed to place a higher significance on military and strategic accounts and those that noted place names, dates or specific areas of expertise, such as medical histories, military tactics or developments in new technologies. Staff wrote brief summary notes for each collection on offer, recommending accounts that were of high enough quality to be purchased, and for how much money.

The Library holds these assessment notes as part of its institutional record.

Only two collections written by women were purchased. One of these was Sister Anne Donnell's account. She received £5 for her diary and letter collection. The Library officer's assessment notes 'marked down' the collection as it lacked a detailed medical account of the war; 'Interesting letters but hardly enough of military and medical matters to be of much value to us.'

Anne Donnell's diary and letters are a rich source of social history and certainly a rarer perspective of a woman's account of warfare. Her time working at a casualty clearing station just behind the front lines, the struggles with her health, her frustrations with British nursing staff and her grief in losing friends and homesickness provide a very personal and emotional perspective to the war and is one that speaks to contemporary audiences. However, it was not viewed as particularly significant in 1920 when being assessed by staff.

The selections made, and the prices paid for collections illustrate the mind-set of collecting institutions at the time; the importance placed on traditional modes of historical inquiry and writing histories.

Several diary collections were purchased for relatively low amounts due to lack of dates or place names mentioned in the accounts, 'It would be more valuable if there were more dates' is a critique often annotated in the appraisal notes.

A number of the diaries were critiqued as having 'more personal information than historical', and therefore viewed as less significant, purchased for low amounts (ie. £5), yet these same sources are valuable to researchers as they illustrate the rich possibilities in interrogating language, humour, attitudes to war, the enemy, the local people, time spent on leave and the impact of the war on personal faith and beliefs.

Overall, there are not many diaries detailing military strategy, nor many diarists who wrote distinct or overall accounts of a battle or campaign that Library officers may have been searching for. Instead, the diarists describe the war from their own viewpoints - what they saw, whether it was the build-up to battle, or the (often) disastrous consequences after a barrage, usually naming those injured or killed.

One of the diary collections which did receive praise and a decent purchase price was that belonging to Archie Barwick, a farmer who served as a sergeant in the 1st Battalion. He served throughout the entire war and filled 16 volumes of notebooks. He wrote candidly, with humour and with interesting detail, including accounts of his brother Len who served alongside him, and his other friends. He writes of his terror at Gallipoli and his grief at losing friends. After some negotiation with the Library, Barwick received £25 for his collection; 'One of the best we have had, very good, and full information' notes the Library officer after assessing this collection. It is with the Barwick diaries, we can see Ifould's 1918 ambition come to be realised. Here we have a remarkably personal account, where events, humour, soldier's slang and descriptions of battles are well documented, providing an excellent account of four years' service, which continues to be accessed one hundred years on by researchers.

The Diary Collection

This collection brings us the war in the first person. There are many diverse voices and viewpoints: laconic, humorous and filled with descriptions of adventures in Cairo and London. They record the names of French women met behind the lines, rates of pay and who owed them money. There are lists of brands of cigarettes smoked. Other accounts are poignant and devastating. Some admit to homesickness, some to the horror of trench warfare and conditions in the trenches. They attempt to describe the landscape and the sounds of the French battlefields. Some admit to not being able to carry on and the relief they feel when they are stretchered off to hospital in England. Some are more prosaic and write about their horses and what they cooked for breakfast.

The collection includes diaries written by member of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), Royal Australian Navy (RAN), Australian Flying Corps and medical corps. The

diaries are written by all ranks of the military, from Major-Generals to junior officers, RAN surgeons, to those who served as privates and sergeants. There are those who served in non-combat services, such as signalers, stretcher-bearers, medical corps and chaplains.

These accounts take in all theatres of war where Australians served. There are diary and letter collections written by soldiers and sailors who served in the Australian Naval and Military Expeditionary Force to New Guinea in September 1914 and witnessed some of the first Australian confrontations and casualties of the war.

The formation of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the departure of the first contingent from Albany to Egypt is represented strongly in the diaries with descriptions of leaving home, life on board troopships and arrival in Egypt, training in the desert, exploring Cairo and historical sites. They are full of descriptions of travelling in the Middle East and Europe, interactions with locals and foreign troops and comparisons with home.

The diary collection holds many accounts of the Gallipoli landing. Soldiers, signalers and members of the medical corps all wrote up their accounts in the days after the landing, in addition to those who witnessed it from the water - those working on board ships anchored off the coast. There are accounts from those who arrived as reinforcements at Gallipoli in May and the August offensives.

The collection holds accounts of the arrival of Australian battalions in France in June 1916 and the early battles Australian were involved with on the Western Front, including Fromelles and Pozieres. The collection holds a significant number of diaries written by stretcher-bearers which describes their duties of rescuing and treating the wounded. Several of these stretcher-bearers were awarded the Military Medal for bravery in the field. The collection includes accounts from those who served on the Western Front throughout the war, including some of the final battles, such as Mont St Quentin.

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 several who served in the Australian Flying Corps.

A selection 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, some from basic notes kept hidden from camp guards) include those captured during the battle at Fromelles and Bullecourt. Diary notes written by prisoner George Bell while in prison were kept hidden in his tube of toothpaste which were ultimately purchased by the Library in 1919.

Throughout 1919 and into the 1920s the Mitchell Library Committee minutes' list diary collections accepted into the collection and the prices paid for them. A year and a half

into the collecting project, in June 1920, the Mitchell Librarian reported that 224 war diaries had been purchased at a cost of £2,770.00.

Material continued to be purchased from returned servicemen or donated by family members into the 1920s. By 1924/25 the drive had slowed and by the end of the 1930s, it had ceased.

The Legacy

The authors of these diaries assumed that their collections would be received, read and shared amongst an intimate audience of family and friends. Soldier Archie Barwick wrote in the first volume of his diary; 'I hope all at home will find something of interest in it for them, for that is the reason why I wrote it.'

These personal accounts form an extraordinary collection that document the first major war that Australians served in as a nation. The diaries reveal their author's world view of the British Empire and Australia's place in it. Importantly, this collection of diaries illustrates how they saw themselves, particularly towards the end of the war, as Australians in the world. One can trace a certain, uniquely Australian sensibility; a laconic humour, a lack of respect for authority and spirit of curiosity and adventure.

The diary and letter collections which form the European War Collection were the first private war diaries to be actively collected by a cultural institution in Australia. The acquisition was purposeful and selective as Library staff sought what they considered were the best quality accounts written by a range of servicemen and nurses.

Originally intended to be read by a small circle of recipients, these diaries were elevated to significant, publicly accessible historical documents when acquired by the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales in the years after the war. Their authors were recast as national heroes in the spirit of the great explorers of the colonial age.

A century on, these collections continue to be accessed and interpreted by a wide range of researchers as key primary documents of Australians experiences in World War I. Like any archival collection, new questions continue to be framed, new areas of study open the collections up to new modes of story-telling and analysis as succeeding generations continue to make sense of the Great War.

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State Library of New South Wales records

Correspondence from William Ifould to H.H. Southwell, 26 March 1919

Public Library of New South Wales Trustees' minute books, 18 November 1918