

Literary giants: revealing the Angus & Robertson collection

Elise Edmonds and Ann Peck

Australian Society of Archivists 31st National Conference
Parramatta
19 October 2016

The Australian bookseller and publisher Angus & Robertson dominated Australian publishing for slightly over 100 years, from 1888 until 1989, and survives today as part of HarperCollins (Australia). This firm published many of Australia's greatest authors and poets, bringing to life an Australian publishing industry. Angus & Robertson (A&R) encouraged Australian writing and reflected a burgeoning Australian culture.

The A&R partnership began in 1884 when George Robertson joined the book-selling business started by David Angus in Sydney. Scottish immigrant David Mackenzie Angus had immigrated to Australia in 1855, with the hope of improving his health in the sunny south. He found work in the Sydney branch of a bookseller, George Robertson and Company (no relation to his future business partner). This company was based in Melbourne. Angus worked for this company for around 18 months before striking out on his own and establishing his own bookshop. He opened a second hand bookshop at 110 ½ Market St in 1884. The book stock that he sold had been sent by a friend from Scotland.

Suffering ongoing ill health, Angus saw the benefit of taking on a business partner in 1885. George Robertson, also of Scottish heritage, had spent two years in New Zealand before arriving in Sydney in 1882.

Initially A&R operated as booksellers, however in 1888 the company began to publish. This was initiated by Robertson, who would direct the publishing arm for the following 45 years, until his death in 1933. From many accounts, Robertson was ambitious, hardworking, and dedicated in developing the publishing side of the business, always maintaining an active involvement in the process. He commissioned and read manuscripts, interviewed and corresponded with authors, arranged for illustrations, corrected proofs and negotiated even the printing and binding. Typical of many immigrants to Australia at this time, he was particularly interested in publishing and promoting Australiana, demonstrating his commitment to his adopted home. He spent his life promoting an Australian cultural life of books which were published in Australia by Australians. Initially all of A&R's books were by Australian writers or on Australian topics. The first publication in 1888 was called *A crown of wattle*, written by a Sydney solicitor, H. Peden Steel. This was followed by a book of verse by

Ishmael Dare (a pen name for Arthur W. Jose), *Sun and cloud on river and sea*, and *Facsimile of a proposal for a settlement on the coast of New South Wales*, written by Sir George Young in 1785.

A&R continued some small scale publishing while the bookselling arm continued to grow, resulting in the move to larger premises in 1890 at 89 Castlereagh St.

In 1895 the company launched a literary series with the publication of verse by another Sydney solicitor, Andrew Barton (Banjo) Paterson. This first work by Banjo Paterson, *The man from Snowy River and other verses*, sold 5,000 copies in the first four months after publication. This was even more remarkable as it was sold for a comparatively high price of five shillings. A reprint was required before publication day, 11,000 copies were printed in the first 15 months and 48,000 by 1917. More successful publications followed, with a book of verse by Henry Lawson in 1896, *In the days when the world was wide and other verses*. Lawson followed this up with *While the billy boils*. Lawson would remain with A&R right up until his death in 1922. Women authors were also published, such as Louise Mack's *Teens* (1897) and *Girls together* (1898), which were novels aimed at the juvenile market.

By publishing Paterson and Lawson in book form, A&R was able to capitalise on the great popularity these writers had already achieved through their work being published in the newspaper, the *Bulletin*.

It was at this time, around the turn of the century, that A&R really came into their own as a publishing house, encouraging 'home grown' talent and thus opening up many new opportunities for Australian authors. Australian subjects had begun attracting a wider audience and this enthusiasm for Australian subject matter was part of that wider search for a particular Australian identity around the time of Federation.

The actual books published by the firm were handsomely produced, printed and bound locally using quality imported paper and cloth. Robertson designed the volumes himself. *The man from Snowy River* appeared in an ordinary edition and a large paper edition believed to have been the first in Australia. The company's product catalogue, *Messrs Angus & Robertson's Publications and Announcements* (1898) was probably the first catalogue of specifically Australian books issued by an Australian publisher.

While the publishing arm was taking off, the bookselling business was good too. A&R was appointed official booksellers to the University of Sydney, the Free Public Library (later the State Library of NSW) and the Parliamentary Library and publishers to the University of Sydney.

In 1900, David Angus retired due to ill health. He sold his share in A&R to two employees, Fred Wymark and Richard Thomson, and then returned to Scotland with his family. He died in 1901. A public company was formed and incorporated in February 1907, succeeding the former partnership. A&R continued to expand its activities both in NSW and internationally,

publishing a wide variety of fiction and non-fiction. In 1910, its successful sales meant that extensions and renovations could be made to the premises in Castlereagh St. Henry Lawson wrote a poem about the premises in *The auld shop and the new*. This poem was presented to George Robertson in 1910, although A&R only published a limited edition after Lawson's death in 1923.

Robertson developed close relationships with A&R's authors, maintaining good and amiable friendships with most, however his most complex relationship was with Henry Lawson. Often Robertson stepped in to assist Lawson, either with money or practical help as Lawson's personal life deteriorated in his later years.

By 1900 A&R was well established as a publisher and had averaged about 11 publications a year up to that time. By 1910, the average rose to 20 titles per year and by 1920, even after four years of war, the annual average increased to 33 titles. A London agency of A&R, the Australian Book Company, was established in 1913.

During the First World War, the company continued to publish, despite paper shortages. In 1915 A&R published C.J. Dennis' first work, *The songs of a sentimental bloke*, followed the next year by *The moods of Ginger Mick*. These works were published in standard editions, but also as special pocket editions for the trenches.

Into the 1920s, Robertson and the company focused on the publication of two large and significant titles, the first *Australian encyclopaedia* (1925-1926), a two volume publication and in 1921 the company began publication on behalf of the Commonwealth of the 12 volume *Official history of Australia in the War of 1914-1918*, written of course, by C.E.W. Bean.

Some of their best sellers (which provided a solid backlist needed to continue with new titles), included works by Paterson, Lawson, *The songs of a sentimental bloke*, the more humble and practical *Australian lettering book*, the *Presbyterian women's cookery book* and *the commonsense cookery book*. The ongoing success of these sales enabled the company to undertake the costly and more prestigious work of publishing the *Australian encyclopaedia* and John Ferguson's *Bibliography of Australia*.

A&R brought into being some of the most enduring characters in Australian literature, which have entered into the nation's conscience, such as Lawson's drover's wife, the sentimental bloke and the man from Snowy River.

The State Library of NSW holds four collections of A&R material which include original manuscripts, authors' and publisher's correspondence, original artwork for book illustrations and jackets, business records and press book reviews of books published:

Collection 01: Angus & Robertson records, 1888-1932. This collection came into the Library in April 1933. The publishing files for 1931 and 1932 were acquired slightly later, possibly in 1934 and 1935 respectively.

Collection 02: Angus & Robertson original drawings and jacket designs by Australian artists to illustrate Angus & Robertson's publications by Australian authors, ca. 1896-1920 were purchased from Angus & Robertson, 1960.

Collection 03: Angus & Robertson Ltd further records, 1880-1974, including publishing correspondence and business records, was acquired in 1977.

Collection 04: Angus & Robertson estrays, 1854-1971, was acquired in 1988.

Research interest in the collection has been steady over the years and has focused particularly on correspondence between author and publisher. This correspondence is essential reading for anyone researching aspects of Australian literature from its earliest days to the 1970s. However, access has been hampered by the need for staff intervention to make available not only the records themselves, but also the existing listings and finding aids. In 1990 a hardcopy "Guide to the Angus & Robertson Archives in the Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, Part 1" was published. This guide, which described the material acquired in 1933 (Collection 01), was intended, before the advent of online library catalogues, to be the first in a series of printed guides which would cover the entire collection. There were also hardcopy listings of the Collection 03 correspondence files and some of the collection's pictorial components, which were available in the Library's Reading Room. The remainder of Collection 03 was largely unprocessed, unlisted and therefore not available to the public.

Additional impediments to access were the various restrictions imposed by A&R at the time of acquisition. For example, correspondence between authors and A&R was restricted until the death of the author (for Collection 01) or for 10 years after the death of the author (Collection 03) except with the consent of the author or their heirs. Consequently, each request for access to an author's correspondence required research by library staff to determine the author's status, date of death if applicable, contact details for heirs and subsequent negotiations with the author/heirs – often a time consuming and frustrating process for both library staff and researchers.

In March 2015, the Library commenced a year-long project designed to address the access issues for Collection 03 by arranging and describing the collection, creating online catalogue records and reviewing the access restrictions. This project presented several challenges:

- The sheer size and complexity of the collection

The manuscript portion of the collection filled the equivalent of around 750 archive boxes, with the pictorial and other components adding a further 70 or so boxes of various sizes. Some parts of the collection (business records, correspondence files, artworks, some photographs) had been previously arranged and had detailed hardcopy content lists, but there were also many large boxes of unprocessed material labelled "Miscellaneous". Within

the over-arching A&R provenance were many subordinate provenances including approximately 30 subsidiary companies controlled by A&R at various times along with various departments and individuals within the company. For many records, it was difficult to identify an original order.

- Changing approaches to archival arrangement over time

In the years since the collection was first acquired in 1977, some parts had been arranged and described. In line with the practice of the time, photographs and other graphic material were removed from correspondence to be stored separately. Some of these, along with other photographs and drawings from this and other collections, had then been placed in artificial collections arranged by subject. Because all the material was labelled with an accession number, it was able to be repatriated to the collection, although not necessarily to a specific place within the collection.

- Preservation issues

Preservation treatments were initially out of scope for the project, but examination of the 134 volumes of book review press clippings revealed that almost all were badly affected by mould. These were able to be treated by the Library's conservators and can now be issued to researchers.

- Transition to new collection management system and online catalogue mid-project

The State Library is currently transitioning to "an integrated platform for library and archive management, digital preservation and user discovery" to replace multiple legacy systems. The first phase involved replacement of the Library's existing archival collection management system with Axiell Group's Adlib Archive. The migration of data from the old system to the new occurred mid-project and involved a freeze on creating or editing data that stretched from an expected 3 weeks to 3 months, as well as much training and system testing. The new system's capabilities are still being explored but it should offer much greater flexibility when displaying complex archival hierarchies.

During this project, the previously unprocessed portion of the collection (the equivalent of approximately 450 archive boxes) was listed and rehoused, much of the pictorial component was also rehoused, and the entire collection arranged and described. At the completion of the project in April 2016, access to the whole of Collection 03, now arranged into 13 series, became possible through the online catalogue.

Series 1, Business records, includes over 90 years of company records, including those of subsidiary companies

Series 2, Correspondence files, comprises letters to and from approximately 5,000 correspondents, including authors, and would-be authors (with every possible variation on the rejection letter), other publishers, booksellers, etc.

Series 3, Literary manuscripts, approximately 150 boxes of authors' manuscripts, published and unpublished, from Betty Archdale and Thea Astley to E.V. Timms and Judith Wright.

Series 4, Book reviews, comprising press clippings and transcripts of radio broadcasts, have formed the basis for some recent research. This year, as part of the State Library of New South Wales' collaboration with Western Sydney University, an intern from the School of Humanities and Communication Arts has used the reviews extensively in researching controversial and banned books. These days, we may consider that collections of press clippings are not particularly significant or desirable, given the advent of the wonderful Trove website, which makes online searching for newspaper articles so easy. However, a well organised press clipping collection such as this, with reviews for each book grouped together, and including clippings from overseas periodicals, is still a valuable, and easily searchable, resource.

Series 5 contains files maintained by some of the senior staff along with some production files.

Series 6, Education Division files, contain records relating to the production of A&R's large number of textbooks and reference books.

Series 7 contains 3 sub-series:

- papers relating to Henry Lawson and his mother Louisa, which were kept in George Robertson's safe. Included in these are letters, Henry Lawson's birth certificate, manuscript copies of Mary Gilmore's memoir 'Henry Lawson and I', Henry's last pencil and Louisa's wedding ring
- papers of Will Lawson (no relation to Henry, but he was a boarder with Henry's widow, Bertha, for several years)
- the diary of Harold Lasseter (of Lasseter's reef fame)

Series 8 comprises 31 large boxes of original artwork including drawings, oil and watercolour paintings, photographs, lithographs and book jacket designs for use in Angus & Robertson publications. They include works by some of Australia's best known book illustrators and artists, including Quinton F. Davis, Walter Stackpool, Dorothy Wall and also Norman Lindsay.

Series 9, 10 and 11 largely comprise photographs. There are many formal portraits of authors and senior staff, but also photographs of various business activities, processes and social events, all of which provide an insight into the culture of a large publishing company of the time.

Series 12 and 13 contain a selection of gramophone records and printing plates.

Using this collection, it is possible to trace the entire lifecycle of an individual book. We can begin with the germination of an idea, which is discussed by the author and publisher, read the various drafts of a manuscript, and the reports written by the publisher's readers, author contracts, production files, artwork for illustrations and book jacket including alternative designs, proofs, book reviews, orders from booksellers and sales figures.

The other outcome of the project was the resolution of the issue of access restrictions. In consultation with HarperCollins, the current owners of Angus & Robertson, all access

restrictions have recently been lifted, making correspondence and readers' reports on submitted manuscripts freely available to researchers.

Following on from the project, the next step in making the Angus & Robertson Collection more available will be the digitisation of selected parts of the collection, which is being rolled out progressively, commencing with the correspondence files from Collection 01. These will be digitised and available from the online catalogue during 2016/2017, followed by the Collection 03 correspondence files.

The end result of all these processes (arranging and describing, preservation, easing of access restrictions and digitisation) will be to bring to light one of the most significant literary collections in Australia.

Literary giants: revealing the Angus & Robertson collection

Elise Edmonds & Ann Peck

Australian Society of Archivists Conference, Parramatta, 19 October 2016



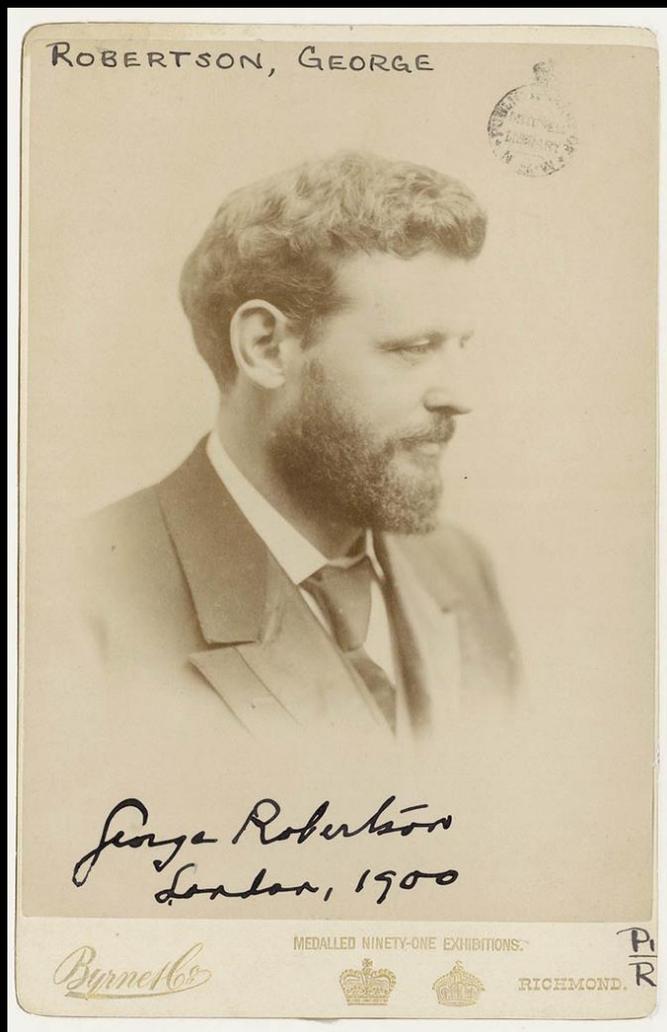
World leading library:
Collect
Connect
Community



Angus & Robertson Ltd Booksellers, Sydney, 1916 / photographer unknown, PXD 376 / Item 07

World leading library:

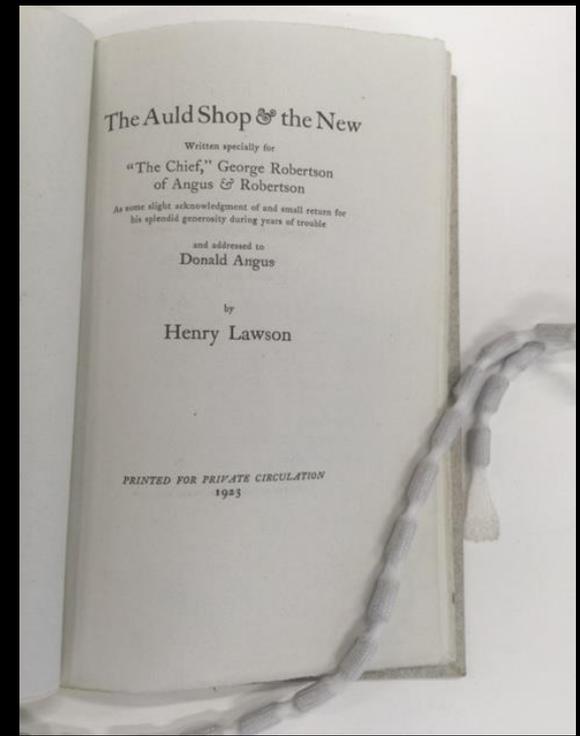
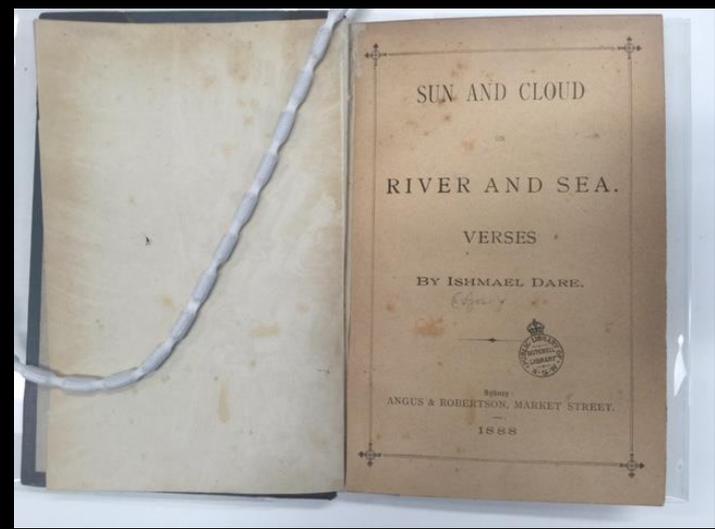
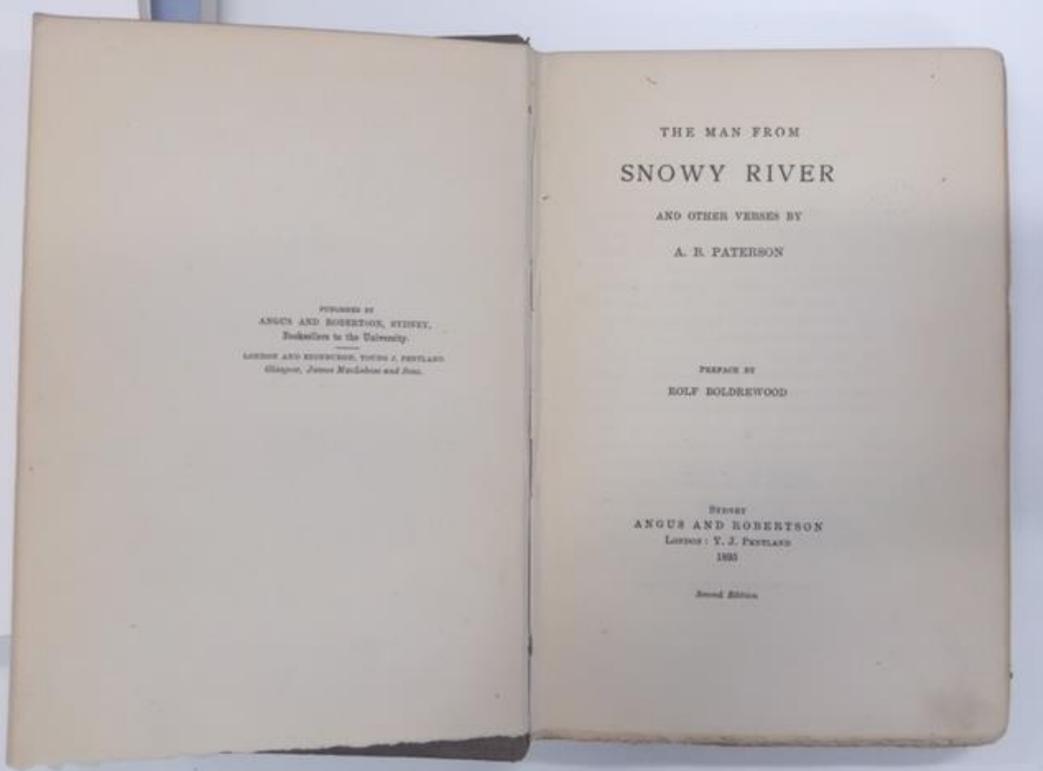
Collect
Connect
Community

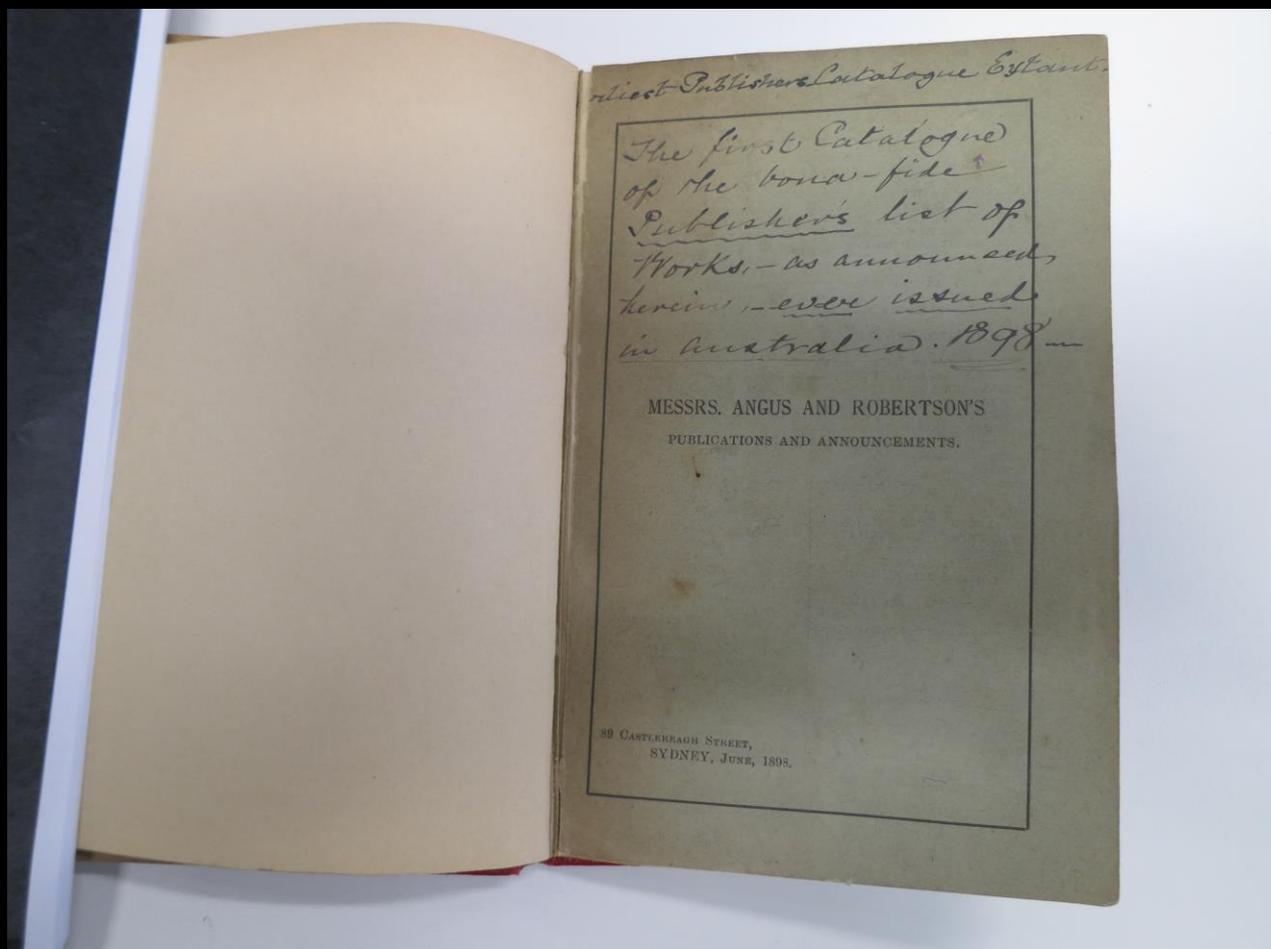


George Robertson, London, 1900 / photographer Francis Byrne & Co, P1 / 1478.

World leading library:

Collect
Connect
Community

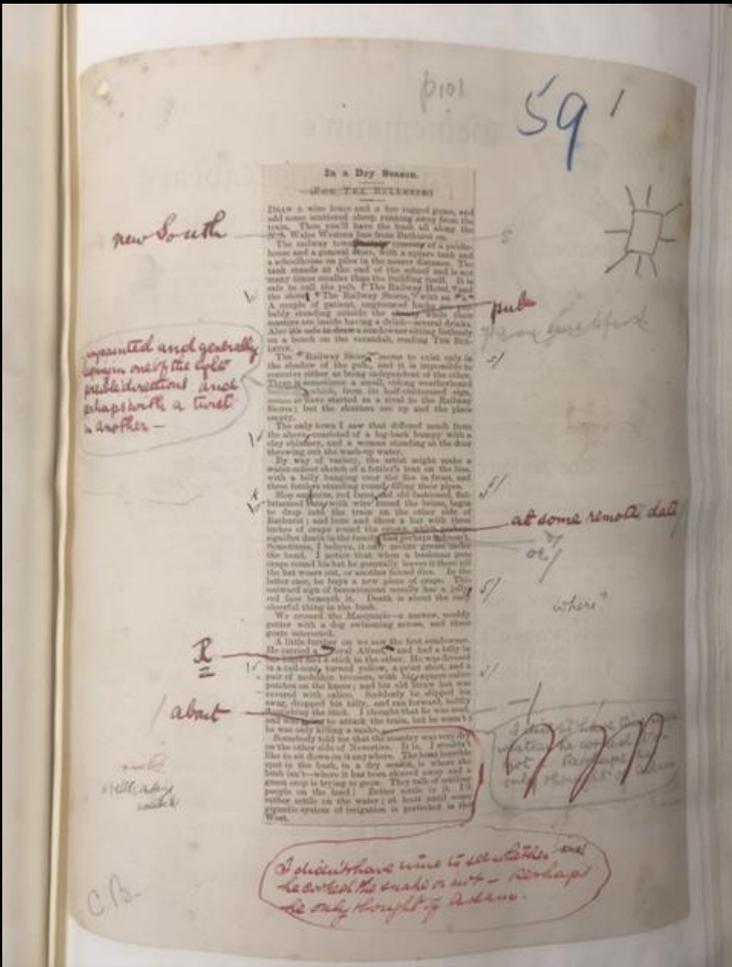




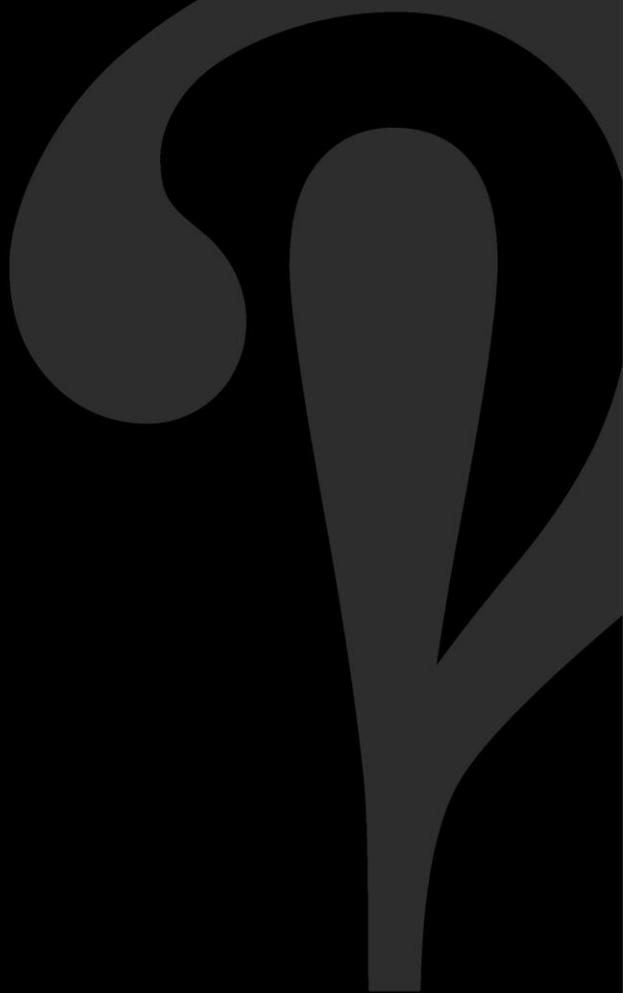
Messrs Angus & Robertson's Publications and Announcements (1898)



Henry Lawson material



Example of an edited poem by Henry Lawson



Angus & Robertson archives

- Collection 01: Angus & Robertson records, 1888-1933
- Collection 02: Angus & Robertson original drawings and jacket designs, 1896-1920
- Collection 03: Angus & Robertson further records, 1880-1979
- Collection 04: Angus & Robertson estrays, 1854-1971

The Angus & Robertson project

Challenges

- Size and complexity of the collection
- Changing approaches to archival arrangement over time
- Preservation issues
- Transition to new collection management system



World leading library:

Collect
Connect
Community

Collection 3: Angus & Robertson further records, 1880-1979

Series 1: Business records

Series 2: Correspondence files

Series 3: Literary manuscripts

Series 4: Book reviews

Series 5: Publishing files

Series 6: Education Division records

Series 7: Collected papers

19 South St Double Bay

Messrs Anhus & Robertson

Dear Sirs

I return with thanks the broadcast review
Of Shearer's Colt

yours truly

A B Paterson

Paterson, A. B.: The shearer's colt, MLMSS 3269 / Series 4 / Vol. 90

World leading library:

Collect
Connect
Community

Mrs Louisa Lawson
wedding ring. Mother of
Henry Lawson the Poet.
Gertrude O'Connor.

If not delivered in Fourteen Days return to
S & ROBERTSON LIMITED
New & Second-hand Booksellers, Librarians,
89-95 Castlereagh Street, Sydney.

This pencil was the last one used
by Henry Lawson — 1/9/22.
Gertrude O'Connor

Henry Lawson's pencil, R 2188 / Item 1
Louisa Lawson's wedding ring, R 2188 / Item 2

Collection 3: Angus & Robertson further records, 1880-1979

Series 8: Illustrative material for publications

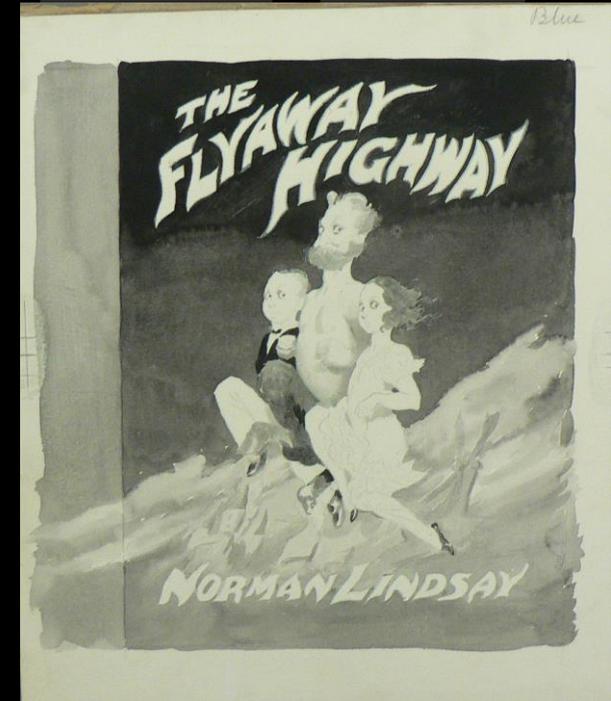
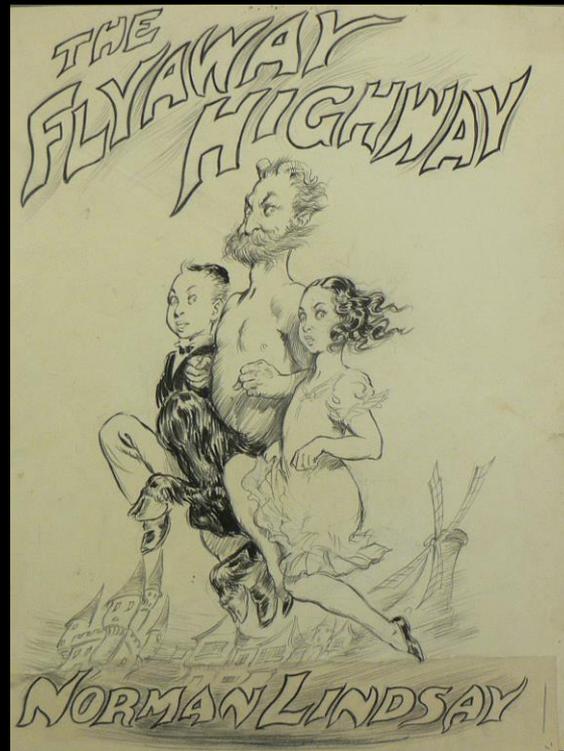
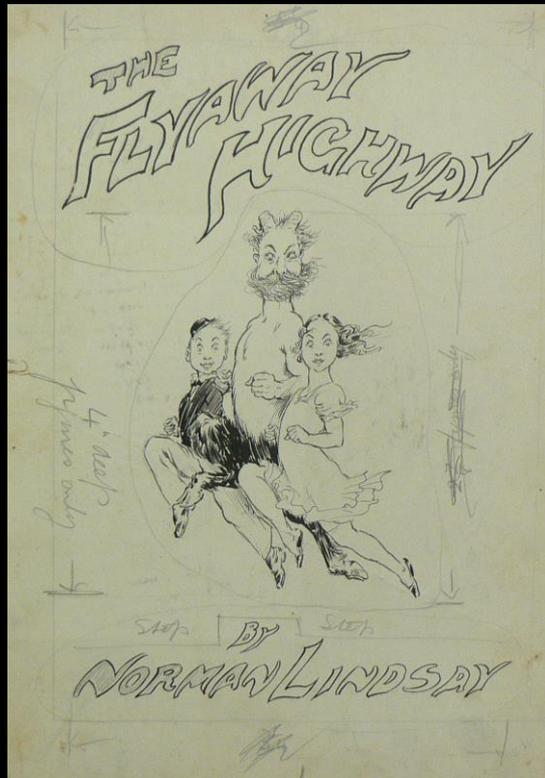
Series 9: Portraits of authors and others

Series 10: Photographs of staff, events, premises

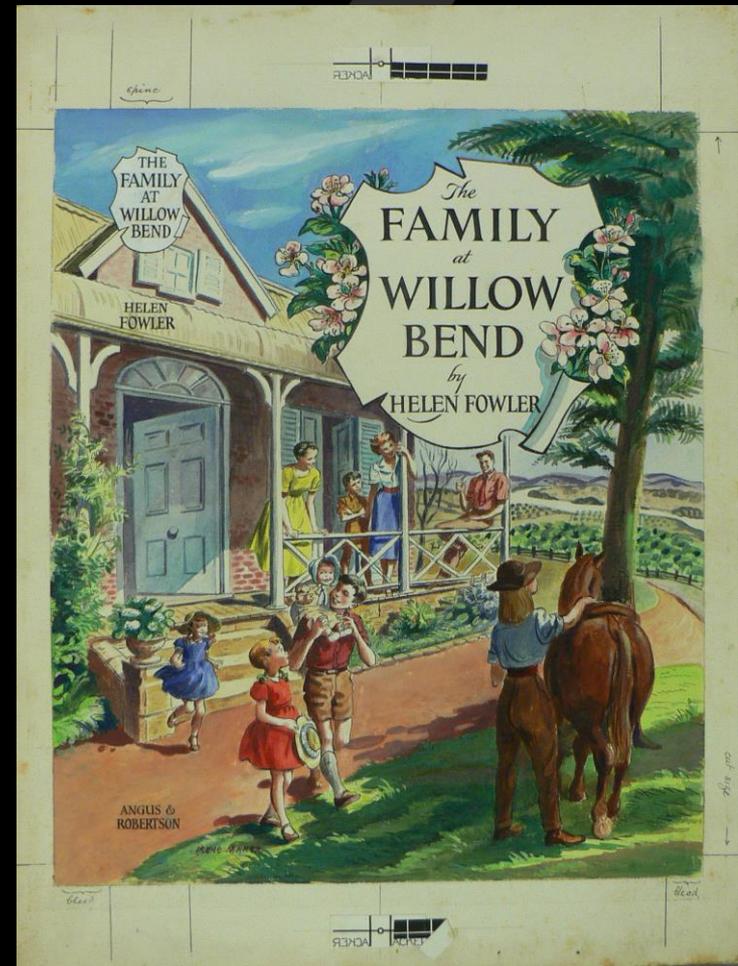
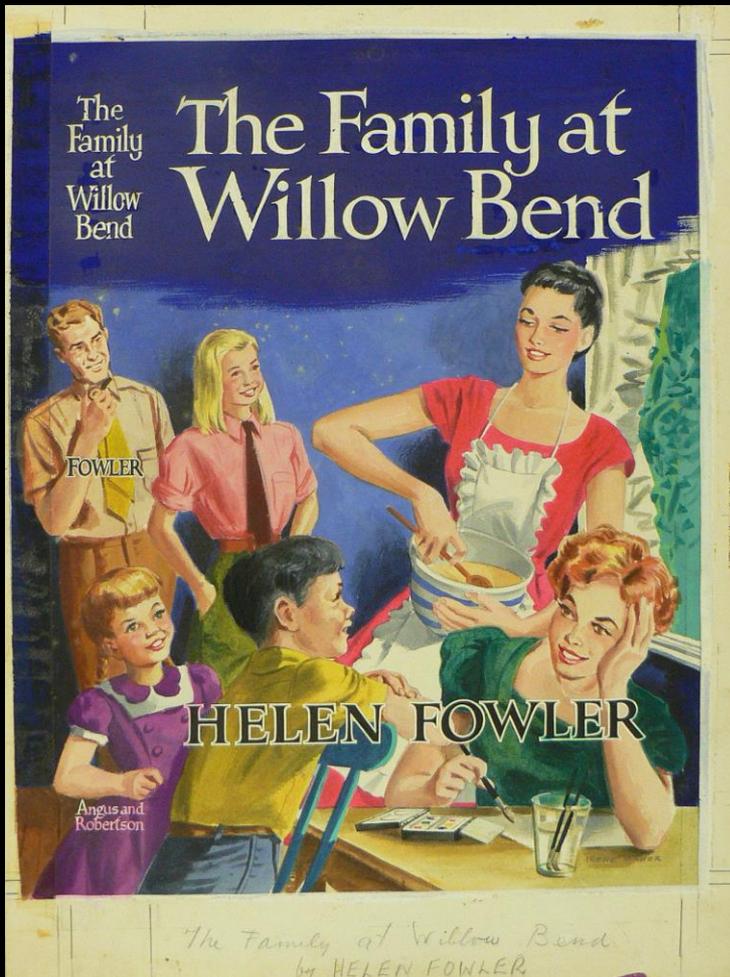
Series 11: Further pictorial material

Series 12: Gramophone records

Series 13: Printing plates



Lindsay, Norman: The flyaway highway, PXD 359 / no. 3147-3149



The family at Willow Bend / artist Irene Maher, PXD 359 / no. 2350-2351

World leading library:

Collect
Connect
Community



Thank you

Questions?

Drawings for Dot and the kangaroo, 1898 / Frank P. Mahony, PX*D 197

World leading library:

Collect
Connect
Community