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Bibliographic citation

Gaunt, HM (2010). Identity and nation in the Australian public library: the development of local and national collections 1850s ,Äö- 1940s, using the Tasmanian Public Library as case study. University Of Tasmania. Thesis. <https://doi.org/10.25959/23211737.v1>

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**Identity and nation in the Australian public library:
the development of local and national collections 1850s – 1940s,
using the Tasmanian Public Library as case study**

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Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements
for the Degree of
Doctor of Philosophy

University of Tasmania

September 2010

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Heather Gaunt

September 2010

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Heather Gaunt

September 2010

ABSTRACT

The major public reference libraries in the capital cities of Australia all maintain a ‘heritage’ role that is a central aspect of their function in their communities. All have acquired rich and extensive collections relating to the history and literature of their respective states and, in a number of cases, to the nation as a whole. However, this aspect of philosophy and practice has not always been part of the public library’s institutional goals. When the major public reference libraries were established in the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the acquisition of a ‘local archive’ reflecting local colonial history and culture was desultory or non-existent in most cases.

This thesis is a cultural history of the growth of the ‘will to archive’ in the public library in Australia over the course of a century, focusing on the period from the 1850s to the 1940s. It addresses *how*, *when*, and *why* the Australian public library came to be a repository of the local and national past, as distinct from (but never replacing) its role as a purveyor of Enlightenment culture and learning. The evolution of this function is situated within a broader framework of emerging historical consciousness, the growth of civic nationalism related to the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, changing attitudes to the production of history and the new value accorded to accurate historical records, and efforts to establish a ‘national’ creative literature. The thesis argues that the archiving mentality that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, stimulated by the emerging interest in local history, became naturalised in the twentieth century through the forces of nationalism and patriotism. The evolution of this function was complex, influenced variously by factors such as the degree and type of cultural philanthropic activity, historical ‘amnesia’ toward the colonial convict past, and residual ‘cultural cringe’ toward Australian literary production.

While addressing local archiving practices across all the major ‘state’ public libraries, the thesis focuses on the Tasmanian Public Library. While providing an overview of the development of the local archive in Tasmania over a century, the thesis examines in detail the agency of key figures such as trustee James

Backhouse Walker and philanthropist William Walker, and the effect of the local penal past on the formation of the local archive, exemplified by the ‘life cycle’ of convict text *The Hermit in Van Diemen’s Land* by Henry Savery.

This study emerges from the conviction that a close examination of the formation and stratification of library collections that symbolise and promote national identity contributes valuable information about emerging and changing ‘worldviews’ of communities, particularly the ways in which communities identify as members of a region and nation. Utilising the lens of public library philosophy and collections, the thesis offers a new way of reflecting on the formation of local and national identities in Australia.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I would like to thank my Supervisors Associate Professor Stefan Petrow and Professor Michael Bennett, and my Research Supervisor Tony Marshall, for their support in the production of this doctoral dissertation. In particular, Stefan has been outstandingly available, helpful, critical and supportive throughout the process, and has made the business of working off-campus a smooth and successful one. Professor Emeritus W Boyd Rayward has been a generous (long-distance) mentor throughout the research and writing of the dissertation, and has encouraged my efforts to think in the broadest terms to an international audience, and to make a show for Australian library history. Professor and Chair of Australian Literature at the University of Western Australia, Philip Mead, has given valuable advice and encouragement, enriching my historical perspective from the discipline of Australian literature. Likewise Associate Professor Andrea Witcomb has supported my explorations in museology and memory, and provided invaluable criticism of work in progress.

I am grateful to the State Library of Tasmania for the award of a three week Research Fellowship in 2005 that directly stimulated this doctoral project. At the State Library of Tasmania, I am greatly indebted to Tony Marshall, Senior Librarian, Heritage Collections, and his staff, particularly Ian Morrison. Tony has gladly shared his enormous expertise, and provided limitless support and encouragement. I am also grateful to library staff at the Mitchell Library, Sydney, the State Library of Victoria, the Batty Library in Perth, the John Oxley Library in Brisbane, the 'Special and Rare Materials Collections' at the Morris Miller Library, University of Tasmania, and the British Library.

I am very grateful to descendants of William Walker, particularly Rod Walker, who generously provided access to private papers, and accommodation in their Tasmanian home. Great thanks also to Margi Mason-Cox, who offered friendship and accommodation throughout the research. I am indebted to Sandy Fitts, for her encouragement and generous reading of the final draft of the thesis.

Finally, thanks to my husband Peter Gaunt, and children Meaghan and William, who were always supportive and assured me (however hopefully) that this would be ‘the best PhD ever’.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

List of illustrations	xii
Abbreviations	xiv
INTRODUCTION:	
Introduction	2
Scope of the study	6
Significance and contribution	11
Methodology	12
Sources	23
Structural summary	27
CHAPTER 1:	
Transfer of the ‘liberal archive’: the development of local collections in the Australian public library in the 19th century	
Introduction	33
The development of the liberal archive in Britain	35
The Australian public library as a derivative institution	40
Inconsistencies in archiving the locality in the Australian state libraries	43
Understanding the failure to archive	47
Dissemination of print culture in southern Tasmania in the 19th century	51
The Tasmanian Public Library	52
AJ Taylor as liberal librarian	56
The first collections	62
Local history and the colonial archive	66
The new historical section of the Royal Society of Tasmania	77
Conclusion	79
CHAPTER 2:	
Professionalism and patriotism: Federation nationalism and the public library	
Introduction	81
Federation and civic nationalism in Australia	85
Patriotism and professionalism in the public library	89
Invocations of nation	94
The promotion of a centralised ‘national library’	98

Classification schemes in the national debate	103
Parallel patriotisms at the Tasmanian Public Library	107
Federalism in the Tasmanian Public Library	113
‘Nationing rhetoric’ in Tasmania	119
Edmund Morris Miller as progressive nationalist.....	122
Conclusion	132

CHAPTER 3:

‘No better missionary work’: library philanthropy & cultural change, part 1

Introduction	134
Philanthropy and library history	135
The international context for Australian library philanthropy	139
Attitudes to philanthropy by librarians and managers	144
Social philanthropy in Tasmania.....	147
Books, elevating culture and the development of library philanthropy	150
Elite philanthropy.....	153
Public stock donations	156
Carnegie philanthropy and institutional change	161
The lending library and the stimulation of local philanthropy.....	170
Further implications of the lending department.....	174
Conclusion	178

CHAPTER 4:

Patriotism and civic faith: library philanthropy & cultural change, part 2

Introduction.....	180
Changing perceptions of philanthropy in Australasia.....	181
Book collectors and patriotic philanthropy	183
William Walker (1861-1933), collector and library philanthropist	191
Walker’s bibliophilic and philanthropic motivations.....	196
Walker as annalist	200
Walker as hoarder	204
Australiana collecting and philanthropy as valorised leisure.....	208
Walker’s donations to the Tasmanian Public Library.....	212
The new Australiana collection of the Tasmanian Public Library.....	216
Walker’s philanthropic legacy	223
Conclusion	225

CHAPTER 5:

Penal history and the archive: The Tasmanian Public Library and *The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land*

Introduction.....	227
History, memory and the development of the local archive	230
History, memory and the 'history of the book'	234
Henry Savery's <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land</i> : creation and reception.....	236
The Tasmanian Public Library and the 'convict stain'	243
The kindling of amateur historians' interest in <i>The Hermit</i> from the 1880s.....	245
The disposal of <i>The Hermit</i> by the Tasmanian Public Library	252
The will to forget?	257
Changing attitudes to convict history and the archive	262
Conclusion	269

CHAPTER 6:

'How to encourage our literature': National fictions in the Australian public library

Introduction.....	271
The 'fiction debate' in the international public library	274
Literary nationalism, Australian fiction and Australian readers	277
The Australian public library and fiction 1890s-1920s	283
National creative literature in the Australian public library.....	290
Australian fiction at the Tasmanian Public Library	294
EM Miller and the promotion of Australian fiction in the public library	296
Changing cultural nationalism in the 1920s and 1930s	298
National fictions in Australian public libraries in the 1920s and 1930s	301
The Australian Library Association and Australian literature	304
External agencies promoting public library provision of national literature	310
Engagement with national fictions in public libraries from the 1930s	318
Conclusion	324

CHAPTER 7:

Preservation and promotion: heritage in the 20th century in the Australian public library

Introduction.....	327
The growth of the public historical sphere in the early twentieth century.....	329
Enrichment of historical collections in the major public libraries	331

Showcasing public heritage	336
Competitive and collegial relationships between the major libraries in the formation of the local and national archive.....	343
Development of formal state archives in the major libraries	347
The growth of the public historical sphere in Tasmania, 1920s onwards	351
Heritage at the Tasmanian Public Library from the 1930s	354
The creation of State Library of Tasmania and Tasmanian Archives.....	361
Further enrichment of the Australiana collections	363
Libraries and ‘heritage’ in recent decades	366
Conclusion	368
CONCLUSION:	
Summary of findings.....	372
Avenues for future research	374
Conclusion	377
SELECT BIBLIOGRAPHY:	
Primary sources.....	379
Secondary sources	389

LIST OF ILLUSTRATIONS

AJ Taylor, librarian at the Tasmanian Public Library 1873 - 1921. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart 30-7668).....	59
Edmund Morris Miller, 1940. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart PH30/1/2210).....	123
The exterior of the Carnegie building, Tasmanian Public Library, Hobart, c. 1907. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart, 30-494).....	167
The opening ceremony of the new Carnegie Library, 1907. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart SLT23-24-2388-1)	167
The Reference Room of the new Carnegie Library, Tasmanian Public Library, c. 1907. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart SLT23-24-2388-2).....	168
The Lending Library of the new Carnegie Library, Tasmanian Public Library, c. 1907. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart SLT NS1013-185)	168
The ground floor reading room, Carnegie Library, Tasmanian Public Library, c. 1907. (Tasmanian Archives and Heritage Office, Hobart SLT23-24-2388-3).....	169
William Walker at 51 years of age. Photograph taken at Adelphi Studios on The Strand in London, 1912. (Walker family, Tasmania).....	194
Title page with mutilated publisher's details, <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land</i> (1829). (Henry Savery, <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land: from the Colonial Times</i> , Hobart Town, Printed by Andrew Bent, 1829, State Library of Victoria, copy with bookplate of James Edge-Partington)	238
Annotations identifying characters in a copy of <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land</i> (1829). (Henry Savery, <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land: from the Colonial Times</i> , Hobart Town, Printed by Andrew Bent, 1829, State Library of Victoria, copy with bookplate of James Edge-Partington)	241

John Marshall's 'Key' to <i>The Hermit in Van Diemen's Land</i> , originally inserted in the copy of the book owned by Justin McCarty Brown, and removed by JB Walker. (Special and Rare Materials Collection, Morris Miller Library, University of Tasmania, Hobart W9/C4/11).....	242
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ABBREVIATIONS

Tasmanian Archives and Research Office	TAHO
University of Tasmania Library	UTL
State Library of Victoria	SLV
State Library of Tasmania	SLT