

Re-igniting interest in local history



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The death of the last Australian ANZAC late last year started me thinking once again about how much of the past is lost each day. We all have memories of places and events which are not recorded elsewhere. Some of these memories are not particularly significant and we certainly do not want to record every moment of our existence.

We need, however, to preserve that part of our past which may be of value to others. Perhaps it will be no more exciting than knowing that great-aunt Tilly drank gin straight from the bottle which accounted for her depressive personality. Alternatively, it could be of immense importance to know that particular illnesses have recurred in the family or that your house is built on a radioactive waste dump.

Local history and genealogy tend to conjure images of fusty, dedicated enthusiasts whose ability to bore is surpassed only by military historians. Their poor image has been promoted largely by 'real' historians who concentrate on weighty issues of politics and economics. In the past, some librarians and archivists were also guilty of relegating local and social historians to the nuisance category.

How things have changed. Somewhere around the time of Australia's bicentenary, we began to appreciate our heritage and increasingly wanted to know about the ordinary people not just the 'great men' who populated the past. Suddenly, even quite respectable academics were appearing in libraries and archives wanting to trace their undistinguished ancestors or the history of their neighbourhood.

To their credit, most librarians and archivists moved quickly when they sensed the change. I can remember a time when the public was not encouraged to use the Mitchell Library. In order to get a reader's ticket, I invented a spuriously erudite topic concerned with economic migration. My real purpose was to find out about my family prior to going on the great overseas tour.

Often less-inventive souls were turned imperiously from the sacred confines of Mitchell with advice to use the print collection in the General Reading Room. The philosophy at the time was that original manuscripts were for the cognoscenti and would be indecipherable to those without training. True, there was also a desire to protect the material from over-use but this protection often bordered on the obsessive.

Now, academic historians are frequently in the minority in the manuscript reading rooms of the national and state libraries. Local historians often not only predominate but many of them have a more detailed knowledge of the records than the librarians. The same holds true in the search rooms of many archives, where the power

of the genealogists is such that they often have special areas and collections assigned to them.

For state and public libraries, local historians and genealogists constitute an important user group. I equate them because serious genealogists soon want more than names and dates. They become interested in the places and the societies in which their forebears lived. More significantly, they are often people who value the services provided to them and have the time and commitment to protect them. The ranks of the local historians are fertile recruiting grounds for friends of the library.

Local history collections have an enormous potential for strengthening the links between public libraries and their councils. Legislation concerning the environment, heritage and land rights has changed many of the responsibilities of local government. Councils and private developers are at risk if they do not have the right information available to them.

In the not too distant past, a major building project in Wollongong was halted when excavators uncovered tombstones. All work stopped while an archaeologist was employed to determine the heritage significance of the graves. It came as a shock to the Council and to the developers that the site had been a cemetery. Yet, a quick look in the local studies collection of the City Library would have revealed extensive information. Knowing that the cemetery had been there might not have removed the need for a heritage investigation but the developers would have been able to include it in their planning.

Local government authorities are implementing information management systems which include data on the past use of land so that they are aware of legislative entailments. Who better than librarians to co-ordinate the collection of this information? By becoming involved, the library can develop its role in the corporate activities of council and improve the information available to ratepayers interested in local history.

Public libraries throughout Australia have extensive local history collections which they have been developing over many years. These collections are significant parts of our national collection and should be recognised as such. It is also appropriate that they remain in the geographical area to which they relate rather than being located in a central repository.

The approach of the centenary of Federation and the drift towards a republic are likely to re-ignite a sense of pride and interest in the past. Librarians need to open their doors to a wider world by promoting local history and taking the initiative to ensure its preservation. It will take money to train and provide skilled staff but it is an investment in the future. ■

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