



Feminising the frontier:

The Ella Stack Collection at the Northern Territory Library

Dr Ella Stack, former mayor of Darwin, with her damaged violin that she retrieved from the rubble in the aftermath of Cyclone Tracy.

Photographer: James Bradley,
Blown Away documentary

Collecting institutions in the tropics must deal with some unique challenges. Darwin's heat and humidity, along with occasional cyclones and World War II bombing raids, have all played a role in limiting the size of the collection of manuscripts and personal papers of Northern Territory Library (NTL). But the collection of papers of Dr Ella Stack was a standout that the library was not going to overlook. **HEATHER HOLT** tells us more.

The NTL's mission of telling the story of the Territory suffers from an ongoing challenge of isolation: often officials and executives come north for a contracted length of time and then leave, taking their papers and photographs with them. Historians and researchers know the immense value attached to these personal collections. Manuscripts are valued as artefacts in their own right, appreciated for their association with an eminent person, or treasured for their value as primary sources of information.

Lynette Aitchison, NTL's Manager Heritage Services from 2006 to 2015, was responsible for a significant growth in the library's manuscript collection, including the acquisition of records of individuals and groups as diverse as Aboriginal musicians The Sunrize Band from Maningrida, the papers and writings of distinguished Territory author Andrew McMillan, and the unique Israeli-born artist and performer Bilha Smith.

NTL recently acquired the personal papers and research materials of Dr Ella Stack (b. 1929). She moved to Darwin with her family in 1961 and was one of two general practitioners in the pre-Cyclone Tracy days. She soon became a well-known figure in the community; she estimates that she delivered around 2,000 Darwin babies before 1974. In the immediate aftermath of Cyclone Tracy in December 1974, she managed the health requirements of over 11,000 Territorians at the temporary emergency centre in Darwin High School before the mass evacuation took place.

Dr Stack's extensive personal collection includes papers, reports, diaries and other miscellany accumulated throughout a long life of service and commitment to the Territory. The collection has taken two years to process and catalogue and is a valuable addition to the small but important manuscript collection held by NTL.

The project to create and curate the Ella Stack Collection (MS122) began in 2013 when Dr Stack, who now lives in Canberra, contacted Lynette to see if NTL would be interested in acquiring her papers. Lynette negotiated and oversaw the transfer of the emerging collection to Darwin, in association with Vanessa Nuessler from Canberra, who listed and arranged the contents in consultation with Dr Stack. The themes of the collection are diverse and span approximately two decades from 1970 to 1990.

Dr Stack's role in the reconstruction of Darwin is already well known. In May 1975, she was elected as Darwin's first female mayor; she was also the first woman to be elected mayor of an Australian capital city. As mayor of 'a heap of rubble', she was a member of the Darwin Reconstruction Commission. She was created the first Lord Mayor of Darwin in 1979 when Queen Elizabeth II established the Lord Mayoralty of the city. In the same year, she was made a Commander of the British Empire for her service to the people of Darwin. In 1980, Dr Stack was appointed to the National Women's Advisory Council, a key authority for advising the Prime Minister on women's issues. Her later career was in health administration and included holding the positions of Secretary of the Northern Territory Department of Health and Chief Medical Officer.

Access to the unique materials in the new Ella Stack Collection will help researchers understand that elusive period of Northern Territory history following the booming 1960s growth of the city, its almost total destruction after Cyclone Tracy, and the subsequent evacuation, extensive rebuild



and redesign of the modern city that is evident today. Dr Stack's biography lists her memberships of 16 organisations, the breadth and extent of which demonstrate the civic-mindedness and commitment of this amazing Territorian.

The collection highlights are: public health and Dr Stack's professional contributions, including assisting in the foundation of the Menzies School of Health Research; participation in community arts and cultural events, including establishing the Bougainvillea Festival (now Darwin Festival) after Cyclone Tracy; her active role in the Darwin Reconstruction Committee and the rebuilding of the city; local government issues, governance of major projects and a unique record of the sometimes tricky relationship with Canberra in the period leading up to self-government of the Territory in 1978.

The Ella Stack Collection's contents reflect the political attitudes and norms of the times, as Territorians moved towards assumptions of state powers in a period when Australians more generally grappled with the social and sexual politics that saw women, such as Dr Stack, move from the sidelines to centre stage of political authority.

You can access the report here: publications.arup.com/Publications/F/Future_Libraries.aspx

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