

A Matter of Influence: International librarianship and its impact in Australia

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Abstract:

Throughout its history Australia has been a melting pot of diverse cultural influences. This has led to a society where competing philosophical and ideological ideas have co-existed: experimentation with radicalism and idealism, and a utopian strand of nationalism has sat alongside deep conservatism. At times there have been acrimonious battles between allegiances and loyalties to old world traditions and aspirations to new world ideals. These battles have helped define Australian society and its cultural institutions

Keywords: library history-Australia, librarianship history-Australia, internationalism

Introduction

Much of the development of libraries in modern Australia has been set against the backdrop of industrial, social and political upheaval in Europe, the rise and expansion of the United States as a world power and Australia's proximity to diverse cultures in Asia and the Pacific. These conflicting and contradictory strands weaving their way through Australian society are closely reflected in the influences which have shaped the development of Australian libraries and librarianship. As a country colonised by the British and voluntary and involuntary settlers from around the globe the story of books, libraries and librarianship in Australia is one in which the influence of 'other' cannot be avoided, creating a truly international context for the profession. If this has resulted in a unique and identifiable strand of 'Australian librarianship', or if through timing and history Australian librarianship is truly global in its form remains open to debate. This paper will explore some of the influences which have shaped libraries in Australia and discuss how these have help shape the library profession in Australia.

Australia was colonised by the British at the end of the eighteenth century, following the American War of Independence, just prior to the French Revolution, and at a critical point in the European Enlightenment. From the moment transportation to Australia was conceived books and libraries had an explicit role in the early colonial experience. Their role was crucial in the construction of a new, 'better' society through their use in civilising the uncivilised, educating all to participate in society and in the transportation and transmission of the culture of the old world to a remote and hostile context. Transportation to Australia came at a time when the ideas of Jeremy Bentham were shaping attitudes to reform and punishment and the approach taken to criminality in Australia is set against this backdrop. The forces for reform were also to see the provision of substantial libraries for convicts throughout the colonies shortly after their establishment, most notably at Port Arthur and Norfolk Island. Even before their arrival education and moral well-being of the convicts was addressed by establishing schools on board the transport ships and the appointment of a 'librarian' to 'have charge of the books'. (Barrett Browning 1847 p.308). The provision of books and libraries to those transported to these colonies was underpinned by Enlightenment ideals of citizenship, social participation and human perfectibility. The use of books and libraries was seen to be a key component in improving both the moral and economic progress of the new colonies and the book collections reflected these moral and economic imperatives. The spread of libraries in the Australian colonies was, according to Gascoigne, seen as 'one of the most potent agents for mental improvement' amongst the population (p.118). In transmitting culture to the uncultured it was hoped that a new and better society would emerge.

The desire to perfect and shape the new colonies morally and economically into a civil society also saw many of the British civic institutions and their ideals transported and established very early in the new colonies. In NSW and Van Diemen's Land of the 1820s and 30s are found the replication of many of the educational, scientific and learned institutions also found in other parts of the world. Examples include the establishment in 1823 of the Australian Religious Tract Society in Sydney; in 1827 the establishment of the first mechanics' institute in the Australian colonies, the Hobart Athenaeum; in 1831 the Tasmanian Society for the Diffusion of Useful Knowledge was established; in 1833 the Sydney Mechanics School of Arts was founded and in South Australia in 1834 a Literary and Scientific Association. Members of these institutions were to 'carry the torch of civilisations, thus confirming their position in society and their right to take possession of the land' (Gascoigne p .118). These institutes were often established in remote rural locations with new towns establishing – alongside the hotels, churches and one-teacher schools – an institute to suit the needs of their particular community. They often were established with the vision of a more egalitarian society by providing suitable materials and education to support this aim. The influence of these ideals was to remain strong in the first half of the nineteenth century and influential settlers continued to aspire to shape the new colonies with reference to the best of both the old world and the new.

Once such example of this is exemplified in the activities of the notable Anglo-Irish judge Sir Redmond Barry who established a university, the public library and other cultural institutions in the Colony of Victoria. When the Melbourne Public Library opened in February 1856, under Barry's direction, it reflected many of the aspirations which had shaped the colonies. It allowed direct access by the public to its collections, in contrast to most other public libraries of the day. Anyone of good character, scholar or general reader, over the age of 14, with clean hands, could come to the library, browse its collection and take any book down to read – 40 years before any public library in the United Kingdom allowed the same.

The Melbourne Public Library provided ‘within the reach of the humblest citizen a library which the richest could not afford to purchase’. This was an entirely modern library, designed for self-regulated self-education.

During the final decades of the nineteenth century and the beginning of the twentieth century Australian society was increasingly exposed to news of the turn-of-the-century political and social unrest and philosophical ideas flowing from Europe and the United States. These influences were to have an increasing impact on Australian society and to impact librarianship directly. The growing influence of professional practices emerging from the United States and the United Kingdom began to dominate discussions in the library profession in Australia and the proceedings of the First Australasian Library Conference in 1896 demonstrate this. The proceedings are scattered with references to practices overseas, papers on the Dewey Decimal Classification Scheme, cataloguing and ‘*The Librarian and His Work*’. This push to ‘modernise’, and concern over the introduction of ‘foreign’ systems and competing models of practice emerging from Europe and the United States, saw arguments over the importation of such practices at the loss of a more indigenous form.

Such concerns and debates were to be overshadowed by World War One and once vigorous public libraries were to suffer stagnation and decay and much of the idealistic and reformist optimism that had guided Australia’s development was lost. Australian librarianship did not fare well during this period as the foundering of both the Australasian Library Association and the Library Association of Victoria demonstrate. Library activity in Australia declined in this period and much of the growth of the preceding decades atrophied. Arriving at this critical time in the development of the Australian library profession at the end of the 1920s, was the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) bringing its reformist agenda and strong association with the American Library Association, leading United States (US) educators and the US government.

The Corporation began a program of book selection for Australian teachers’ colleges and education departments and travel grants to allow Australian educators, university administrators and cultural leaders, including librarians, to travel to the US, and also on occasion to the UK, to expand their horizons. Carnegie funding was provided for the establishment of a new professional library association in Australia, the Australian Institute of Librarians (AIL) founded in 1937. The arrival of the CCNY and its support of Australian librarianship was to be important in the construction of Australian librarianship in the following decades, as was the establishment of United States Information Libraries (USIL) in Melbourne and Sydney in 1943 and 1944. In Australia, the USIL activities closely followed funding for local professional association, the provision of travel grants by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) and the establishment of the first library training schools. In the following decades Australia played host to a range of eminent international library experts, including Lionel McColvin from the UK in 1946 to assess Australia’s public library system and in 1969 US educator Lester Asheim to offer advice on the future possibilities for LIS education.

These events and influences were the harbingers of ongoing change for the Australian library profession into the twentieth century. Such international influences continue to shape the Australian profession in the twenty-first century with these influences impacting on models of education for the industry as well of practice. Emerging from these influences was a profession which adopted a hybrid model of education drawing from both the old world and new leading to an ongoing debate about appropriate education for the profession. This

hybridity has been a key feature of the Australian library profession and serves to highlight the competing international influences which have shaped, and continue to shape, the profession.

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