

LOCAL HISTORY IN AUSTRALIA: SUPPORTING CULTURAL HERITAGE*

By Jan Partridge

Local history resources in Australia are developing slowly but surely as more and more people recognise the value of creating viable and supportive local communities. Despite the economic benefits from globalisation being pushed by business, governments and the media, the impact of the loss of a cultural identity are now being recognised and felt by many people.

Although virtual communities are touted as one solution to this problem, people can still feel dispossessed because these 'communities' must by their very nature remain remote and not fulfil daily needs. The impact also of sterile suburban development over the past few decades, the gutting of rural areas by the withdrawal of banks, businesses and other infrastructure support, and the increasing isolation of individuals has also been recognised by individuals and local governments.

Belatedly, governments at all levels in Australia are now working to recreate the community spirit which has been eroded over past decades, at the same time as using the local community as a basis for job creation through cultural heritage and tourism. In order to achieve this, the economic benefits of developing local history collections in public libraries, historical societies, archives and museums are slowly being recognised as important resources for historical, cultural, economic and community development. Australia celebrates the centenary of the establishment of the Commonwealth of Australia in 2001 and this has also resulted in a heightened interest in local history. People are now preparing to commemorate this even and are reflecting on changes to the country over the past century.

Cultural heritage, the public and community face of history, has become popular. This term covers many areas; the natural and built environment, movable cultural heritage collections in local museums and art galleries, local history collections in libraries, archives and historical societies, public and local history, but also cultural heritage tourism. In particular, the conservation and presentation of the

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country's heritage for tourism is seen as vital for the continued prosperity of much of Australia, particularly those areas suffering a withdrawal of government facilities and businesses.

Australian governments at a national and state level have supported the preservation of our cultural heritage through the collection, management and preservation of artworks, artefacts and documentary heritage by national, state and regional galleries, museums, archives and libraries. Most of the emphasis over the past few decades, however, has been on the identification, listing, management and protection of the built and natural heritage. The federal *Australian Heritage Commission Act of 1975*, and subsequent state acts, which emphasised preservation and conservation of the built and natural environment, created an upsurge of interest in the local environment.

As a result of this legislation Heritage Councils and National Trust offices were formed in all states of Australia, and Australians were encouraged to actively participate in collecting, preserving and managing their local historical sites. Each local authority was required to list all historical buildings and places and in order to do this, research needed to be undertaken to identify them. This activity boosted interest in developing local history services, although many well-established collections had been founded decades before.

Despite this, in the cultural heritage scene, documentary heritage has been the most neglected. Grants exist for the preservation of buildings, sites, objects and visual media such as photographs but less money has been made available to support quality management of, and access to, collections of historical material. This may be attributed to the nature of documentary historical collections and the differences between the disciplines caring for these resources:

- documentary resources are not as visually appealing as buildings, artworks and artefacts;
- the scattered nature of Australia's documentary heritage which is dispersed throughout the country in national, state, regional and private libraries and archives, historical societies, church archives, private businesses, voluntary clubs and sporting organisations, schools, etc. has made it difficult to establish standards;
- there has been an expectation that national and state libraries and archives would be responsible for ensuring the collection and preservation of all Australia's documentary heritage but in times of economic restraint this goal is being weakened;
- the different professional approaches and practices of archivists, librarians and records managers has resulted in a variety of systems and procedures;

- the lack of cohesion and concerted pressure on governments and the Australian public to support their documentary heritage has resulted in limited financial support.

The library profession as a whole has not advanced its cause as publicly as museum curators, archivists, and art gallery experts. In some senses the library profession has stood outside the ‘cultural heritage’ sphere and not argued that historical collections held locally support the collections in major libraries and archives and are of paramount importance for accurate and timely research at a local level.

The situation is also exacerbated because, although the National and State Libraries have excellent collections of Australiana, in the current economic conditions they are finding it difficult to continue to collect all material relating to Australia. As a result, increased pressure is being placed on other libraries, particularly at a local and regional level. Local governments across Australia are to be commended for the support they are giving to the development and maintenance of local history collections in public libraries, and there are some excellent collections across Australia. Unfortunately financial and moral support for local history services and the employment of professional local history librarians is not universal. Councils receive no incentive to develop these resources and therefore local history services must compete for funds with all other council activities.

While the signs are encouraging there is still a lot to be done, and a number of issues to be resolved. There is a need for;

- standard terminology in the local history area,
- a clear definition of what is meant by a ‘local history collection’,
- a better understanding of users and prospective clients,
- guidelines for collection management, staffing levels, use of volunteers, etc.,
- standards for organising and accessing collections: classifications schemes, indexing, thesauri,
- assistance with technological developments: digitisation, Internet access,
- best practice models for the management of local history services,
- identification of the role/s of local history librarians,
- standard expectations for the education for local history library staff,
- promotion of collections and services to the community,
- closer networking in the local community,

AND

- Effective action to ensure local history services are recognised as essential support for the cultural heritage industry

Firstly, in Australia there is difficulty over terminology. The terms ‘local studies’, ‘local history’, and more recently ‘community history’ are used interchangeably. The term ‘local studies’ was adopted from Britain to describe historical collections and has had some benefits because historians jealously guarded the term ‘local history’. On the whole ‘local studies’ has referred to the collection of historical materials and ‘local history’ to historical research, however many libraries do refer to their collections as local history services and the person in charge as the local history librarian. As interest in community identity gains popularity, the term ‘community history’ has been adopted by historians and there has been a move to this term. Perhaps more importantly, ‘cultural heritage’ is replacing the term ‘history’ in the broader community.

Should local history collections now become known as ‘community cultural heritage services’ – rather clumsy but possibly more relevant to the community? If local history services are to become visible in the cultural heritage industry, then a change of name seems inevitable.

Further, there needs to be a broader understanding of what a local history collection is or could be. A number of trends are occurring and these are encouraging.

What constitutes local history has also been widened to encompass corporate and institutional history, histories of individuals, families, houses, built environment, streetscapes, ethnic and indigenous people in the community, and more recently all aspects of the natural environment. Collections now cover the full breadth of the culture, experience and background of all Australians irrespective of background. Today Aboriginal people and people from different ethnic backgrounds have claimed their place in local history, local museums and heritage organisations, and are actively engaged in presenting their stories to the community. These different perceptions on Australia’s history and development has not necessarily meant an easy path for local history enthusiasts or local history collections. Some local history publications may well be contested histories which initially upset members of the community but which will ultimately bring a richness to the local heritage which would otherwise not exist.

Local history librarians acquire material relating to the past, but now increasingly they are gathering material concerning the present. This creates a living collection which can create whole new user groups. It also means that a very active collecting policy needs to be established and that the local history librarians needs to network throughout the community.

Materials collected now can comprise any format from archival manuscripts to electronic records and newer formats requires different expertise, technological support and greater financial assistance. This is impacting on budgeting, space, staff training, and collection development.

Little research has been conducted into who uses local history collections, how they are used, and their value to the local community. Alan Bundy (1999) conducted a survey of collections in Australia. In this survey of 534 public libraries, there was a response from 233 libraries of which 178 stated that they had a local studies collection. While two respondents stated their collection was commenced as early as 1940s, the growth since then indicates the potential for local history collections: 1950s – 3, 1960s – 11, 1970s – 26, 1980s – 66, 1990s – 36. The upsurge in the 1980s may reflect the bicentenary of the first white settlement in Australia in 1788. Hopefully the celebration of the centenary of the establish of the Commonwealth of Australia will have a similar effect.

While further research on use of these collections needs to be undertaken, what is known is that users come from industry, government, schools and universities, as well as the general public. Increasingly stress is being placed on local history collections by family historians and some services such as the Kew Public Library in Melbourne and the City of Playford in South Australia have accepted this, and are committed to providing a wide range of family history resources for their community.

Collection management is another issue. Efforts are being made to establish guidelines for collection management but further work is needed to develop universal standards for the organisation and access of collections, such as classification schemes, levels of indexing, standard thesauri, specific software, etc. Currently in Australia there is a proliferation of systems in place. Most local history collections are catalogued onto the main library catalogue and while this provides easy access to library users, there is still a need for more discussion on appropriate levels of indexing, the classification of archival, audio-visual and electronic material, etc.

The use of the Internet is increasing exponentially. Many local history services are promoting their services through the Internet and a considerable number now have excellent websites with online catalogues and good photographic displays. However there is still a need to design content-rich websites for researchers. The library profession is behind other information professions in developing skills of interpretation. While some fine photographic collections are available through the World Wide Web, some lack quality descriptions, explanations and interpretations of what those photographs represent. Lack of finance is, of course a factor as is lack of experience in analysing and interpreting photographs for researchers.

Websites are brilliant for displaying the treasures of the collection but it would also be very useful if libraries placed copies of their policy documents, disaster plans, etc. on their website to assist others. Future developments should include access to original materials through the web, especially in Australia. Because of distance, access to primary source material remains a headache for researchers. Few libraries make their rare material available through inter-library loan and may not allow photocopying, so digitisation will be the way of the future. Some very interesting projects are currently being undertaken at the national, state and local level and a listing of some of these projects can be seen at the National Library of Australia's website. As researchers become more sophisticated in their searching, the demand for remote access to full-text material on the web will increase and the profession must be ready to assume these new responsibilities.

Another issue is the continued growth of resources only available electronically. As more and more government, commercial, private and academic information becomes available only in electronic format, this information is in danger of being lost unless local history services convince governments that local history collections can only be viable if electronic resources are collected, and that future local histories will not be able to be written if the resources are not available.

As these trends continue, there is some confusion about the role/s of local history librarians, the level of professionalism required for the position, and the status of the manager of the local history services. While the major role is the management of local history collections, a number of local history librarians are also engaged in managing the local history website, digitising collections, co-operating with the local historical societies on community projects, developing regional co-operative cataloguing schemes, interacting with the local heritage enterprises, and supporting cultural heritage tourism.

As these roles become more complex, there is a need for established staffing guidelines. Currently the management of local history services varies from state to state. Some states in Australia have professional librarians managing these units, others have archivists, whilst some states consider this is the role of library technicians. Some managers work in isolation in purpose-built heritage houses, others work in regional library centres or the central library of a multi-library system. Some have additional staff to assist with clerical work but most are dependent on community volunteers. Because of the increasing number of local history services it is imperative that guidelines on staffing levels and qualifications in relation to the size and breadth of collections be established.

Most local history library staff are qualified in librarianship but collections may require other expertise as well. Library classification principles do not suit all formats of material acquired, but a limited number of local history librarians are qualified archivists or have specific knowledge of archives, as well as preservation

and conservation practices. The level of commitment by staff is very encouraging as many have gained qualifications in local history to better serve their clientele.

Unfortunately universities in Australia, in a period of stringent budget cuts, are concentrating on the broader history courses and reducing an emphasis on local history. To overcome this, several universities are rethinking the needs of local history library staff, and family and community historians who are not interested in undertaking a more traditional form of study and devising special courses to suit. The School of Media and Information at Curtin University of Technology has developed a fee-paying *Graduate Certificate in Local Studies*, which is available in distance education mode and in 2000 will be a web-based course available internationally. This certificate is taught jointly by the School and the Research Institute of Cultural Heritage at Curtin University and tries to maintain a balance between the management of local history collections, archives, preservation and conservation, technology and practical history research. There is a need for more short courses to help local history librarians acquire additional skills, and it would be worthwhile if these were made available internationally through web-based delivery.

Local history services occupy a difficult position in the library and information profession in Australia and possibly elsewhere. Local history librarians often work in isolation, but to survive and develop a successful service a local history librarian must sell the service to the parent authority, interact with the local community, network with local, regional, and state cultural heritage organisation and with other local history librarians, as well as contribute to issues relevant to the wider library profession. Local history librarians may have more issues in common with the heritage industry than other members of the library profession and so, of necessity, must balance the needs of both sectors.

Ideally, local history librarians need to actively promote their service to the parent institution to ensure continued adequate funding. Techniques for doing this vary but one opportunity which might assist is to become a regional archival centre. Currently only the most developed local history services are the archival depository for the local authority. Under existing legislation local government archival materials are forwarded to the state Public Records Office, however, as the trickle-down effect continues, it is possible that the local history centre will also become a council/ regional archival resource. It is an area which is worth pursuing.

While most services are well promoted to the local community, local history librarians have been less involved with the cultural heritage industry, and to some extent has stood outside it. This industry comprises practitioners from a wide range of disciplines; anthropology, archaeology, museums, history, conservation, archives, tourism, local government, and interacting with them requires an

understanding of the broader cultural heritage concepts. Cultural heritage tourism, in a period where communities are suffering from a downturn in local industry, is seen as economically important. To encourage visitors, councils are supporting a proliferation of pamphlets, booklets and exhibitions to promote heritage walks, heritage places, local events and people, at times without consulting the local history librarian. The growth of heritage tourism offers opportunities for the local history librarian to promote the collection to the heritage community and to offer support for researchers engaged in developing these publications and activities.

Part of the problem facing local history librarians is that conceptually there has been confusion over the placement of local history in the broader cultural heritage scene. The heritage industry is a powerful one and the place of local history in this industry, and the relationship between all the disciplines involved in presenting and preserving the history of the local community requires further exploration. Gaps exist between local history librarians, cultural heritage professionals, and local history enthusiasts. Local communities see cultural tourism as an economic gain without necessarily understanding the need for advice and assistance from the local history librarian and professional historians. Good promotion of the resources of the local history collection and consultations with historians and heritage groups could overcome these gaps.

While these demands increase the complexity of work for local history librarians they also offer opportunities for increased status and financial benefits. It may be that heritage tourism will be the catalyst which will increase the number of local history collections in public libraries in Australia. There is no doubt that local governments need to be convinced of the worth of local history collections but creating alliances with the cultural heritage industry and providing evidence on economic gains for the local community cannot help but benefit the collection. Further pressure will also be placed on local authorities as the major collecting institutions advise local councils there are no longer able to collect all the material relating to that area. Unless local libraries develop collections this material may well be lost.

There is no doubt that local history is a growth area but how can local history librarians accomplish all that is required of them? They need support from the Local Studies Section of ALIA, as well as more co-operative networks. The Local Studies Section publishes a newsletter *Local-Link*, and supports *ALIAlocal*, an internet discussion group. By organising conferences and workshops at a state and national level, and by attending cultural heritage meetings and conventions members of the Local Studies Section are trying to contribute to discussions on cultural heritage issues, and highlight local history issues in that industry. Much more needs to be done in the area of policy, planning, standards, and guidelines. The establishment of best practice models and standards should assist local history

librarians manage and promote their collections. The Local Studies Section of ALIA sees that this is a role which it should play but at the moment does not have the resources to accomplish this.

There is much to be done to ensure the continued collection and maintenance of Australia's documentary heritage and the establishment of national standards. While not detracting from the excellent work being done in the field, more financial assistance and co-operation between libraries, archives and museums is essential if Australian local history collections are to become major resources to support the state and national library Australiana collections. Local history librarians need to market themselves and their collections to heritage organisations so that they become visible and central to the cultural heritage industry.

While these issues relate to the Australian scene, it is likely the situation is echoed in other countries, and it is worthwhile supporting each other and developing international standards and policies to strengthen the local history librarians in the field.

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