

Reflections on collection policies in NSLA libraries

Towards a national approach to web collecting

May 2020

Introduction

In March 2020, as the full repercussions of the COVID-19 pandemic became apparent in Australia, our national, state and territory libraries began the extraordinary exercise of collecting on exactly the same subject at the same time with the same sense of urgency. There was little time to prepare or confer. The ubiquity of the subject matter, manifesting in every imaginable format, and the ways in which libraries chose to collect it, highlighted the differences in our collecting approaches, preferences and capacities in a way that could not have been achieved by comparing policies alone.

Several NSLA libraries began identifying websites quickly for collection through the Australian Web Archive. Fortuitously, NLA had commenced its annual web harvest in early March, running for six weeks until mid-April. SLNSW was adding to this joint effort as well as its own collections using Archive-It and Webrecorder, picking up content from Twitter and Instagram, and testing collecting from Facebook (where privacy, rather than technology, is the primary issue). Libraries Tasmania was collecting website imprints independently.

SLQ was fast to prepare a full collecting plan including commissioned photography and digital stories, and a community call-out for emails and physical ephemera. It was most prepared to accept the risk associated with commissioning photography and, after considered consultation, issued letters of support to a number of photographers who were already documenting the event, resulting in a broad range of material including shots from inside the hospital environment. Some took a more risk-averse approach and chose not to commission any work, but to be open to unsolicited offers later. Others were still discussing or scoping photographic commissions six weeks in. The ACT Heritage Library requested use of the trove:Australia Flickr stream as a platform for community images, with the aim of bringing high quality, rights-cleared work into its collection formally by agreement with contributors.

By the end of March, NLA was undertaking daily or weekly focused web collecting from 200 websites, ranging from government advisories to the COVID-19 diary of MONA's David Walsh. Based on its collecting remit, web archiving extended to Indonesia and the Pacific including Papua New Guinea, Fiji, New Caledonia, Vanuatu, the Solomon Islands and Bougainville. NLA also contributed a seed list of Australian URLs to the IIPC's international collection of COVID-19 related web materials, led by Columbia University and the Internet Archive.

By the end of April, SLV had launched *Memory Bank* and SLSA had launched *Remember my story* to gather community contributions. SLNSW was well into its #NSWathome Twitter campaign, and staff had been asked to keep emails from subscriber mailing lists (such as Woolworths, Coles, Qantas, venues, festivals and schools), to be exported and processed at a later date. LANT was just beginning to develop a collecting plan, and drawing on staff contacts for a 'life in Jabiru' perspective. SLWA had not yet commenced a social media or community contribution campaign, but had begun partnership negotiations with the Centre for Stories for an oral history project, and with the local history community for a diary project. Pre-publication data was received by NLA for two titles commissioned by publishers that would document Australia's response to COVID-19.

Publications and ephemera were accepted by NSLA libraries through a variety of channels, from customised portals to email, Dropbox, WeTransfer, NED and regular post. All subject to library policies on copyright, Creative Commons and deeds of gift. Nobody was equipped to collect formats such as SMS messages from

the Australian Government or apps, including the Australian Government coronavirus app.

Access to web archiving and legal deposit collections (through NED) was almost immediate. Finding aids and printed ephemera necessarily slower, while availability of oral histories and photographic collections depended on the speed of processing and rights agreements negotiated.

Early conversations between members of the Heads of Collections advisory group and Digital Archives network for NSLA ensured there was open sharing of information and ideas, but there was little movement toward collaborative initiatives beyond web archiving. Colleagues in NED did work together on a joint approach to NewsCorp to encourage the deposit of 60 regional newspaper titles whose print editions were moved to digital as a direct result of the pandemic.

This report began with a request from NSLA members in late 2019 for a joint review of our collection development policies (CDPs). Seven libraries were poised to re-draft their policies and all NSLA libraries were set to embark on a scoping exercise for a collaborative approach to web archiving. It was felt that there was a need to ascertain overall gaps in our collections and consider again what libraries could be collecting together and what separately, with the immediate aim of informing the web archiving scope, and the broader aim of understanding our collecting practices more clearly from a national perspective. Our response to collecting COVID-19, immediately following collecting on the 2019-2020 bushfires, provides a useful case study.

Given that the majority of NSLA libraries are in the process of making significant changes to their CDPs, this is not a formal, quantitative or survey-based report. It is a reflective report based on observations shared during nine online interviews with collection managers in each NSLA library. It considers:

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1. The CDP

Unsurprisingly, each library has taken a different approach to the structure and tone of their CDP. All but the State Library of Queensland and ACT Heritage Library are in the process of review.

The State Library of Queensland (SLQ) produces a public [Content Strategy](#), last reviewed and approved by the Library Board in 2020. It includes general selection criteria followed by a succinct description of content selection and community engagement in four areas: Memory Collection, Information Collections, Public Library Collections, and Extraordinary Collections. Here, 'memory' applies to Queensland heritage, and 'extraordinary' to rare books or special collections. Detailed collecting plans are developed internally for each area, including collecting targets for annual reporting. In 2019, for example, Queensland Memory listed 35 specific acquisitions in its own priority subject areas:

- Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples
- Lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, intersex, and queer/questioning communities (LGBTQI+)
- Culturally and linguistically diverse communities (CALD)
- Food, drink and dining
- Politics and current events
- Health and wellbeing
- The Arts
- Environment and regional communities
- War and peacekeeping

Some of these acquisitions comprised multiple titles. Six digital stories on Anzac Square, for example, or 65 websites on food and drink. A Lutheran Archive of language books from Hope Vale, Bloomfield River State School and others, or the photographs and papers of Russian sculptor George Virine.

Similarly, Libraries Tasmania is developing its new CDP with an overarching policy followed by sections for the Public Lending Collection, Public Reference Collection, Community Archives, Tasmanian Heritage Collection, and Allport Library and Museum of Fine Arts. For each of these five areas, the document will include role and purpose; principles and guidelines for selection, deselection and donations; and relevant legislation. This is important given the crossover between, for example, Community Archives (unpublished and generally donated materials) and the Tasmanian Heritage Collection (including all formats of legal deposit as well as the Crowther Library of published and unpublished materials).

State Library Victoria will design its CDP to complement its strategic plan, with a four-year time frame and a format-agnostic set of priorities. Collections are currently organised in terms of Victorian and Australian, World, and the History of the Book. The library is shifting its service model away from a formerly heavy emphasis on print.

The National Library of Australia has made substantial changes to its CDP following changes to the library's structure and its approach to overseas collections. NLA curators will now be working based on subject expertise, covering all formats. A decision by one curator to collect around bushfires, for example, could encompass ephemera, oral histories, personal archives and public records of government decision-making. The CDP reflects a strong preference for digital (unless the work is best represented in print), and makes explicit reference to cultural diversity in collections, First Nations community relationships, and relationships with other bodies with collecting responsibilities including NSLA libraries, AIATSIS and NFSA.

Library & Archives NT will be making light changes to its CDP following the integration of archives. The ACT Heritage Library's CDP is described as 'medium agnostic' with a focus on subject areas (stataiana) rather than format. State Library of South Australia's CDP will be developed as the 'scaffolding' around collecting with access as the main driver, and collection plans to be developed alongside. The State Library of Western Australia seeks to contemporise its CDP, making it an easy reference point for staff and a means of setting clear boundaries for donations and acquisitions. Its focus is content over format.

The State Library of New South Wales will have a stronger emphasis on format than others, with guidelines by format and subject to sit beneath the CDP including, for example: rare books, NED, state reference collection, photographs, manuscripts, and social media. This is in part to provide more clarity and rigour in selection decisions, a departure from previous format-agnostic guidelines that were based primarily on the interests and areas of specialisation of library staff.

2. Current practice and context

For a long time now, we have been operating in an environment in which library users expect information and collections to be available on demand, at no cost.

We are also collecting in a world in which (to paraphrase colleagues at Library & Archives NT): grey literature is predominantly digital; small documents are increasingly published as web content rather than separate PDFs; guides and planners are usually published as apps; photographs are almost completely digital; music is licensed on platforms; self-publishing and niche publishing has increased in both print and digital; search terms tend to be key-words rather than phrases or controlled vocabulary; modern correspondence takes place by email, text or social media; and the vast majority of collection use is remote.

Individual collections are hybrid, including legacy materials and contemporary materials, with exclusively digital personal collections still rare but in formation right now. The reading room of the future could look very different, one library noted, with these personal digital archives and other digital collections available from people's homes. In short, we are in a lengthy transition phase.

In this context, the debate around whether to organise library collections and staff by format or function continues, and there may be no right answer. Based on its new collection development policy, NLA will have three senior curators and three assistant curators collecting across all formats. SLQ has established a working group for selection across all formats with criteria based on content, significance and viability (in terms of the library's capacity to both preserve and provide access to an item). SLV has moved to a function-based or task-based structure and adopted the 'continuous improvement' philosophy.

In theory, concepts of comprehensive/intensive, representative, and selective collecting are still in place. In other words, what we collect lots of, some of, and very little of. In the NT, for example, intensive collecting is for all NT digital publications and NT news; representative is for digital photographs, maps and datasets; selective is for websites and audio-visual material. Some libraries continue to build on particular subject specialisations. For Western Australia, this is mining and resourcing. For South Australia, a combination of wine growing, shipping and the sea, family history, and children's literature research. There was general agreement that these specialisations can help to shape the identity of an institution, but should come under regular review for the same reason.

There is some evidence of bigger shifts in collections thinking and practice. SLV is reviewing purchase of eresources, asking what we really need to buy in perpetuity and what we can let go, resisting "the impulse to buy and keep everything". In terms of community engagement, SLQ is "letting go of egotistical methods of measuring our success" and working with other organisations to build collections, concerned more with providing a consistent user experience across collecting institutions. In addition to Trove, state libraries are contributing to state-based aggregators of digital collections in the mode of Victoria's long-running *Culture Victoria*. This includes the recently-launched [Collab](#) in South Australia (a joint project of the State Library of South Australia, History Trust of South Australia, Art Gallery of South Australia, and South Australian Museum), and [Culture WA](#) in Western Australia.

Collaboration between NSLA libraries regarding collection decisions remains fairly informal, including offers of material that are valuable but out of scope for a particular library. Most agreed that the trust and communication channels are there, but depend on who you know and "whose desk it lands on". Libraries

tend not to share exact prices paid for acquisitions due to commercial agreements but general comparisons can be made. More than one library estimated \$1,000 per oral history interview commissioned, including provision of raw data and transcripts, where others paid by the hour. Prices paid for commercial digital photographs ranged from \$100-\$200 per image, or up to \$400 by auction.

Libraries differ in their philosophies around active involvement in research and data curation. Most have fellowship programs, but some are light on promoting the outcomes of these. SLQ, with its new Digital Catalyst fellowship, has a particularly strong reputation and emphasis on digital collections, and the DX Lab fellowship at SLNSW has resulted in some highly regarded projects. Visibility and participation in the research data landscape would seem to be essential for the survival of a modern research library, but some were less enthusiastic about this and raised questions over the tendency to digitise collections that are easier or popularly appealing. One library felt that it was providing “better and better access to smaller and smaller amounts” of data but that this distracted from a very large manuscript processing backlog, and asked “is it our role to make the material available as best we can for other people to do the research, or is our role to be engaging people to do the research ourselves?”

3. Collection diversity and community engagement

The question of whether library collections truly reflect their communities is not a new one. Countless papers, reports, guidelines and recommendations have been produced on this issue over many years. Ultimately the best solutions may be local, but it is worth considering where the big common blockages are and what attempts have been made to address them.

In terms of historic and contemporary collecting, libraries are generally reliant on the interests and influences of collections staff, but have made efforts through practice and policy to look beyond internal expertise. Guest curators have been employed for projects such as SLQ’s *Meet me at the Paragon* exhibition on Greek café culture. Oral history collections have been compiled by freelance historians with communities who have little in the way of written records or have been marginalised – the Polish Australians oral history project at NLA, for example. Libraries have built community-specific collections such as the Northern Territory’s Queer Archive, or collections at Library & Archives NT for language groups including Chinese, Filipino, Greek and Vietnamese.

The National Library’s new CDP explicitly puts community engagement and relationship building into the curatorial role. SLV’s four-year plan includes improving engagement with segments of the community that have been ‘disconnected’. The library is considering establishing a collection advisory committee that includes community members, and has engaged a consultant to design a new approach to engagement with a focus on regional areas and online participation. It will be billed as a research library for children as much as it is for older demographics and researchers. Importantly, the library is also establishing a dedicated Koori Research Unit. SLSA is considering ‘pop-up’ libraries in several communities. SLWA holds an Aboriginal languages collection and a community language collection, and is looking at how to integrate community language material rather than separating it under ‘languages other than English’. The library is considering collecting material relating to Singapore, noting that Singapore is closer to Perth than Perth is to Australia’s Eastern states.

The difficulty with some of our approaches – as SLWA has identified – is the effect of ‘othering’ non-white, non-Anglo communities, which can give an impression of tokenism in collecting rather than genuine inclusivity. One of the intractable problems for national, state and territory libraries trying to engage with communities is that our efforts are taking place within the confines of our institutions, based on our existing practices and assumptions. Our workforces are categorically low on diversity.

NLSA libraries across the board have an acknowledged problem with presenting as culturally safe spaces

for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, for example. On walking into one library for a recent NSLA meeting, an Aboriginal man born in the region commented that “I can’t see myself anywhere in here”. The downside of striking colonial architecture is that it sends a colonial message, in some cases exacerbated by statues, rooms or entire collections named for people with notorious histories in terms of race relations.

We know that libraries must make very deliberate and applied changes if they wish to be truly welcoming to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander staff and communities, beyond rhetoric, from presentation of physical spaces right down to the language we use in metadata fields behind our catalogue records. The relationships we build with First Nations communities to develop contemporary collections and ensure a ‘right of reply’ to historic collections that pertain to them, are crucial. The NSLA Culturally Safe Libraries Program represents a considerable collective investment – both financially and culturally – to address these issues on multiple levels, but will need sustained support and must be accompanied by local initiatives to truly change current practice with support from individual library leaders.

Web collecting for diversity

Very generally speaking, one of the principle advantages of collecting from the web is that it is a far more democratic medium for publishing than traditional print, and therefore has great potential to improve collection diversity.

Of course, we continue to experience a significant digital divide in Australian society, with many households lacking internet access – as has been demonstrated once again during the COVID-19 pandemic. In theory, however, the majority of the population has access to at least one device that enables them to create something, be it music, video, mash-ups, photographs, blogs, podcasts or DIY websites.

One interviewee observed a generational lag in terms of linguistically diverse populations, wherein the first generation is concentrating on survival, the second on seeing through the ambitions of the first, and the third generation, finally, has the chance to reflect and collect their own stories. Many of these stories are shared through online channels, sometimes informally.

The issues here for libraries are in selection, technical capacity, rights, and quality assessment. As one library noted, identifying every subject of current or potential interest to a jurisdiction is not something that we have an algorithm for. If we do find material of perceived interest, we may be unable to collect it. The ACT Heritage Library is interested in podcasts recorded by a couple in one migrant community based on interviews with new arrivals, for example, but lacks the capacity to collect and provide access to this material. There can be issues around quality of content or lack of consistent metadata. Creators may be reluctant to deposit works with libraries due to a lack of trust in government.

Behind this is a broader issue of community awareness of the purpose and offerings of national, state and territory libraries. All libraries are grappling with ways of measuring the degree of engagement with our collections beyond number of downloads, views or retrievals. “How are we letting our communities know what’s there?”, one library asked. “How do we know what’s being used and what it’s being used for?” Even the collections of our National edeposit service (NED) are only as good as our communications allow them to be. Staff at SLQ noted, for example, that collections of school newsletters were skewed toward those with the resources to deposit them, and the awareness that libraries would be interested in this material.

Metrics that can assist in this predicament have proven difficult to pin down. The recent RMIT-led research project on representing multicultural Australia in national and state libraries produced reams of data about the number of collection items held by the National Library pertaining to various community groups, but this shed no light on the degree of community engagement with those collections, nor did it reveal any correlation between numbers of items held and community satisfaction.

4. Gaps in collections

Gaps in collections were identified in relation to both technology and content. Some felt that, as a sector, we are not investing in IT and programmers for collection processing and delivery at the same level as we are investing in collection expertise. Many collection gaps were attributed to gaps in technical capacity or currency, agility or responsiveness, and, on occasion, to restrictions in legislation. Others were attributed to the issues outlined in the section above, including institutional habit, cultural influences or bias, lack of outreach or trust in institutions, and a history of shaping collecting practice around the areas of interest of current or former staff. Beyond all of this was the persistent issue of a lack of resourcing, both to help libraries generate solutions for collecting new formats, and to maintain these collections once established.

Not all gaps are 'bad', but some call for more urgent attention. Specific gaps identified were:

- **Audio-visual material** including podcasts, videos and new music. There was a lack of clarity around the role of NFSA in this. With most new music licensed through platforms such as iTunes, and some through crowdsourcing platforms, it can be impossible in some cases to purchase.
- **Social media** including Twitter and Facebook, with the latter involving very complicated issues of privacy. Even where collection mechanisms are available, making this material accessible, searchable and meaningful has defeated us to date. Views differ as to the quality of the content, but it remains fundamental to an understanding of our social context. As one interviewee pointed out, "actions are shaped by an opinion about what has occurred. If we're not getting a snapshot of this, we're missing a huge piece of the Australian story".
- **Applications** including government apps for safety and information, event apps, or entertainment apps such as TikTok.
- **Text messages**, noting that this is the preferred medium of communication for many politicians.
- **Contemporary Indigenous materials** for reasons connected with cultural permissions and formats. A specific example is The Orb website in Tasmania, hosting a complex collection of interconnected online resources to assist in the teaching of Tasmanian Aboriginal histories and cultures. Currently Facebook remains the favoured platform for many Indigenous activist groups, meaning that much of this content is missing from collections. It was also noted that some Indigenous groups are not using the .au suffix, which means their websites are not included in the annual domain harvest.
- **Grey literature** where not picked up through NED or government web archiving by the NLA, particularly as reports, essays and creative works are increasingly published in HTML format.
- **Open datasets and dynamic datasets**, noting that not everything ends up in a report.
- **Google Earth and Google Maps** material cannot be archived presently.
- **Personal digital archives** are not yet a strong component of our collections and few libraries are equipped to process email histories and large collections of personal electronic documents. Equally, many prospective donors are not yet at the 'end of the lifecycle' for their records.
- **Online-only newspapers and magazines** that are not being captured through NED.
- **Controversial ephemera in digital form.** Where we will collect physical ephemera on any subject, we are less likely to seek out digital output from controversial groups such as 'flat-earthers'.
- **Specific subject areas** in both physical and digital collections, noting that examples differ widely from library to library. Examples of gaps in physical collections provided included environmental activism, refugee women, 1950s and 1960s migration, and women's activism. The bias in certain

collections was noted, again differing in each library, with one example being huge volumes of material collected around WWI and WWII but not around the Vietnam War.

- **Modern stories** that require responsive and applied contemporary collecting. Examples were Julian Assange and Margot Robbie as people of interest to Queensland. One library noted our bias toward 'collecting the past' in the sense of colonial history.

5. Web collecting: present and future

Current web collecting

NSLA was presented with a paper in November 2019 which outlined the current state of web collecting in Australia. The paper included the history of web archiving by the National Library of Australia dating back to 1996, with annual whole-of-domain harvests collected since 2005. Based on the information presented, members agreed to scope a new approach to web archiving for our national, state and territory libraries that would include infrastructure replacement.

The paper noted that six of the nine NSLA libraries were partners in Pandora, now the Australian Web Archive, and as such have been contributing to curated selective web archiving for well over a decade. Selected material tends to include government websites, events relevant to the state in question, and ad hoc additions based on staff suggestions. Whilst the Pandora operational group continues to function and members have visibility of other libraries' collecting decisions, there is general agreement that online collecting across states is not particularly strategic or coordinated at this point in time, and that blurred state and national boundaries further confuse the issue.

The State Library of New South Wales is most advanced in terms of social media collections, using the subscription-based service Vizie. Its social media archive is publicly available via a user interface that displays data geographically as well as through a 'wheel of emotions'. The archive comprises anonymised aggregated content, and an API is in development. Material is held in cloud storage, but not in Rosetta or any digital preservation system.

Outside of the formal Pandora partnership, Libraries Tasmania continues to collect imprints of Tasmanian websites (first page as a minimum) and provides access to these through its catalogue as per any other format. Its focus is government websites and events. This material is not being preserved. Libraries Tasmania's former ODI (Our Digital Island) system no longer exists as a separate entity.

Library & Archives NT has virtually no resources for web collection, but does have the advantage of legislative permission to collect. Currently it collects fewer than 15 sites per year, most around elections, lobby groups, Northern Territory blogs, and Indigenous arts. LANT is in favour of web content delivery through Trove. The ACT Heritage Library has no mechanism for the collection of websites.

Future web collecting

Discussions revealed general support for a collaborative approach to web archiving that includes national infrastructure, standards, collecting guidelines, storage, preservation and delivery, while giving states and territories the autonomy to collect and curate community material specific to their jurisdictions.

It was thought that annual domain harvesting could continue along with more curated collecting for the Australian Web Archive based on an agreed national web collection development policy. Identification of national priorities might begin with an analysis of subject areas collected through Pandora.

One library demurred on the basis that web material should be curated in batches, in order to meaningfully assess it, describe it and review public/private boundaries, and that a national policy could not accommodate that level of specificity.

Another reiterated that “web material was born on the web, it should be accessible on the web” and that we must avoid squeezing this material into a library model. There is an acknowledged tension here as the sheer volume of web material does not allow the application of traditional descriptive practices, but the need to provide meaningful access through meaningful description is still felt by most to be essential.

There was strong interest in the intersection between NED collections and web collections, and the need for clear policy on this. One library expressed a wish for “a web scraper – particularly for [local] government publications” that could extract annual reports, strategic plans, newsletters and journals. In which case, could an automated process be established to re-use metadata and generate item level description to improve discovery? Could reports and legal deposit publications more generally be picked up in a web harvest and deposited into NED through an automated process? Arising from this were questions about where and how a national collection would operate. Would library catalogues feed into (and out of) a giant digital corpus? Would we work through Trove, as with NED?

NSLA libraries will need to consider which materials can be collected through web archiving and deposit mechanisms (such as NED), and which fall outside of legal deposit remits but are in the national interest to collect. What kinds of additional infrastructures and arrangements would be required to collect and preserve this material? Further, how might we collaborate with other institutions, such as the NFSA or ABC for the collection of diverse formats online? How can we be sure that collections elsewhere will meet comparable accessibility and preservation standards? Are questions of standards and trust inhibiting effective collaborative collecting relationships outside NSLA, or are we simply not accustomed to this level of collaboration?

Ultimately, the issue of concern expressed by all libraries was beyond that of how to collect and preserve the complex materials that live online. It was how to provide useful, intuitive, easy and timely access to what we collect. This, in the end, is why we are here.

End note

NSLA libraries are poised to begin a new era of collecting web-based materials. Managed well, this is an opportunity to collaborate at a national level – as we have done with NED – while preserving the identity of individual member libraries, improving the diversity of our collections, addressing some of the major gaps in our collections, and helping us to engage with our communities in new ways.

This paper does not offer any specific recommendations. It is a discursive paper based on interviews undertaken with collections staff in all NSLA libraries, and is intended to contribute to:

- developing a scope for a national approach to web archiving by experts at the National Library
- discussion within the NSLA Heads of Collections advisory group as to opportunities for collaboration that might address some of our current collecting gaps
- discussion within the NSLA CEO group at a strategic level regarding national approaches to collecting, including web collecting
- discussion within the NED Steering Group and NED Operational Group as to NED’s content policy, and the intersection between NED and web archiving collections.

Consulted

Janice van de Velde, Brian Hubber, Catherine Johnston, Kerry Blinco, Jane McGregor, Ian Morrison, Louise Anemaat, Brendan Somes, Richard Neville, Jerelynn Brown, Jo Bayly, Joanne Cooke, Anthony Laube, Antoinette Buchanan, Kevin Bradley, Susan McEwan, Debra Jones, Michelle Collier, Anna Raunik, Gavin Bannerman, Robyn Hamilton, Karen Stone, Margaret Warren, Jo Ritale, Jenelle Colston-Ing.

Acronyms

NSLA: National and State Libraries Australia	SLNSW: State Library of New South Wales
NED: National edeposit service	SLQ: State Library of Queensland
NLA: National Library of Australia	SLSA: State Library of South Australia
LANT: Library & Archives NT [Northern Territory]	SLV: State Library Victoria
Libraries ACT [Australian Capital Territory, referring here to the ACT Heritage Library]	SLWA: State Library of Western Australia

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