Searching for a Forgotten Life
W.L. Baillieu in the Archives

Popular perception is a strange and fickle thing. I recently wrote a history of Australia’s Collins Class submarines. I began that project sharing the almost universal belief that these submarines are ‘noisy as a rock concert’ — I was rather surprised to find out that they are, in fact, the second quietest submarines in the world.

Since I have begun working on a biography of W.L. Baillieu I have discovered that, while the Baillieu family is well known, for most people WL (as he was universally known) is remembered solely as a landboomer who paid sixpence in the pound on his debts when the land boom collapsed in the early 1890s. I suggest this is like remembering Don Bradman for his bowling or Robert Menzies for his contributions to the Wesley College magazine.

It is true that Baillieu was a leading figure in the Melbourne land boom of 1885–1889, the wildest and most extraordinary boom in Australian history, and one of the notorious group who made secret compositions with their creditors in 1892. But it is easy to forget that he was only 33 when this happened — and what is truly remarkable is the way he recovered from the collapse of his first career and built a career in business without parallel in Australia.

In September 1892 the real estate firm of Munro & Baillieu was dissolved and WL began his own business under the name W.L. Baillieu & Co. In spite of the disastrous state of the economy, he made a success of this business, taking in his brother Arthur as a partner and developing it into one of the largest real estate agencies in Melbourne under the name Baillieu Allard. To the end of his life he described himself as an ‘auctioneer’.

At the same time he took over the stricken stockbroking firm of W.J. Malpas & Co. and built up a stockbroking business with his brothers Edward (Prince), Clive (Joe), Norman and Maurice (Jac), which as E.L. & C. Baillieu has been one of the leading stockbrokers in Melbourne for over 100 years. Throughout his business life WL worked closely with five of his brothers and, while he was always acknowledged as the leader, their business success was very much a joint effort.

W.L. Baillieu played a large part in a dramatic resurgence of Victorian gold-mining in the 1890s, promoting, managing and raising capital for several of the most productive mines, notably the Duke mines at Maryborough and the Jubilee mines at Scarsdale. In the same decade he also worked closely with Theodore Fink to put together the Herald and Weekly Times group. He was a director of the Herald for about 40 years and was responsible for Keith Murdoch rather than Thorold Fink taking charge of the company after World War I.

In 1905 WL joined with Herbert Hoover, W.S. Robinson and Francis Govett to establish the Zinc Corporation, and with Montague Cohen to establish Amalgamated Zinc. These two companies developed the minerals flotation processes which solved the problem of separating zinc from the complex Broken Hill ores and made the Broken Hill mines highly profitable for another 70 years. At the same time he became the dominant figure in the North Broken Hill and Broken Hill South mining companies. It was the wealth from these mines which financed most of his later activities and they formed the core of the Collins House group, an informal but close alliance of companies, of which WL was the unofficial but unquestioned leader. The group was named for Collins House at 360 Collins Street, an office building built and owned by the Baillieus in which most of the companies, as well as associated professional partnerships such as lawyers Arthur Robinson & Co. and mining agents Bewick Moreing had their offices.

Closely associated companies included Carlton & United Breweries — put together by W.L. Baillieu and Monty Cohen in 1907, the Herald & Weekly Times, Dunlop, Yarra Falls textiles, Melbourne City Electric Company, and numerous other mining, refining and smelting companies.

At the outbreak of World War I over half the lead and almost all the zinc from Broken Hill was sent to Germany or Belgium for smelting and refining. In 1915 W.L. Baillieu negotiated the takeover by the Collins House group of BHP’s run-down lead smelter at Port Pirie, which was modernised and became the largest lead smelter in the world. The new company Broken Hill Associated Smelters was jointly owned by the Collins House mining companies.
WL was also the driving force behind the formation of Electrolytic Zinc which built the zinc refinery at Risdon near Hobart, one of the world’s first refineries to use electrolysis rather than distillation. It is often forgotten that the Electrolytic Zinc refinery was on the same scale as BHP’s steel works at Newcastle — with the capital raising by E.L. & C. Baillieu the largest in Australia to that date.

During World War I the Collins House group also took over the copper-refining works of Electrolytic Refining & Smelting at Port Kembla — previously one-third German owned — and set up Metal Manufactures Ltd, one of Australia’s largest manufacturers. By the end of the War the Collins House Group controlled three of the four enterprises at the heart of Australia’s heavy industry — Port Pirie, Risdon and Port Kembla, as well as the largest and most profitable mines in Australia at Broken Hill.

In the 1920s the Collins House Group led Australia’s industrial expansion with new ventures in paper manufacture, textiles, cotton growing and many other areas. New companies formed by or closely associated with the Collins House group included Associated Pulp & Paper Manufacturers, Western Mining, Gold Mines of Australia, British Australian Lead Manufacturers, ICIANZ and the Commonwealth Aircraft Corporation. The group also financed numerous attempts to find payable oil fields in Australia and New Zealand, developed copper mines in New Guinea — which failed because the only skilled workers who would go there were fleeing from either justice or their wives — and turned down the chance to develop Mt Isa on the grounds that the transport costs would be too high.

Even while building up the biggest mining and industrial conglomerate in Australia, WL was also an active politician, being a member of the Victorian Legislative Council from 1901 until 1922 and a minister from 1909 to 1917. During much of this period he was regarded as the power behind the throne in both state and federal politics, having particularly close relations with Alfred Deakin, Stanley Bruce, W.A. Watt and Walter Massey Greene, the latter two both working for Collins House after leaving politics.

When one thinks of the political hacks, plastic ‘celebrities’, third-rate sportsmen and petty criminals who have been the subjects of recent biographies, it is hard to disagree with the proposition that WL. Baillieu is the great unwritten biography in Australian history. Why has there been no published biography? There have been several attempts to produce one. Several hagiographies were written in the late 1950s and early 1960s, but fortunately they were never published. They were totally unbalanced and riddled with errors of fact, having been based solely on the recollections of a few individuals.

The next obstacle to a biography of WL was the ‘landboomer effect’. In 1966 Michael Cannon published The Landboomers, a brilliant, if flawed, account of the land boom and bust. This book has been continually in print ever since, popularising the view of the land boom as a conspiracy to defraud the public and the landboomers as a criminal gang who should all have been jailed. It is not surprising that the reaction of many Baillieu family members was to shy away from publicity and public scrutiny. Collections of letters disappeared from sight and enquiries from historians were met with responses ranging from polite evasion to blank refusals to cooperate.

A further obstacle was that the belief developed that WL was rarely literate and consequently there could not possibly be many letters. Michael Cannon wrote of WL that ‘handicapped by his comparatively low standard of education, he found it difficult to express himself on paper’. Consequently the conclusion was drawn that there was not enough material to write a full biography.

So when I was asked to investigate the possibility of writing a biography of WL. Baillieu I was worried that it might end up being a very shallow study. I had just finished a biography of Sir Ian Potter which was somewhat handicapped because there were not more than four accurately recorded facts about him before the age of 33 and no more than half a dozen surviving letters written in the first half of his life — and he lived for 92 years.

However, there turned out to be no such problem with W.L. Baillieu. After about a year of research the overwhelming problem has become the sheer volume of material by and about WL. It has got to the stage where I am almost scared to explore new avenues in case they open up another cornucopia of WL’s correspondence. Far from being a poor correspondent, WL was a prolific and articulate letter-writer and literally thousands of his letters have survived. In addition there are a smaller number of letters written by his brothers, numerous company records, share registers, account books and other documents — in fact enough material to write several books.

My search for W.L. Baillieu began — as all such searches should do — in the University of Melbourne Archives. I knew that the collections held by the Archives would be the most likely place to find material on WL, but I did not expect to find the goldmine I did.

The papers of Clive Baillieu, WL’s eldest son and the first Lord Baillieu, were the obvious starting point. This collection is everything a historian could ask for — comprehensive, well-sorted and listed, with a wealth of material about Clive and
his career, and much about other family members. Clive Baillieu’s papers were reviewed by the legendary University of Melbourne Archivist, Frank Strahan in 1967. He wrote: ‘There is a wealth of excellent material. Certainly this is one of the greatest collections which could come from an Australian, and its significance is such that it must rank as an outstanding collection in a world context.’

WL and his eldest son were particularly close and there are numerous letters between them. One that has particular interest in the light of recent events is a letter written by WL from New York on 29 October 1929, just after the stock market crash:

N.Y. gets on my nerves wonderful and all as it is, and the market collapse does not improve matters. I had no idea until the market commenced to crumble the unreal basis upon which it was all built up. I fancy if I had appreciated it I would have been ready to take a risk on the Bear side.

The Bull market has been an expression of the American’s mind that there is no end to their greatness. When we arrived here, on all sides you heard of the unlimited value in the equities of America’s Industry; in this all you heard of the unlimited value in their greatness. When we arrived here, on all sides you heard of the unlimited value in their greatness.

The UMA also holds the records of all the major Collins House companies: North Broken Hill, Broken Hill South, the Zinc Corporation and Broken Hill Associated Smelters. These all have hundreds (it seems like thousands) of archive boxes full of letter books, correspondence files, accounts, contracts, minute books, production reports, share records, details of investments, prospectuses, newspaper cuttings ad infinitum. There are hundreds, probably thousands, of letters to and from WL. Baillieu. Most of these are business correspondence but given that building up the Collins House group and its many businesses was the central work of WL’s life, and these letters show how this was done, they are absolutely critical for understanding his life.

The UMA also has several other collections of great interest for the biographer of WL. Sir Hugh Brain worked with WL’s brother-in-law, Edward Shackell, at Collins House in a business which provided company secretarial services to all the Collins House companies, giving him good insights into how all the businesses worked. While the collection is small, his typed reminiscences include many revealing stories about those who worked in Collins House. For example, Brain wrote:

The first company meeting I attended was a board meeting of Electrolytic Zinc, chaired by W.L.B. Its General Manager, Herbert Cep, had just returned from a trip to America. In those days the General Manager’s expense account for his trip was board business and Gepp’s substantial claims were being gone through. About half way through WL said ‘What are all these medical costs, clinics and so on, you weren’t sick in America were you Gepp?’

Cep looking a bit shamefaced said, ‘No, Mr Baillieu but as a matter of fact Mrs Gepp had a child while I was there.’ The Chairman said, ‘God bless my soul, and you expect us to pay for it?’ Gepp retired into an embarrassed silence, broken by the Chairman saying, ‘Oh well, I suppose we’ve got to meet it, but understand Gepp, in future if I’m in for any transaction I’ve got to be in from the start.’

Of greater importance, if less entertaining, are the papers of W.S. Robinson. Robinson was WL. Baillieu’s chief lieutenant in the Collins House group and there are many fascinating letters between the two of them on the major policy decisions of the Collins House group, as well as more lighthearted letters on family matters, as the business ties between them were cemented when WL’s son Harry married WS’s daughter Margaret.

And then I came to the Baillieu Allard papers. I had been led to believe that this was a ‘dry as dust’ collection of the daily accounts of a real estate firm, and in my initial plan I allowed about three days to look at it. In the end it took over three months. It is an extraordinary collection primarily showing how WL and his brother Arthur built the real estate business up from the depths of the depression in the 1890s to great success in the early 1900s. But in addition it has many general business files showing how WL diversified from real estate into gold and coalmining and then into the Broken Hill mines. While there are not many letters by WL, there are hundreds of letters written to him by Joseph Cram, who was his agent in London in the mid-1890s, and by his relatives when WL made his first trip to London in 1897. One written by Edward Shackell expresses sentiments which I trust will still resonate with readers of this journal:

Your note to hand and pleased I am to hear that you are enjoying the trip and that both Mrs Baillieu and you are benefited by the change. You speak of London as a great city. It must be and I look forward to the time when I shall see it myself and compare it with the idea I have formed of it from descriptions read me. You are specially favoured in seeing the great city during the Jubilee celebrations. I feel quite envious.

The occasion is I suppose without parallel in the history of the world and the odds are a million pounds to a brick that the present generation will never see such another.

One perplexing aspect of the Baillieu Allard collection was a series of large leather-bound letter books which began at number 60 in the early 1900s and continued into the 1920s — these mainly contained trivia about rents, properties for sale, insurance and so on, but I wondered where the earlier ones were. It was only in March this year that I found out that numbers 36 to 60 were safely in the care of a family member, together with many other account books of various sorts from the 1890s and early 1900s.

Book no. 36 begins in October 1892, immediately after WL’s partnership with Donald Munro was dissolved and WL had just set up on his own. The new firm kept the same run of letter books going (if anyone knows the whereabouts of 1 to 36 please let me know!). Many of these letters were written by WL himself and
they give an extraordinary picture of the desperation and despair of the dark days of the 1890s depression. Strictly speaking these are business letters, but I don’t think it is being too much of the amateur psychologist to think that something can be made from them. He wrote on 21 October 1892:

My position I regret to say does not get stronger financially. Each day something drops away that one regards as an asset.

Another letter says simply:

If you can forward cheque for anything on a/c it will be thankfully received.

He wrote to George Partridge of Chancery Lane:

I regret I have not heard from you in reply to my previous letters re your past due bill I regret still more that I am badly in want of payment. If you are unable to let me have cheque I must ask you to give me a new Bill that I might discount.

And to a tenant in one of his Malvern houses:

Referring to your memo of yesterday’s date, I hope you will carry out your promise and get the rent settled up next week otherwise I shall be compelled to adopt measures I much prefer avoiding.

As WL was 6 foot and 2 inches tall and a boxing champion in his youth, the hint of a threat in the letter had some substance. We sometimes forget that in Melbourne the depression of the 1890s was considerably worse than the depression of the 1930s — unemployment was higher, asset values fell far more and a higher proportion of businesses collapsed. The fact that the population of Melbourne fell by about ten per cent between 1890 and 1900 is a clear indication how tough things were. WL’s letters give some idea of the desperate struggle needed to survive in business.

I am grateful that I have been given access to other collections held by the family, notably the letters written by WL to his sons on the land — Tom at Tongy (inland from Newcastle in New South Wales) and Harry at Turrumbarry near Echuca. These letters show a great interest in all things agricultural and pastoral and suggest that WL’s dream would have been to be the squire of a large country estate. Then there have been letters that have come from the English branch of the family, the descendants of Clive, who in 1922 decided to live in England. Among these are the letters WL wrote to Clive expressing deep distress at Clive’s decision and also letters WL wrote to friends and family in January 1931 when he had a nervous breakdown. These last letters were never sent, but give an extraordinarily sad picture of a great man in a state of mental collapse.

The conclusion from my year in the archives is that the real challenge in writing a biography of W.L. Baillieu is not, as was widely believed in the 1960s and 1970s, a lack of sources, but rather the vastness of the sources and the amount of work required to do justice to the scale and richness of the material available.

Peter Yule

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Researching the Melbourne University Boat Club – Australia’s Oldest Boat Club

At the end of 2006 I applied for and attained the commission to research and write the history of the Melbourne University Boat Club – my tenth such project. I knew nothing about rowing or sport at the University but quite a lot about the Yarra River and the social history of Melbourne, having written several books on related subjects.

I began with two searches for material that would form the basis of the work, the first was at the State Library of Victoria (SLV) website for images of the Yarra and rowing, the other a search of UMA’s online catalogue for all material relating to the club at the University of Melbourne. The latter produced lists of minute books, correspondence and some photographs and cuttings from newspapers. The annual reports were pasted into the later minute books which had typed pages pasted in.
was immediately evident however that many minute books were not there. As it turned out, a member of the club who had intended to write its history had the missing minute books.

Notes on the club’s first president, Martin Howy Irving (the University's second classics professor, taking the post in 1856), revealed much about the establishment of the boat club and the kind of place the University aspired to become. Irving had won a Balliol College (Oxford) scholarship in 1848. An outstanding student, he was Oxford’s junior mathematics scholar for 1850 and obtained first-class honours in classics and second-class in mathematics (BA, 1853; MA, 1856). An adventurous spirit brought him to the colonies and to the fledgling University of Melbourne which had been established just three years before.

There could hardly have been a finer example of a mid-19th century gentleman than Irving. Over six feet tall, wiry and handsome, he had been one of the leading oarsmen of Balliol College. He believed that playing sport was as important to educating young men as academic training. Four months after arriving in Melbourne, in July 1856, he helped organise the first recorded cricket match for a university team — with Emerald Hill.

The early years of the boat club reflected the social strata to which university students and oarsmen belonged. The names of the club’s presidents, committee members and rowers read like a who’s who of 19th century Melbourne: Sir John Madden, Sir John Grice, Wolfe Fink, Sir Henry Wrixon, Sir William Kernot and Sir Thomas a’Beckett are just a few of the names listed in the minute books. Other revelations included the importance of the first residential colleges, Trinity, Ormond, Queens and Newman, to the University. During the first 50 years, more students lived on campus than off and university life was, therefore, a total experience, with many students residing for three or four years and participating in sports, plays, debates and enjoying the pleasures of an encompassing culture.

One collection key to the boat club is the Clive Disher collection. Disher grew up on his father’s estate, 'Strathfieldsaye', in Victoria. After attending Gippsland College at Sale, he finished his secondary education at Scotch College and entered Melbourne University to study medicine. His photographs of crews and dinners and his study in Ormond College are a marked contrast to that of the ALF crew he stroked at the 1919 Peace Regatta at Henley-on-Thames after World War I during which he had served as a doctor. Faces of the young university men in his pre-war photos shine like cherubs revealing self-assuredness and calm, while that of the ALF crew, taken just five years later, reveals men who seem middle-aged, their bodies and faces worn by their experience.

The Peace Regatta, a race between crews from the allied forces and Cambridge and Oxford University crews was won by the ALF crew. His letters to the boat club in Melbourne, begun when he was appointed to train the crew in the winter of 1918–1919, to the time of the race in June 1919, reveal the spiritual journey and healing provided by the return to life’s pleasures and the camaraderie of pre-war life. It also marks an early entry to international sport, just as World War I provided Australia’s entry to the world stage. Like many other members of the club, Disher remained dedicated to it until the end of his life in 1976.

Records also revealed that the first MUBC men to participate in an Olympic regatta were Harry Ross-Soden and Simon Fraser who travelled to Stockholm in 1912 with a crew that was otherwise made up of New South Welshmen. Although this crew was eliminated in the semi-finals, they had proved their worth by winning the Grand Challenge Cup at Henley Royal Regatta as Sydney Rowing Club. The 20th century brought about a decrease in numbers of rowers resident at a college and coaches more determined to make rowing available to any student at the University who wanted to take up the sport. Although it was easy to see how changes at the club continued to reflect changes to life in Melbourne and at the University, it was surprising to find that the actions of key MUBC individuals had caused changes to the entire University.

The most important such individual (to me as a researcher of the club) was the dedicated record keeper John Lang who not only acted as secretary and treasurer but wrote up the club's missing records and kept up the club's minutes and reports from the 1890s until his departure for England in 1921. These years of recording provided not only facts and figures but accurate accounts of meetings and races, descriptions of club personalities, dinners and other social events. He kept up a correspondence with many key figures. He was also instrumental in setting up the Melbourne University Sports Union. His records and minutes are written like a time capsule, with a clear eye to the future and the knowledge that someone would one day write the story of the club.

In more recent years the club has become a major centre for elite sport, with members represented at many World Championships, Commonwealth and Olympic Games.

As with the records of so many organisations the club’s activities have not been so well recorded in the 1990s, when computers began to be used to send minutes of meetings and the old and excellent habit of pasting these into a hardback book became obsolete.

Each such history of the University’s
Red Tape – Some Retiring Thoughts

Because archives arise from administrative activities, we are professionally predisposed to find bureaucracy strangely interesting. This is especially so for many government archivists and really, any of us whose collections mostly comprise the records of large organisations.

In my case, it began as an undergraduate studying Max Weber's theories of bureaucracy and developed while a public servant in Canberra where beyond the officially designated close-of-business (4.51pm), our favourite TV comedies were Yes, Minister and Yes, Prime Minister. Eventually I found a copy of Jonathan Lynn and Antony Hay's scripts published by the BBC (The Complete Yes Minister, The Diaries of a Cabinet Minister by the Right Hon. James Hacker MP), but they will always be a pale substitute for the wonderful performances of the perfectly cast Paul Eddington playing Minister James Hacker and Nigel Hawthorne as Sir Humphrey Appleby.

The series titles became so synonymous with political and bureaucratic stratagems that in the UK they spawned another (and serious) text by Antony Jay entitled How to Beat Sir Humphrey: every citizen's guide to fighting officialdom (Long Barn Books, 1997). Appropriately, the cover has a Gerald Scarfe cartoon of Sir Humphrey wrapped in red tape.

Not surprisingly then, as retirement approached, my thoughts turned to one of the classic statements of bureaucratic perfection. It was written by the great English archival theorist Hilary Jenkinson in 1922 in A Manual of Archive Administration.

Because records were 'a convenient form of artificial memory', any administrator returning from an absence or replacing someone should be able to 'find a summary of all that has been done in the past [on a particular matter] … in his files'. Thus Jenkinson coined 'the golden rule of archive making', something akin to the religious injunction to try always to be ready to meet one's maker. One must have [one's] … always in such a state of completeness and order that, supposing himself and his staff to be by some accident obliterated, a successor totally ignorant of the work of the office would be able to take it up and carry it on with the least possible inconvenience and delay simply on the strength of a study of the Office Files.

Jenkinson’s rule sounds anachronistic in these days of relentless email, abolished registries, succession planning and corporate memory, but it harbours a kernel of timeless good sense. I hope my successors don’t end up cursing me, but will leave my mobile charged up and turned on. If Jeremy Lewis is correct, however, it probably won’t ring, even if my file equivalents had been model summaries and my shredding minimal.

As I cast around for the right farewell speech quote, Lewis’s edited anthology The Vintage Book of Office Life (Vintage, 1998) saved the day. In his introduction to its final section, 'The end of the road', Lewis explained that retirement itself was beyond the scope of his book. 'For a while,' he wrote, 'the names and reputations of office tyrants and office characters live on in memory and folklore, for a while they return to haunt the scenes of their past. But every time there are fewer left who knew them, and less and less to say; in the end the connection is broken, and nothing more remains.' Good recordkeeping means a little may in fact remain to inform or bemuse posterity. And while we do not seek it, the memory of archivists (whether tyrants or characters) can live on in the thoughts of researchers, and more tenuously through the collections we built and managed.

Michael Piggott
University Archivist and Manager of Cultural Collections, Michael Piggott retires at the end of 2008.

The history of the Melbourne University Boat Club will be published in 2009.

In addition to her many publications historian Dr Judith Buckrich is an Honorary Research Fellow of the University of Melbourne’s Cultural Heritage Unit and a Consulting Fellow of the World Innovation Foundation. She is also Chair of the International PEN Women Writers’ Committee and Vice-President of the Melbourne Centre of PEN.

AIF Crew at the 1919 Peace Regatta at Henley-on-Thames.

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activities adds to the fabric of knowledge about the University, but there is much more of interest here, the story of the city, its river, its society and its place in the world can all be traced through the material that has taken me two years to trawl through, from which I have created a story that I hope will be interesting to all readers, not just those interested in the beautiful sport of rowing.

Dr Judith Buckrich
The second half of the year seems to hold a surfeit of Archives and Records-related conferences. The dilemma is which to choose? What area of specialisation? The privilege of working at the UMA is in the diversity of the collections, not only in terms of content, but also their media, and the resultant choices for professional development come in an array of fields.

In August I attended back-to-back conferences in Perth. ICHORA4, the fourth International Conference on the History of Records and Archives was held from the 3 to 5 August at the State Library of Western Australia and at the picturesque campus at the University of Western Australia. With a theme of ‘Minority Reports: indigenous and community voices in archives’, the program was diverse, filled with a wide range of both Australian and international speakers.

The Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) Annual Conference followed, based at the Parmelia Hilton, also in Perth. I delivered a report on activities of the Business Archives Taskforce at the meeting of the Business, Corporate and Labour Special Interest Group. Strong sessions on emerging digital issues and on business archives were very relevant, and UMA’s Melinda Barrie, Senior Archivist, Rio Tinto and Business, presented a paper on corporate social responsibility.

In September I attended the Records Management Association of Australasia’s Convention. I presented a paper on the management of photographic collections in the digital age which was well received. While the government sector is well represented in terms of managing physical collections in digital space, those archives and records bodies which fall outside of their ambit are often left to struggle ahead on their own. As a result an online forum for discussion has been formed through the RMAA website.

I returned to Sydney in October to follow up with site visits and explore what other universities and cultural heritage groups are doing in terms of collection management and access. A part of this visit was to explore the means of making some of our student cards, dating to pre-1912, available digitally. Software has been purchased and a trial project is currently underway. We have had a number of staff changes in the second half of the year.

Reference Services Coordinator, Jason Benjamin was recently appointed to the position of Co-ordinator of Conservation Programs within the Cultural Collections (the entity within which UMA sits). Coordinator of Repository and Systems, Maria Gionis has left us to take up a position at RMIT University. Photographer Lindsay Howe is back with us, digitising the Jack O’Brien photos of 1950s Fitzroy, as described in our previous edition. The images will soon be online on our image catalogue UMAIC and also available through Picture Australia.

Kathryn Wood is a project archivist who has been engaged to work on a number of arrangement and description projects, including the Shell Australia archive. This very large collection covers the company’s activities from 1901 to 1996 and is full of unexpected riches.

Christine Kousidis has continued her work on the AXA/National Mutual archive, which concludes at the end of the year.

The Collection Review is drawing to a close, and we are now in the midst of planning for the installation of new shelving. This means that we are unable to receive any new acquisitions until March 2009, however our Reading Room opening hours will be returning to normal: Monday to Friday and the first Saturday of each month, when we reopen after the Christmas-New Year break on 5 January 2009.

Helen McLaughlin
Collection management teams get just as excited about shelving and the latest in archival-quality preservation packaging as they do about the collections which they store. So the University of Melbourne Archives is glad to announce that we have permission to purchase and install two new ranges of shelving in early 2009.

In 1960 the first University Archivist, Frank Strahan, commenced eclectic and energetic collecting of University, business and community records. With his keen eye for exhibition material, he also collected the pictures from the walls of companies, office equipment such as typewriters and company seals, desk furniture and a huge range of memorabilia. From the University alone he collected sporting trophies from the Sports Union, framed photographs of academic staff, scientific equipment belonging to professors, sleeping bags of Antarctic explorers and clothing such as sporting blazers and football jumpers. From building companies and architects’ practices he collected plans and drawings which are now a vital source for students and Melbourne’s conservation architects alike.

In the 1970s the then Labour Archivist, Andrew Reeves, began to collect trade union memorabilia. Now Tinsmith’s Union armour, eight hour day ribbons and the first deed box of the Trustees of the National Trades Hall and Literary Institute (now the Victorian Trades Hall Council) compete for space in the UMA repository in Brunswick.

These objects are currently occupying shelves and plan cabinets at the northern end of the repository and need to be moved before the new shelves are installed. They will eventually be returned to the shelves, and on this account the new shelving design will be a departure from our standard configuration. Our new shelving ranges will incorporate plan cabinets for posters and architectural drawings into the lowest bays, thus saving space and providing a safer workplace for staff. Aisles between shelving ranges will be wider to allow facing plan cabinets to open completely and safely into the same space, but still maximise the use of the space available.

There will be an area for hanging those items of clothing which are robust enough to hang, while other clothing and textiles will be stored in boxes on shelves. A purpose-built hanging frame for rolled banners and similar textiles has been included in the design. Objects will be reboxed and stored on shelves. There will be more shelves per range to avoid wasted space and the need to stack boxes on top of one another.

Thanks to a grant from the University’s Miegunyah Fund, an Object Curator will be appointed in 2009 to catalogue and pack objects for reshelving. In fact development and trials of the cataloguing and packaging system have commenced this year with the help of a volunteer, art history and curatorial student Stacy Jewell. Stacy’s job has been to unpack, catalogue and rehouse small objects currently stored together in larger boxes. She has enthusiastically embraced this project and her pioneering efforts will be of great use in setting up the larger object project next year.

The downside of all of this wonderful improvement in housing for the Archives’ collections will be that for up to eight weeks early in 2009, some collections currently housed in plan cabinets may not be available to researchers while shelves are installed and plan cabinets are relocated.

So, better shelving, an improvement in storage and control of objects, better staff working conditions — what is there not to be excited about?

Sue Fairbanks, Senior Archivist, Collection Management

Select Documents from the Archives

How to Write a Letter of Complaint

The offending tome and prospective weapon.

Victorian XXXXX Co. Cheltenham
(undated but c.1960)

To Sands & McDougall Pty Ltd Melbourne

Sir,

You have impertinently sent us a bill for £3 15.0 for displays in your directory. We did have a vague query as to information for the pink pages of the telephone directory. We had no use for the villain. He was shown the door for we do not require or desire such publicity. What information that he got was unscrupulously obtained from neighbours or manufactured as none was given by us.

It is our opinion that your directory is of no merit or of any use to decent, honest merchants. Well do I know that it is made use of by every spiv in the city of Melbourne. If the announcements relating to us are not withdrawn immediately from this corrupt publication it is our intention to seek the aid of the courts to enforce the matter I will repeat myself and again state that we do not wish to be called on by the type of fly-by-nighter who makes a practice of gaining a miserable existence moving from one announcement in your scurrilous and iniquitous door-stopper to another.

Should a copy of this scandalous tome arrive at our factory, I will personally go to the trouble of finding out when the next board meeting of Sands & McDougall is taking place when I will make it my pleasure to personally throw the rotten thing straight at the chairman whilst he is at his accustomed place at the head of the table.

We do not intend to be pestered further in this matter. Let this be the last we hear from you.

We are,
Your obedient servant,
etc.

Sands & McDougall Pty Ltd Melbourne

The University of Melbourne Archives
University of Melbourne, Victoria 3010, Australia

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