

Fleas in the reading room and fiction on the shelves: meeting the readers of a nineteenth century public library

Peter Thompson

La Trobe University Library
Box 199 Bendigo 3550

Email p.thompson@latrobe.edu.au
Phone: +61 3 5444 7979

Biography:

Peter Thompson is the Information Systems and Resources Librarian at the Bendigo campus of La Trobe University Library.

He has worked in Australia and overseas in a variety of roles, in both academic libraries and the private sector.

He has post-graduate qualifications in information technology and a Masters in Information Science (Librarianship)

La Trobe University Bendigo is the custodian of the collection, borrowing records, minutes and suggestion book of the Sandhurst Mechanics Institute Library.

These documents tell a story of the relationship between a library and its community. The lending records convey the important role people placed on the library for entertainment and education.

The suggestion book, in which patrons entered requests for purchases, and suggestions for improvements, indicates an engaged borrowership, passionate about the library and its collection.

Through primarily an examination of the non-fiction borrowing, the interests and concerns of the membership of the library will be highlighted.

INTRODUCTION

Just over sixty years ago, in the heat of a Bendigo February, what was then the Bendigo School of Mines Public Library would have offered Mr Brennan, one of the very few regular borrowers, a dusty, gloomy, but cool sanctuary.

*Sitting on the shelves of the Voyages and Travels section was a book that had been circulating through the collection since the early 1870's. The book, **Westward by Rail** by W.F. Rae, a tale of railways and Mormon communities, had given over seventy years of entertainment to the readers of Bendigo.*

*On the 2nd of February 1945, thanks to Mr Brennan, it was borrowed one last time. Within months the library would close after ninety years, and Mr Brennan's membership, and the collection of which **Westward by Rail** was a part, was assumed to have passed quietly into Bendigo's history.*

THE PROJECT

The Heyward Library at La Trobe University, Bendigo houses the remaining collection of the Sandhurst Mechanics Institute Library, over 5000 volumes in all. A project to catalogue the bibliographic, social and historical data associated with the collection has been underway for some time now.

The work has essentially revolved around designing and building a database to capture the unique aspects of the volumes which make up the collections, and the data contained in the remaining records pertaining to the library.

In order to build a useful database, a process of **normalization** of the data is undertaken, where the data contained in something like a borrowers' ledger is figuratively taken apart, to see what internal relationships, contingencies and dependencies lurk within the untidy pages of handwritten records.

This process is presently being undertaken for the documents outlined below, and whilst fascinating to a database tragic such as the author, this process is not the subject of this paper. Rather this paper is something of a progress report on the information that is being revealed as the documents are examined.

We'll look in particular at the borrowings of the 1880's, focusing on the non-fiction loans, and see what this might suggest about the subscribers to the library.

The intention is to provide a picture of the library and it's borrowers in its heyday in the 1870's and 1880's, drawn from the remaining records of the Institute.

BACKGROUND

Discussions on library usage in nineteenth century Australia are coloured by the fact that most of them were Mechanics Institutes, and therefore the libraries ostensibly had a role in providing uplifting and educational literature to the readership.

It seems to be generally acknowledged that the readers primarily enjoyed reading fiction (Bremer and Lyons: 2001, Petrow: 1998). Previous work on the collection (Thompson: 2005) has shown that Sandhurst was no exception. The non-fiction borrowings run at about 10% of loans from sample pages of the 1880-81 records.

This paper concerns itself primarily with that ten percent. Through examining the non-fiction loans it is hoped that we'll find out more about the readers, beyond the broad descriptions described elsewhere (Kwasitsu: 1989).

THE DOCUMENTS

The documents are ledger books, each locally manufactured by one of the many printers operating in Bendigo at the time.

One ledger book was originally used to record the **borrower deposits** during the late 1860's. These were funds borrowers handed over to the library to ensure borrowers returned books, and to cover any losses from lost or damaged books. Later, the half-empty ledger was used for recording the member borrowing, by the simple act of turning the ledger upside down and using the back page as the start.

Another ledger was used to record the **suggestions** of borrowers for purchases and service improvements from mid 1874 through to 1878. Once again, the ledger was later used to record loans, from April to May 1880, by turning the ledger upside down.

The third ledger contains the minutes of the library committee from 1865 through to 1867.

The fourth ledger contains the borrowing records from 1900 through to 1946.

SUMMERTIME READING FOR THE SELF IMPROVERS?

The sample recorded spans late December 1880 through to the end of February 1881 – most of the summer. In all, 450 non-fiction books were borrowed during the summer of 1880-1881, by 220 individual members of the library.

CATEGORY	LOANS
Biography	54
Classics	23
History	97
Miscellany	47
Natural History	65
Philosophy	17
Poetry	21
Travel	131
TOTAL	455

As the table at left illustrates, tales of travel and adventure were the most popular reading when not indulging in the guilty pleasure of novels.

The travel books range from the memoirs of colonial officers in far flung parts of empire, such as **Past Days in India**, to hair-raising tales of adventure such as **Travel, War and Shipwreck**, designed to enliven the lives Victorian schoolboys.

*Table 1 Non-fiction loans
Summer 1880-1881*

THE DARK CONTINENT, THE EMERALD ISLE AND THE WIDE BROWN LAND

Several themes stand out in the patron's selection of travel books – personal narratives and African exploration are just two. Predictably, an interest in the story of David Livingstone seemed to have some resonance with the borrowers of the library. Stanley's **How I found Livingstone**, was borrowed along with **A Popular Account of David Livingstone, Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa**, and **Last Journals of David Livingstone** were all borrowed by separate patrons.

Trollope's **South Africa** was also borrowed a couple of times, attesting to the popularity of the writer, but also possibly suggesting that interest in Africa wasn't purely in terms of savages and stricken missionaries.

In all, twenty-two separate patrons borrowed twenty titles on Africa for a total of thirty-five loans over the summer.

The next most popular destination for the Mechanics Institute armchair traveler was North America (including Canada), with nine separate titles being borrowed by ten individual patrons for a total of fifteen loans. The most popular title is William Butler's **The Great North Land**.

Arthur McCrae's *The Americans at Home*, and Anthony Trollope's *North America* also feature, as does Sir Arthur Fremantle's *Three Months in the Southern States*.

But what of Australia and the region? The most popular title is, interestingly, James Hingston's *The Australian Abroad, Vol. II, Ceylon, India and Egypt*, hot off the presses of Sampson Low, having been published in early 1880. Both volumes survive in the library, and volume II is much the worse for wear compared with volume I. As was the habit of the readers of the library, errant facts are corrected by assiduous readers in pencil. The volume was borrowed on three occasions by separate patrons over the summer.

Two volumes of Australian exploration were also borrowed – Julian Tenison-Woods *History of the Discovery and Exploration of Australia* and Will's *A Successful Exploration Through the Interior of Australia*.

The remaining two loans are for Mrs Millets *An Australian Parsonage*, and *Colonial Travel : a Narrative of Four Years Tour through Australia, New Zealand and Canada* by David Kennedy.

Turning to history, the readers were by far most interested in English history. All three volumes of *England Under the Stuarts* by John Jesse were borrowed twice, as were both volumes of *History of England in the Eighteenth Century*, by William Lecky. Most of the other borrowings on English history continue in a similar vein, such as *The Pretenders and Their Adherents*, and *Scotland under the Early Kings*.

After England, the most popular history subject is Ireland, and the work of two prominent Irish nationalists, both with links to Australia, are to the fore. Both volumes of *New Ireland*, by Irish parliamentarian and activist A.M. Sullivan, are twice borrowed over the summer, as is *Young Ireland*, by Sir Arthur Gavan Duffy, an Irish politician who had recently retired from public post in Victoria. Froude's *The English In Ireland in the Eighteenth Century* is also borrowed.

Less partisan histories such as McGee's *Popular history of Ireland* also feature, but are only borrowed once.

Continuing on the Irish theme, the single most popular title borrowed over the summer is the first four volumes of *The History of Our Own Times*, by Justin McCarthy, Irish politician and writer. This set had just been published in 1880, and was something of a runaway bestseller. No less than six separate readers borrowed volumes of the set over the summer.

But the good people of Bendigo weren't solely concerned with tales of adventure, and the politics of the homeland. The categories of Miscellany and Natural History provide a possible glimpse into the eclectic interests and preoccupations of the readers of the town.

The demanding *On Defects of Vision Which are Remediable by Optical Appliances* by R.B. Carter was borrowed twice, as was Reeves' *Consumption in Australia*. Benjamin Ward Richardson's *Diseases of Modern life* and Dr Carter's *Principles of Physiology* also enjoyed an outing. As well as this new-fangled medical fare, Johann Casper Laveter's *Essays on Physiognomy* was also borrowed.

Science wasn't ignored, with books on optics, numerous titles on electricity, meteorology, general science, 'natural history' in terms of biology, zoology and botany being borrowed. The overall impression gained from the borrowings from the Natural History section is of professionals and students using the library as a resource for their work and study. This is notwithstanding the fact that the single most borrowed title from the section is the title *Half Hours in Air and Sky*, a popular title of the time on the art of ballooning, being borrowed by four individual members through the summer.

If the titles in the Natural History section suggest a borrowership engaged in self-improvement, those from Miscellany suggest there was a more reflective, even spiritual side to the men and women availing themselves of the library.

The books of Sir Arthur Helps, *Friends in Council*, and *Companions in Solitude* were each borrowed twice, and collections of anecdotes and reminiscences generally feature in this category. *Gleanings and*

Reminiscences, Riding Recollections, Pictures of the Past all feature amongst many others of the type in the Miscellany category.

Spiritualism also makes an appearance here, with **People from the Other World** and **Mystic London** being read. Where this trend really hits its stride is in the Philosophy section. The **Talmud** is borrowed twice, and books on plutology, Christianity, the Devil and **The Powers of the Human Mind** are all taken home for a quiet read over the long days of summer.

A SAMPLE OF FICTION READING

As we talked about at the beginning of this paper, non-fiction made up only 10-15 % of loans in the library. So what of the fiction reading? A detailed analysis is outside the scope of this paper, but it might be enlightening to follow a couple of patrons who have featured in the non fiction borrowing.

Miss Barker, as she is entered in the borrowers' ledger, borrowed Edith Wharton's **Wits and Beaux of Society** on 15th of January 1881, and **Friends in Council** on the 28th of December 1880.

Henry Birch, gold investor, enjoyed adventure and travel books, including the boating adventure **Four Months in a Sneak Box**, and William Howard Russell's **The British Expedition to the Crimea**.

We'll chaperone Miss Barker and Mr Birch on their visits to the library, and enquire as to the suitability of their fiction reading. Miss Barker, on her weekly visits to the library favoured some of the most popular writers of the day in her fiction reading. Rosa Nouchette Carey's **Wooded and Married** and Rhoda Broughton's **Nancy** were borrowed, as well as two books by Susan and Anna Warner, **Wych Hazel** and **Gold and Chickaree**. She borrowed various other titles, all typical popular fiction, it is a relief to report.

Henry Birch ranged slightly further afield in his fiction borrowing. He too enjoyed a couple of Anna and Susan Warner novels (including **Wych Hazel**), as well as Rhoda Broughton and Mrs Henry Lovett. He added books from male writers to his list, such as Trollope's **Harry Heathcote of Gangoil**, Alphonse de Lamartine's **Graziella**, and R. Mountenay Jephson's **With the Colors**.

It is likely that a close analysis of the total borrowing records will yield surprises and borrowers and titles which go against convention, but that must be left at this point to the work of the database now in development.

Without the benefit of that close analysis, it can be said the readers sought out the latest fiction, indulged their interests and educated themselves through the shelves of the library.

We know what they were reading in the Summer of 1880, but what role did the readers play in the development of the collection and the library through the 1870's to arrive at that point?

To answer that question, let's turn to the **Suggestion Book** for the years 1874 through to 1878.

"ANONYMOUS SUGGESTIONS WILL NOT BE ENTERTAINED BY THE COMMITTEE"

Once again, the source document is a tattered re-used ledger. The suggestion book for the mid-seventies was only half-filled, and was re-used in April 1880 to record loans in the crucial period just prior to the major re-organisation of the collection in 1880.

There are forty-seven pages of suggestions dating between September 7th, 1874 and December 9th 1878. The suggestion book was available in the reading room for patrons to record requests and complaints. The first page contains the edict that "*Members using this book must sign their names in full to each suggestion they make*" Typical of the users of the library, someone has suggested "*requested?*" next to the imperious '**must**'. Someone else has written "*not*" in pencil after the word. So, things got off on the wrong foot from the start.

The book would be scrutinized by the Secretary-Librarian periodically, and various suggestions would be referred to the Library Committee of the Institute to be acted upon. This would be noted next to the suggestion.

The suggestions begin with complaints and requests about newspapers and journals. ***The Australian Journal*** is requested twice on the first page, and a complaint on the lack of availability of newspapers from the Western District, namely the ***Geelong Advertiser***.

Requests for newspapers and magazines feature repeatedly through the years, ranging from local weekly papers such as the ***Inglewood Advertiser*** through to international scientific journals.

Overall, the suggestions make for entertaining reading, primarily because of the unresponsiveness of the Library Committee to most requests and complaints. An interesting thread runs through the years of a campaign by various members to get the Library Committee at least respond to their requests for a subscription to the ***Dublin Review***.

The campaign starts on the 16th of September 1874, with Mr O'Brien begging to request a copy of the journal be provided. In November Mr McKean makes a similar request. Neither is acted upon.

By the 15th of April 1875, Mr O'Brien has had enough. He makes another polite request, then follows it up with a lengthy entry where he gives vent to his exasperation. It's worth reproducing here as it reveals a perceived sectarian undercurrent, as well as expressing what many may have felt about the Committee.

"It is better than three months since I suggested the getting of this Review and the only satisfactory answer I can get is that it is referred to the library committee.

Who those gentlemen are or what they do for the Institute I do not know, but what I can plainly see is that the committee is determined to exclude all Catholic periodicals from the library.

If they consider that straightforward and upright management of a supposed liberal institution, I and many others am sorry to say, do not..."

The campaign continues right through till the end of 1878. But success was eventually achieved. In the catalogue of the Institution for 1880, the title is listed as having ten volumes.

Mr O'Brien wasn't alone in using the suggestion book to voice displeasure at the way the library was run. Some of the complaints, this one from November 1875, are quite cheeky:

"Has there been an earthquake in the (reference) bookcase? It is in a delightful state of confusion and won't be much good for reference or anything else soon"

A Member

And another:

"A new set of draughts would warm the hearts of several subscribers to the Institution. The old ones might be useful in a museum of antiquities"

John Wilson

One can imagine the amount of throat-clearing from the committee that such impertinence must have produced.

Not all the subscribers were as gentle on the library. Some of them were formidable, inasmuch as they not merely complained, but provided practical alternatives and improvements to services.

In April 1875 Robert Thorn put his thoughts to paper on the way the library obtained newspapers, suggesting

"...that some plain business man in Melbourne such as George Robertson or Samuel Mullen be consulted with a view to reducing the time taken for transmission to an average of twelve hours..."

This elicited another entry on the same page requesting that "some fool" from the present committee should resign and allow Mr Thorn on to the committee to the general improvement of affairs.

This level of engagement amongst the members was not confined to taking pot-shots at the Committee. They were not averse to taking each other on through the pages of the suggestion book, as a couple of entertaining examples show.

In September 1875 a small deputation of subscribers entered a request in the suggestion book for the purchase of Oliver Goldsmith's 18th Century treatise, ***Animated Nature***, with eight signatures below the request. Someone has scrawled "A useless book" next to the entry, but a fuller counterthrust is entered lower on the page.

An opposing group of eight subscribers have signed an entry which protests the purchase of the volumes, citing it as "*expensive, antiquated and useless as a work of reference*" and that there are plenty of more appropriate and up-to-date works in the library.

It gives one pause for thought when we see subscribers to a nineteenth century regional library forming into factions to fight over the merits of an eighteenth century work of natural history. Goldsmith doesn't appear in any of the subsequent catalogues of the library, so we can assume the modernists won the battle.

Another of what in a later age might have been called a 'flame war', erupted in December 1876. It must have been great fun for observers at the time, so, entering into the spirit of mischief of one-hundred and thirty years ago, let's read the exchanges in full:

"I would respectfully by leave suggest some insecticide being occasionally distributed over the floor of the Reading Room, which would cause fleas to remain on the persons they came in company with, and disincline said fleas to leap about the floors, and from thence to the persons who previously had none about them and do not desire their company

P.S. Fleas are inimical to intellectual culture, frustrate study, and as a consequence the design of the institute"

George Elliot Simms

Then comes the rejoinder:

"Perhaps if the author of the above effusion were to apply a little soft soap and water to his carcase and pay a little more attention to his personal ablutions, and dispense with the superfluous grease which generally envelopes his beautiful head and face, ...it would be a favour to the subscribers generally"

Luigi

Well, that set the cat amongst the pigeons. Over the page:

"...I made no offensive or personal allusion to anyone on page 40, but if I had deemed it necessary to do so, as a "favour to the subscribers" I should not have had the cowardice of some subscriber, who, in a stupidly offensive reply, shields himself with anonymity as "Luigi". ... I do not deem it necessary to reply to further than to say that I am willing to submit my head and face or "carcase" (sic) to a competitive examination for cleanliness with those of Luigi before any Inspector of Nuisances"

George Elliot Simms

That must have caused some chuckling behind the pages of the *Illustrated London News* in the quiet corners of the Reading Room, interrupted only by the leaping of fleas from host to host.

THE EARLY 1900'S: THE END OF THE INSTITUTION AND AN AGING MEMBERSHIP

Thus far in this paper we've examined the non-fiction borrowing of the subscribers in the early 1880's which provided a picture of an educated readership engaged with the world around it. This view is reinforced by the assertiveness and eloquence exhibited in the suggestion book from the mid 1870's.

We have seen the library in its heyday, but the good times weren't to last. With the 1890's, government funding declined, and like so many other Institutes, the Sandhurst Mechanics Institute closed in 1904. The library itself continued to function till 1945.

The next set of records we'll look at date from that period, the ***Loans Register 1901-1945***. We met *Henry Birch* when we looked some examples of fiction reading, and Mr Birch features strongly in the loan records a quarter of a century later. In fact many of the names familiar from the summer of 1880 are here again. Fowler, Meuller, Mackay, and many others who were stalwarts of the library and pillars of society in the gold-rich heyday of Bendigo still borrow almost daily.

The mines are failing, Bendigo is changing, and the Old Bendigonian subscribers are in their sixties and seventies. New names appear in the register alongside the old, and the children of the old.

The ledger is now organized alphabetically by borrower and turning the pages of the folio size ledger, one doesn't need to research the names that appear. The same names that appear in the library membership roll are those that adorn the streets, parks, businesses and statues of Bendigo.

Some names leap off the page though. Sir John Quick, recently elected as the Federal Member for Bendigo, and having lately been knighted for his contribution to Federation, borrows recent fiction (presumably on behalf of, or by his wife?).

Amidst the old money and cosy elite, a couple of names stand out: E.B Myer, and Sidney Myer, of Pall Mall. The loans are for popular fiction in the main, and for Sidney, the dates coincide with his first marriage to Hannah Flegeltaub of Ballarat.

The presence of these names hints at a role otherwise overlooked in previous research. In a community as complex as late nineteenth and early twentieth century Bendigo, the communal role of the library, and the signifying role of membership in that community is one of the themes to be tackled as this research gets underway.

With the dramatic shrinking of the budget after the withdrawal of funding in the nineties, and the collapse of the Institute, there's little money to buy anything other than fiction, and this is reflected in the loans of the time. Fewer non-fiction titles seem to be borrowed, and those that are do not have recent call numbers.

CONCLUSION

Much remains to be done in developing a database for the books and records of the library. As this paper hopefully illustrates, we may learn much about our early libraries, and those that used them by examining closely the collection and records left behind in Bendigo.

Westward by Rail survived the dispersal of the library, and has found a new home as part of the Sandhurst Collection at La Trobe University Library, Bendigo. Though the spine is cracked, and the covers show signs of decades of shelf-life, the book can still be enjoyed today, as it was by Mr Brennan sixty years ago, or by the readers in the 1880's.

It is hoped that this paper, and the project from which it stems, will go some way to revealing the significance and value that such a long-standing relationship between a library and its readers represents to our culture and society.

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