

A 21ST CENTURY DATABASE FOR A 19TH CENTURY LIBRARY

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Abstract

The Sandhurst Collection comprises about 5500 books and bound journals, the remaining items of the Sandhurst Mechanics Institute and Free Library. Because of the age of the materials, and long periods of neglect, much of the material is in a fragile state. The intention of the project is to catalogue the contents of the collection, and to view the items as 'bibliographic artefacts' - record in the database the unique information contained within the physical items relating to its provenance, how it was classified at different times, binding, and any indications of how the book was used by the patrons of the library.

This paper describes the history of the collection, the scope of the project and provides examples of the data to be eventually contained in the database. Subsequent projects stemming from this works are also described.

1. The History of the Collection

The Sandhurst Collection is comprised of the remaining books and journals of the Sandhurst Mechanics Institute and Free Library. The books date from the late 1700's through to the early 1900's and number about 5500 volumes. They cover novels, travel, history, and biography through to works of reference such as atlases and encyclopaedias.

The journals are mainly popular titles such as Temple Bar, Blackwoods Magazine and The Gentleman's Magazine.

The Library was founded in 1854. It enjoyed a degree of success, and was an important and valued part of the cultural life of the town in the years up to the depression of the 1890's.

At it's height it in 1889 it comprised some 14,000 volumes. The withdrawal of adequate funding in the depression began a long period of decline for library (Barker, 1994).

The Mechanics Institute closed in 1904. The School of Mines took on the management of the library, as the School of Mines Public Library. It was an adjunct to the operations of the school, the School seems to have had no clear plan for the role of the library in the community.

When it finally closed in 1946, the library and the museum of the School of Mines, were generally seen as irrelevant to the needs of post-war Bendigo(Cusack, 1973).

Some of the library collection was given away, some discarded or pilfered, while the rest was left to decay over the years.

With the revival of interest in heritage in the 1970's, the collection became the focus of considerable debate as various individuals and committees strove to decide how best to manage and preserve the collection.

In the late seventies and early eighties, staff from the Bendigo College of Advanced Education library endeavoured to rescue the remaining books of the collection. It was eventually housed at the Heyward Library, BCAE, and named the Sandhurst Collection.

2. The Collection Today

When the material was bought to the library much of it was found to be in such bad condition that it was housed in the stack area of the library, and is effectively beyond repair and barely usable as reading material. The rest of the material is housed in closed-access in the technical services offices.

Funds were provided early in the 1980's for the restoration of selected material, and re-binding and restoration of material was undertaken. With great diligence and care, Technical Services staff of the library were able to save much material from decay.

It needs to be understood that the state of the collection is such that even materials that were repaired are to a degree brittle and fragile, and will not stand up to much use.

The library is presently redeveloping a management policy for the collection, and until that is completed the collection will not be openly available to users of the library.

The present project began as an effort to definitively record the contents of the collection in an authoritative and accessible way. The exact nature of the collection was a mystery – were the books rare? How old were they? How was the collection organised?

Printed lists were available, but because the lists lacked essential bibliographic details such as publication dates, publisher or edition details, they did little to unlock the nature of the library.

3. The Project

The Sandhurst Mechanics Institute and Free Library has been the subject of research a number of times. Frank Cusack detailed the history of the Institute, and the story of the library in general terms in his 1973 book *From Canvas to Campus : a history of the Bendigo Institute of Technology*. Lishi Kwazitsu included many details of the library and institute in her 1989 PhD thesis *Printing and the book and newspaper press in Bendigo* (Kwasitsu, 1989). Donald Barker detailed the financial history of the Institute and library in his 1994 M.Arts thesis *The Sandhurst Mechanics Institute and Free Library 1854-1983*.

Funding was provided through the research committee of the library to initiate the first of two projects. The first project would build a database detailing the contents of the collection. The second would analyse the borrowing data from the early twentieth century.

As work progressed on the database to detail the contents of the collection, I noticed that many of the books had distinct characteristics and features which indicated interaction with the library and the community outside the library, and which lent uniqueness to each item. Although not a historian, I began to see each book as a 'bibliographic artefact' which may be able to tell us something about the library, its readers and the community.

The current project is intended to answer the questions: What materials are in the collection, and what unique information, apart from their actual content, reside in the books? This translates into two main tasks:

1. Record the essential bibliographic details of the collection in a database in order to detail the exact contents of the collection.
2. Record for each title details which might indicate where or how the book was obtained, binders, interesting physical details related to usage, and how the book was classified within the library.

The first step was to design a database that would allow the collection to be accessed and analysed by any interested user.

Once the design was complete, spreadsheets for immediate data recording were established. These spreadsheets are currently the main repository for the data, but test uploads to the data base confirm that the data files and interface are functional.

So far, data for the novels, travel and poetry sections of the collection have been entered.

4. The Information Recorded in the Database

The fields in the database record the following information:

4.1 Essential bibliographic details

The shelf number, author, title, publisher, place, date of publication and edition are recorded. Although rather sparse by traditional library cataloguing standards, the database is not a traditional library catalogue. The intention is to have enough information to properly identify the book, and no more.

4.2 Shelf numbering information

The collection is organised into broad subject categories. Each of these categories has a number range attached to it, as is shown below:

Novels, tales and sketches	1-1499
Voyages and travels	1500-2099
History and historical memoirs	2100-2499
Biography, speeches and correspondence	2500-2899
Poetry and drama	2900-3199
Classic, Philology and education	3200-3399
Natural history	3400-3999
Philosophy, theology	4000-4399
Miscellaneous	4400-4899

This scheme was introduced in 1880, when the collection numbered about 10,500 volumes. Renumbering the collection would have been no small undertaking.

Apart from this scheme, there is clear evidence that *three* previous numbering schemes were used by the library. It is interesting to note that in the first twenty-five years of the library's life it was re-organised three times, but after the 1880 scheme was introduced, it stuck with it for the next sixty-six years.

There are examples in the collection of each of these numbering schemes imprinted on the spines of books.

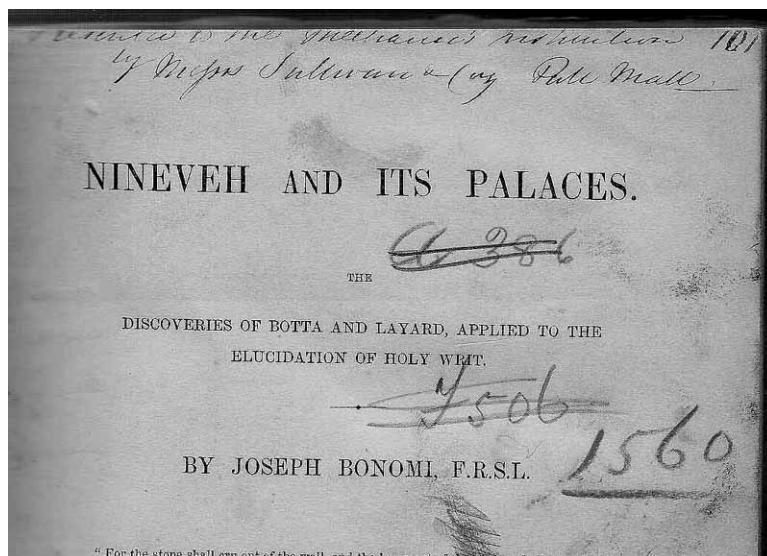


Figure 1. A typical title page, showing the various shelf numbers, as well as a donation note from “Mayor Sullivan”, James Forrester Sullivan, the mayor of Bendigo 1857-58.

Although the developments of Melville Dewey and Charles Ammi Cutter revolutionised library organisation in the nineteenth century, these developments passed the library by. This fact alone could point to a lack of management direction in the library.

The way the scheme worked was that each author was assigned a number within the applicable subject area, with the authors being spread alphabetically throughout the range.

The obvious problem with the system is that as books are added, an authors name could fall between two previously allocated consecutive numbers. The solution was to add either an alphabetic or fractional suffix to the number.

The illustration below shows an excerpt from the novels section of the 1884 catalogue which illustrates the system:

202	Cousin Jack	1	THE QUEEN'S FAVORITE	1
202½	Cox, Mrs.	1	Unmasked	3
203	Cox, G. W., M.A., and Eustace H. Jones	1	Romance of the Middle Ages	1
		2	Tales of the Teutonic Lands	1
203½	Coxon, Ethel	1	A Basil Plant	2
204	Craddock, The Hon. Mrs.	1	John Smith	2
204½	Craddock, G. Egbert	1	In the Tennessee Mountains	1
		2	The Prophet of the Great Smoky Mountains	1
		3	Down the Ravine	1
205	Crail, Georgina M.	1	Annie Warwick	2
		2	Hero Trevelyhan	1
		4	Winifred's Wooing	1
		5	Without Kith or Kin	2

Figure 2. In the above example, Mrs Cox and Ethel Coxon are later additions to the library.

The borrowing records from early in the twentieth century indicate that almost exclusively, books with suffixes, some as low as ¼ and the letter D, were being borrowed.

4.3 Binders

Judging from the number of books rebound, organising the binding may have been a considerable task for the secretary-librarian, and an expense for the library, as well as a source of income for local businesses.

The binding has occurred most noticeably in the novels and travels areas. Some books were bound locally (eg *Sir Samuel Baker Albert N'Yanza*, London: McMillan, 1866 bound by Brockley Binders, Sandhurst, and *Edward Rae, The Land of the North Wind*, London: John Murray, 1875, bound by Carrs, Sandhurst) and some were bound apparently in Melbourne (eg *James Smith, Rejected Addresses or the New Theatrum Poetarum*, London: Piper, Stephenson and Spence, 1855, with a label from J.W.Evans Binders, Flinders Lane).

Typically the binding is in ordinary brown hide with a shortened version of the title, the shelf number and the name of the library being imprinted in gold on the spine.

4.4 Booksellers

Various labels and stamps record the booksellers from which many of the books were sourced. Kwazitsu records that the librarians embarked on many buying trips to Melbourne, and Barker (Barker 1994 : 39) details the arrangements the library made with a London agent.

Some books were purchased locally (eg *Robert Southey, Thalaber the Destroyer* London: Clarke, Beeton, [n.d.], purchased at Henry Ashley Booksellers and Stationers, Pall Mall, Sandhurst). Some in Melbourne (eg *William Aytoun, Bothwell : a Poem*, London: William Blackwood, 1855, from Charlwood Booksellers, 7 Bourke St) and from London (eg *J.H. Jesse, London : its celebrated characters and remarkable places* London: Richard Betley, 1871 with a label from W.H. Smith).

4.5 Donations and bequests

The importance of the library, and the role it played in Bendigo society, as outlined in Kwasitsu and Cusack is underlined by the many books donated or bequeathed to the library.

Some seem to be one-off donations of personal copies, (eg *E Joy Morris Notes of a tour through Turkey, Greece, Egypt and Arabia Petrea* London: George Clark, 1848 is dedicated “Presented by W.M. Muller of the Advertiser Office”) while the database reveals that some benefactors donated groups of books. Many of the names mentioned in Kwasitsu have been encountered including many books from the Wybrants bequest. (Kwasitsu, 1989) (eg *William Howard Russell The Prince of Wales' tour : a diary in India ...* London: Sampson Low, 1877).

Poetry seems to have been a favourite subject for donation, with donations both from authors and readers. (eg *Peter Stewart, Australian tales and verses and the poem 'Scotland'* Melbourne: J.T. Picken, 1906 has the note on the title page “To the Public Library Bendigo from the author, P. Stewart” and *Douglas Sladen A Summer Christmas and a Sonnet upon the S.S. "Ballarat"* London: Griffith, Farran, Okeden and Welsh, 1884 is donated “With the authors compliments”).

4.6 Readers marks and marginalia

There are considerable traces left behind indicating how readers enjoyed, or in some cases, obviously didn't enjoy the books.

Many volumes of poetry have favourite passages underlined or otherwise marked.

Some books have a short critique left behind on the title page - eg the Dickens imitator George William Reynolds' *Pickwick abroad or the tour in France* (2nd ed. London: Henry G. Baird 1864) has the hand-written note on the title page “Not bad – Dickens is better”. Less kindly, someone wasn't impressed with Jane Austen's *Northanger Abbey* (London: Richard Betley 1877) having scrawled “Rubbish” under the title.

Pencil drawings of subjects such as flowers, portraits and other doodling possibly indicate the readers were comfortable with the material in the library - perhaps had a sense of ownership. W. N. Letson's translation of *The Nibelungenlied : The fall of the Nibelungers* (London: Williams and Norgate, 1873) has what appear to be study notes in the rear fly leaf.

A recurring motif among the books is arithmetic on the inside leaves (eg *Rolf Bolderwood In Bad Company London: McMillan, 1901* has arithmetic on the back inside cover).

5. The Future

The complete collection will be eventually entered to the database, along with some books and journals from other local mechanics institutes. The database will be published on the web as soon as the data for the three areas presently covered is tidied-up. It is an after-hours task so it may take some time.

Groundwork on a comparative survey of early numbering schemes in these types of libraries is also underway.

Analysis of the borrowing records 1901-1946 will be the subject of later research. Some specific notable users have already been analysed, and this work should prove to be an interesting and enlightening addition to our knowledge of this collection.

Conclusion

In his latest exploration of the mystique of books, Nicholas Basbanes (Basbanes, 2003 : 134) quotes Archibald MacLeish:

“What is more important in a library than anything else – than everything else – is the fact that it exists”

The existence of this collection, fragile as it is, presents us with a source of intrinsic information about the history of the library and community which is yet to be fully explored. It is hoped that this project may illuminate areas of regional history and library history to the benefit of both.

References

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