

The 'elite of their profession': the impact on professional practice of the Office of War Information libraries and their librarians in the British dominions during World War II

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Abstract:

In the midst of World War II, as the attention of the Allies shifted to the Pacific, seven civilian women from the United States (US) arrived at The Heads, Sydney, Australia after fourteen days aboard a navy ship. Amongst these women were four librarians, members of a contingent of US Office of War Information (OWI) personnel sent to operate information centres, with the help of local staff in key cities, worldwide. Plans for the establishment of information libraries followed the success of the US Information Library opened in London in 1942 and were part of an emerging US agenda to employ access to information in support the war effort and promote democracy. The momentum of the success of the London OWI library was to propel the establishment of further centres and in 1943 the first of these new centres were established in four of the 'British Dominions'-- that is Australia, New Zealand, India and South Africa. The US librarians' arrival in Australia in 1944 followed in the wake of an injection of Carnegie Corporation funding during the previous decade and during a defining period in the development of the Australian library profession. Focussing on the OWI library in Melbourne, Australia, and using the records of key personnel and agencies, this paper will critically reflect on the significance and impact of the activities of these libraries for the professional communities in which they were established.

Keywords: Librarianship-Australia, Office of War Information Libraries, Librarians-United States

In the midst of the Pacific stages of World War II seven civilian women from the United States (U.S.) arrived at The Heads, Sydney, Australia after fourteen days aboard the U.S. navy transport ship Mt Vernon. These women were part of a leading contingent of United States Office of War Information (OWI) personnel sent to operate U.S. information centres with the help of local staff in key cities worldwide¹. Amongst the women arriving in Sydney on that day in 1943 was the new director of the OWI libraries in the Pacific, librarian Miss Harriet Root accompanied by her secretary, Hazel Ferguson--both to be based in Sydney; co-directors of the United States information library in Melbourne, librarian Mrs Helen Wessells and government document specialist Hazel Brown; and finally Dr Mary Parsons, well know library educator and Doris Kavanagh government document expert en route to the OWI library in Wellington, New Zealand. While not originally intended to play a role directly in the development of librarianship in Australia or New Zealand, these librarians were in fact to engage fully with the local profession and community. The Australian OWI contingent

actively embraced a responsibility to promote the library movement believing, as Harriet Root was to claim that “in this way the United States Information Libraries will have a lasting influence on Australasian life.”² Focussing on the OWI library in Melbourne this paper will examine the establishment of these libraries and explore their activities with the local library fraternity and within the communities in which they were based.

Planning

The arrival of these women in Sydney saw to fruition plans devised by U.S. educational administrator Chester Williams³, for the establishment ‘in certain key cities’ of ‘a small staff of Americans to operate information centres with the help of locally selected personnel’⁴. Plans for such information centres followed the success of the United States Information Library opened in London in 1942 and the momentum of its success was to propel the establishment of further centres in the Pacific and in Europe. These libraries also signalled a more overt approach to the promotion of United States values and culture internationally and should be seen within the broader context of the changing nature of U.S. diplomatic efforts of this time. According to Williams’ these ‘outposts’ of America would be established firstly in countries formerly known as the British Dominions⁵ and then in liberated cities after the war⁶ and would be ideally staffed by four specialists

- a. A senior information specialist to liaise with government, media and civic leaders
- b. A junior information specialist or librarian to maintain a collection of books, pamphlets, government documents, periodicals, pictures, films posters, maps and reference materials and to answer reference queries
- c. An exhibition specialist to arrange for exhibitions in these “propaganda shops”
- d. A non-theatrical film specialist to maintain and show a collection of informational films⁷

Planning for the centres began in Washington in 1943 under the supervision of Williams aided by Librarian Mrs Helen Wessells. Wessells left her position directing the New York Public Library’s contribution to the Victory Book Campaign and was the first of the new information centre librarians appointed by the OWI. She proceeded after her appointment in mid-1943 to undertake the development of library routines, checking of the 1000 books ‘selected by library experts’ to form the core of the library collections and the packing of books and government document for shipment to the new centres. Williams in a memorandum to Ed. Barrett⁸ described the collections destined for the centres as consisting of

a basic collection of reference materials including books, pamphlets, government documents, radio scripts, film strips, photographs, plastic plates, recordings and information films⁹

Amongst the books selected by the experts were works of reference such as the 14th editions of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica*, the *Handbook of Tropical Medicine (1943)* and the *Field Books of North American Mammals*. Practical and technical works were also featured including those such as the *Heating, Ventilating and Air Conditioning Guide (1942)*, *Fluorescent light and its applications (1941)* and *Public Health Nurse in Action (1940)*. Other works aimed primary at providing insight into the U. S. way of life had a prominent place in the selection with titles such as *American Dancing(1946)*, *Songs of American Sailormen (1938)*, *The American Craftsman(1940)*, and the *Practical Book of American Antiques, Exclusive of Furniture (n.d)* making up a large part of the collection¹⁰. Alongside the book collection the libraries were supplied with 3000 pamphlets and government documents and subscriptions to 130 American periodicals¹¹. By April 1943 Williams’ plans had resulted in forty collections of materials being ready for dispatch when needed to the various theatres of war with twenty collections destined for Europe and thirteen to the Mediterranean. The remainder of these collections were to assist in the establishment of the first five of these information ‘outposts’ in the strategically important cities of Sydney and Melbourne, Australia; Wellington, New Zealand; Bombay, India and Johannesburg, South Africa.

Role of the librarians

Originally intended to share ‘American materials and information with the people of the country through their own channels [of communication]’, very soon it became clear to those such as Harriet Root that their role was to be much broader than this original intention. In a report written to Michael

Stiver, Director of the OWI dated November 8 1944 Root claimed that 'The most important job we can do in the next six months to further cultural relations is to cooperate with local librarians in promoting their library programmes'¹². She outlines clearly in her recommendations for Australia given the 'deplorable state' of libraries in that country that the OWI librarians should involve themselves in

- a. cooperation with existing libraries by
 1. Exchange services: interlibrary loans
 2. Advice on library problems to individual librarians
 3. Advice on the selection of American publications
- b. Cooperation with programs for establishing libraries by
 1. Aiding existing library schools in
 - a. Planning curricula
 - b. Lecturing to classes on progressive librarianship as exemplified in the United States
 2. At the request of librarians, conferring with individuals and groups about the establishment of library schools, discussions of needs, methods of establishment, and possible interim programs
 3. Promotion talks in communities¹³

These librarians were to undertake these tasks with determination throwing themselves wholeheartedly into the promotion of libraries and library education in the cities they were stationed. Their profile and standing within both the local profession and the wider community was enhanced by the extent of their contact with leading academics, political and community leaders. Their presence was to have a lasting impact on the countries where they operated and their success was undoubtedly to influence the U.S. government's post war adoption of the use of cultural institutions such as libraries, museums and art galleries in their wider diplomatic efforts. It has been claimed by US library historian Pamela Spence Richards that these OWI librarians were 'held up as a model for local librarians'.¹⁴ And that

What gives their work a larger significance in the history of librarianship is its effective demonstration that the management and, above all, the delivery of information is as vital a component of a strong democracy as free access to the information itself.¹⁵

Libraries and democracy

This role in 'demonstrating democracy' at work was to be part of an active promotion of U.S. modes of education and library practice as exemplars of modern democratic values. Librarianship became overtly entwined with the defence of democracy in the wake of the Nazi book burnings of 1934. These events were to crystallise the role for books and libraries in the defence of a U.S. style conception of democracy in a time of global conflict. Such a role can be seen passionately articulated by prominent U.S. figures such as President F.D Roosevelt and Librarian of the U.S. Congress Archibald McLeish.

Roosevelt at the 64th American Library Association Conference rallied U.S. librarians to action stating

In your charge is the living record of all that man has accomplished in the long labor of liberty, all he aspires to make of it in the future we of the United States fight to secure. By keeping that record always before the eyes of the American people you give them renewed strength in their struggle against the dark backwash of tyranny, renewed faith in their unconquerable determination to take full part in establishing on this earth a new free age of man.¹⁶

While MacLeish, echoing these words was to challenge U.S librarians claiming

In such a time as ours, when wars are made against the spirit and its works, the keeping of these records is itself a kind of warfare. The keepers, whether they so wish or not, cannot be neutral¹⁷

This view was to emerge in the Pacific theatre with Elmer Davis U.S. Director of Information after the destruction of the American Library in the Philippines stating that the 'Nazi policy, now adopted by the Japanese, menaced the culture of civilisation'¹⁸

The utility underpinning this emphasis on libraries can be understood through, what Kranich has called a basic syllogism historically at the heart of understanding the importance vested in libraries in the United States in spreading democratic ideals. It is a belief that democratic libraries provide

uninhibited access to information and that democracy depends on an informed and participative community. Therefore 'by extension libraries can be viewed as carriers or vectors for spreading notions of freedom and democracy'¹⁹. This focus on cultural institutions such as libraries as conduits through which the 'United States could be interpreted'²⁰ and democracy demonstrated was part of a much broader U.S. response to the propaganda efforts of the AXIS nations and was to foreshadow the use of cultural institutions as part of diplomatic efforts after the War. Inheriting the mantle of the activities of the American Library Association during World War One U.S. librarianship was seen as part of this emerging agenda. U.S. librarians and librarianship were called to act as an international benchmark for 'modern and democratic' professional practice and an integral element in U.S. diplomatic and military efforts. Its purpose according to Wilson Dizard Jr, author of the history of the United States Information Agency(USIA), was 'The transfer of U.S. library practice abroad' and to provide 'a working example of how a democratic society educates itself'²¹ The establishment of the OWI centres was part of this emerging agenda and of what Beatrice Warde, writing in the Wilson Library journal of 1943, called the 'gathering' and mobilisation of 'mental ammunition against the Nazi hate-America campaign'. It also served to as means by which U.S technical information could be stored and distributed in defence of democracy.

The U.S. Office of War Information Library in Melbourne

Upon their arrival in Sydney the women were enthusiastically welcomed by the press and the local library fraternity. In a speech given at the opening of the Sydney library in George St. on the 16th of February 1944 Principal librarian of the Public Library of New South Wales Mr. John Metcalfe welcomed them as the 'elite of their profession in the United States of America', claiming that in 'being the elite of their profession in America, they are the elite in the world, because America leads the world's libraries.'²² Metcalfe goes on to draw a link between their presence and the activities of the Carnegie Corporation in the previous decade offering thanks for that which had enabled librarians such as himself to travel to the United States. Not uncharacteristically Metcalfe's speech was tempered with pride in local practice claiming that Australian libraries and librarians had made 'notable contributions to library methods which were taken up in the United States and even the Library of Congress'²³—this was a view that later correspondence from the U.S. librarians indicates was not one they shared.

Between November 1943 and January 1944 the six women worked to establish the library in Sydney with the New Zealand contingent finally leaving to take up their post during January of 1944. The New Zealand library in Woodward St., Wellington was to be officially opened on the 25th of August of the same year by Mr M.K. Patton U.S. Minister in New Zealand in the presence of the New Zealand Prime Minister. In the same month as Parsons and Kavanagh departed the books and other resources so carefully packed in Washington arrived in Sydney and the furniture and equipment needed for the Sydney and Melbourne libraries was obtained. Helen Wessells then departed Sydney on the 28th of January 1944 heading for the U.S. Mission in the Australian capital of Canberra accompanied by Harriet Root. The trip to Canberra was to provide an opportunity for Root and Wessells no just to visit the U.S. mission but to meet and to talk informally with what Wessells called the 'present and future leaders of the country'²⁴. The women while in Canberra attended the Australian Institute of Political Science where they met influential academic Professor Douglas Copland²⁵, Lloyd Ross, Director of Public Relations in the Commonwealth Department of Post-War Reconstruction and H.V. 'Doc' Evatt, Attorney-general and minister for external affairs in the Australian Government, member of the U.N. Security Council and later first president (1946) of the Atomic Energy Commission. On their first night in Canberra they were invited to a small dinner of just six guest amongst whom were Robert Gordon Menzies former Prime Minister, leader of the opposition and later Australia's longest serving Prime Minister and Harold Holt a minister in Menzies governments both before and after the war and his successor as Prime Minister in the 1960s. This association with those in powers and with local librarians was to be the hallmark of the librarians' time in Australia and the extent and range of their activities was to embrace fully Roots desire that they immerse themselves in local society and professional activities.

Melbourne

Wessells continued alone from Canberra travelling by train to Melbourne where she was to undertake the establishment of the new Information Centre. She spent her time negotiating with plumbers and electricians and signing the lease for the basement and ground floor of Newspaper House Collins st in what Wessells described as ‘the busiest block, in the busiest street in Melbourne’. The new ground floor was to be a ‘window on Collins st’ and the centre offering something almost unknown in Melbourne—central heating!²⁶ The library had area of 925 square feet on the ground floor where book stacks, an office space and information desk were situated and another 1125 square feet in the basement holding films, periodicals and a workroom. A feature of the space, and one which was considered an important marketing tool was the street level windows providing constantly changing displays and the ‘expensive, well-lighted exhibition spaces’ under the street in the basement used for a gallery²⁷. The library in Melbourne opened officially on the 29th March 1944 with two hundred guests in attendance including Vice chancellor of the University of Melbourne J.D.C. Medley giving the opening address²⁸. Earlier in February Wessells recounts a private celebration with Lloyd Ross wielding the hatchet on the first box of books after its arrival²⁹. Almost from the first day the staff and the library were busy answering questions as varied as how to make pumpkin pie, worker’s compensation in the U.S., salaries, homemaking, clothing and business practices. The range of patrons was broad drawn for the local U.S personnel posted in Melbourne at that time, war brides trying to familiarise themselves with their future home, politicians, architects, academics and journalist as well as the general public.

Wessells threw herself into the local community in Melbourne and further afield and the extent of her activities both social and professional are astonishing. With what appears to be tireless energy she is reported in the local media as attending openings, giving guest lectures, attending recitals, dinner parties and gallery openings and participated in U.S. celebrations such as Coral sea week with other U.S. national in Melbourne. Rarely a week goes past between 1945 and 1947 when Wessells does not get a mention in the local media for her activities. On the professional front her activities are almost more expansive as she spoke to local politicians and the public on the value of children’s libraries, the role of the OWI library in the community and the value of public libraries to the community. She attended local library association meetings and met privately with local librarians to offer advice and support. She travelled extensively and over great distances to provide information and support. Her travels include and trip to act as a public library consultant in Tasmania, travel to review public library services in Victoria’s North and to Wagga Wagga in New South Wales some 500 kilometres away from Melbourne to offer advice and encouragement to the librarians and to assist administrators in determining salaries for staff. The range and extent of Wessells’ activities can be seen reflected not only in the numerous references to her activities appearing in the local papers but also in the range of organisations who were to send letters of support upon the imminent closure of the library in 1947. From this extensive list we can see Wessells and the library reaching beyond the city all over the State of Victoria and beyond and into every industry, local council, military arm and government department³⁰.

In a summary report written in an attempt to stave off the closure of the library in Melbourne the activities and use of the library are outlined demonstrating the extensive use made of the library. At the time of writing the library had had 124,517 visitors, 5,744 registered borrowers, 37,579 reference questions, 29,912 quick questions and 7,667 Research questions. The library had circulated over 7000 films and nearly 10,000 books and had answered tens of thousands of questions from the general public, local government workers and farmers groups and professional and scientific associations³¹. The report claimed that the library had been used for the development of State legislation, court decisions, newspaper and journal articles and was in constant use by the Universities and State Education Departments as well as by the many American visitors passing through³². In terms of the local library professions the report states that ‘the United States Information Library has been of tremendous value’³³ with the OWI librarian participating in group discussions at the library, providing library films, attending meetings and conferences and offering constructive advice on the planning and designing of new libraries. They also were to become active participants in the local library movements and claim to

have been responsible for getting UK public librarian Lionel McColvin to Australia to survey public libraries in Australia. In the view of the report overall the U.S. libraries gave 'a much needed, and on the part of most librarians, a desired impetus to Australia'.³⁴

Local Impact

There is no doubt the libraries and librarians of the OWI were popular additions to the Australian library scene and offered of their time and services enthusiastically and unstintingly. What is less clear is if they fulfilled Harriet Root's ambition and had a lasting influence on Australasian life. Contemporary commentators, both from the U.S. and from communities with OWI libraries, saw the impact of these librarians and their libraries as one of the most effective and long-lasting of U.S. propaganda efforts. For example Henry Canby, editor of the *Saturday Review*, after a visit to Australia claimed that the libraries were ranked 'next to the rescue of the country from the Japs in winning friends for America in Australia.'³⁵ Further Canby, writing to the then Under Secretary of State Archibald MacLeish, believed that these libraries were the OWI's most important legacy which had 'taught our library ideas and practices, which are a quarter of a century ahead, to the Dominions.'³⁶ Despite Spence Richards claims there are still some questions remaining about the ongoing impact of the OWI libraries and librarians on Australian library culture from an Australian perspective.

The arrival of these women in Australia and the establishment of OWI libraries certainly occurred fortuitously at a watershed moment in the development of the Australian library profession. Stepping into the arena of Australian librarianship these women were standard bearers for the practice of U.S. librarianship and their arrival added fuel to a new aspirational agenda for many influential Australian librarians. The U.S. librarian's presence also helped re-focus the Australian community's attention on the benefits of professionally maintained and adequately funded libraries at a time when such issues were again being debated by many Australian community leaders. Concepts such as free access to information, freedom to read, professional education and association became part of discussion surrounding the growth of Australian library practice. Yet other influences and activities were also at work during this period and despite the views of the OWI librarians on Australian library conditions progress had been made in the decades prior to their arrival with many other factors at play in shaping a new library agenda in Australia.

In countries such as Australia, New Zealand and South Africa the establishment of the OWI libraries overlaps to some extent with the impact of the funding of local professional associations and provision of travel grants by the Carnegie Corporation of New York (CCNY) in the 1930s. In addition the formation in 1937 of the Australian Institute of Librarians, the establishment of the first library training schools³⁷, the pervasive influence of the New Education Movement throughout the country in these decades and the attention and support by key educational administrators and political figures of the library movement during this periods helping ring in change for Australian library practice. School libraries were also a focus of reform with the Victorian Education Department beginning a pound for pound subsidy for school libraries in 1944 and a report on educational reforms calling for the introduction of school libraries in all Victorian schools published in 1945³⁸. Prior to the establishment of the OWI libraries progress had also been made in library services in Australia with various state governments proclaiming Free Library Acts³⁹. The idea of Australian librarians being isolated from ideas about modern library practice is also not supported. Many Australian librarians had travelled to Europe and the United States in the decades preceding the arrival of the OWI librarians bringing international trends to be debated sometime ferociously amongst the local profession. In the early decades of the twentieth century Melbourne for example had been home to an active and vigorous debate about the profession and the provision of library services to the community⁴⁰ with professional and modern practice being central to an argument that included debate in parliament. Tasmania, which had come to the attention of Wessells in her travels, was also influenced by these Melbourne debates through the advocacy of those such as influential former Public Library of Victoria employee and fierce modernisation proponent E. Morris Miller, Vice-Chancellor of the University of Tasmania during this period. In New South Wales the Free Library Movement had been established in 1935 with broad ranging support from government and community and the topic of reform to public libraries was

very much at the forefront to public debate. In Melbourne and Sydney major building projects were undertaken for the public libraries of New South Wales and Victoria in the first three decades of the twentieth century to provide for the expanding role of these major libraries.

In November 1946 well-known British librarian Lionel McColvin arrived from the United Kingdom under somewhat controversial circumstances to follow up progress on the conditions of public libraries in Australia⁴¹. McColvin was an influential figure in the public library movement both in the UK and in Australia and his influence has been considered to be underrated by some in discussions about the development of librarianship in Australia⁴². From his visit and the eventual report it produced⁴³ we see emerge themes which were to be ongoing in the development of Australian librarianship. McColvin had described American librarianship as an opportunity for ‘useful guidance’, but ‘not of a character to completely meet our needs’,⁴⁴ and promoted a system for Australia closely aligned to the UK model. UK models of education and practice more easily aligned with conditions in Australia and his vision was one which was to closely reflect the development of library education in Australia in future decades.

This combination of factors and influences meant that the OWI librarians arrived at a time of ‘gradual, cumulative changes to the Australian library world that were remarkable in scope and breadth’,⁴⁵ and their activities therefore may be highlighted as one contributor in a series of events over many decades which would change Australian library practice in the twentieth century. In New Zealand the ongoing and direct influence was much more overt and indisputable. OWI librarian Dr Mary Parsons, after her term as OWI librarian in Wellington was to become vice-president of the New Zealand Library Association and founder and first director of the New Zealand Library School which introduced a post-graduate education model into New Zealand librarianship education along U.S. lines. In Australia the impact is less clearly defined. The OWI librarians’ popularity and contribution to the community are evidenced in the responses to them in the media and the outcry when closure of the libraries was mooted. Their long-term impact is less easy to define. Richards argues that:

The OWI librarians sent to Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa arrived in those countries at critical periods in their library development, since all three nations were in the process of re-evaluating their library services in the recent critical Carnegie commission reports. By offering strong models of modern information service and by energetically supporting emerging local movements for tax-supported public libraries, three OWI librarians in particular made contributions to library development in Australia, New Zealand, and South Africa that endure to this day⁴⁶

This view however ignores the changes already underway, the long history of public library provision in cities such as Melbourne and Sydney and the social, cultural and educational difference which made U.S. style librarianship ‘not of a character to completely meet our needs’. The presence of competing visions for the future represented by those such as McColvin and Wessells presents not only positive contributions to the development of modern library practice but also to ongoing tensions and issues surrounding education for Australian librarianship which remain unresolved even today. The OWI libraries in Australia and their influence are part of a rich and complex history and their place in this history requires further examination if we are to gain a true sense of their place in this history.

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² H. Root *Memorandum to Mr M Stiver United States Information Libraries in Australia and New Zealand*, November 8, 1944:4, Chester Williams Papers, Box 5, University of Oregon.

³ Head, British Division, Libraries Division OWI

⁴ Williams *Memorandum to Ed Barrett*

⁵ A territory constituting a self-governing commonwealth and formerly a British Colony.

⁶ Williams *Memorandum to Ed Barrett*

⁷ Williams *Memorandum to Ed Barrett*

⁸ Chief of the overseas news and features division of the Office of War Information.

⁹ Williams C, *Memorandum to Ed Barrett*

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- ¹² Root, *Memorandum to Mr M Stiver*:1.
- ¹³ Root, *Memorandum to Mr M Stiver*:2.
- ¹⁴ Pamela Spence Richards 'Information for the Allies' *Library Quarterly* 5, no.4 (1982):337.
- ¹⁵ Spence Richards, 'Information for the Allies':342.
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- ²³ Metcalf Text of speech
- ²⁴H. Wessells to Pamela Spence Richards Personnel Communication (n.d.), Box 3. Pamela Spence Richards Papers, Rutgers University
- ²⁵ Sir Douglas Berry Copland (1894-1971), Professor of Economics, University of Melbourne, First Vice-Chancellor of Australian National University Canberra and war time economic consultant to the Australian Prime Minister
- ²⁶ *Report, May 1-31 1946* [Melbourne Library], Box 3, Helen Wessells Papers, Columbia University:1
- ²⁷ *Report, May 1-31 1946*:1.
- ²⁸ *Report March 29th 1944-April 1st 1947* [Melbourne Library], Box 3, Helen Wessells Papers, Columbia University:1.
- ²⁹ H. Wessells, *Experiences getting to Australia during the war to help found the USIS library program* [n.d.], Transcript Box 3. Pamela Spence Richards Papers, Rutgers University.
- ³⁰ *General Use of Library March 1944-July 1947* Report, Box 3, Helen Wessells' Papers Columbia University.
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