

# Managing the retirement brain drain

A case-study from the Manuscripts Branch at the  
National Library of Australia

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What happens when a manuscripts team loses years of collection knowledge and established relationships with donors and users as the result of retirement? What strategies can staff adopt to compensate for that loss of knowledge? In the midst of a period of such transition, three new archivists consider it timely to provide an account of recent developments in the National Library of Australia's Manuscripts Branch. We will focus on the local significance of Australia's ageing workforce by reflecting upon the changes prompted by the recent retirement of several long-serving Manuscript librarians. We will report on what the key issues have been for us during this transitional phase. We will also explore the implications of retirement for other institutions, and the aims and possibilities for the future.

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Patrick White, Eddie Mabo, Lindy Chamberlain, Judith Wright, Manning Clark, Helen Garner, Jessie Street, James Cook, William Bligh ... these are a few of the people represented by their papers in the Manuscripts collection at the National Library of Australia. The Manuscripts collection holds the records and papers of thousands of people and organisations significant to Australia. By papers, we mean diaries, drafts, photographs, letters and correspondence.

However, this paper is not about our collection, but the people who have acquired it, cared for it, and made it accessible. Until recently the Manuscripts Branch has been characterised by a core of long-serving staff. In this paper we will examine the effects of recent staff retirements: what has happened, how it has been managed, and conclusions for the future. We will begin by telling a story about our staff...

Once upon a time there was a man called Graeme Powell. Graeme completed a Bachelor of Arts degree at the University of Adelaide, followed by a Library Diploma at the University of New South Wales. Graeme worked for the National Library of Australia from 1969-2006. Although he worked in different sections of the Library in the earlier part of his career, it was the Manuscripts Branch where he spent the majority of his working life, most notably in his role as the Library's Manuscript

Librarian. During this time, he concentrated on manuscript acquisitions, built up the Manuscripts collection, became familiar with many of the collections, established long and trusted relationships with donors and was considered invaluable to readers for his knowledge of the collection.

Throughout his time in the Branch, Graeme worked with a number of other long serving archivists and librarians. In fact, it would be fair to say that over the past 30 years there has been little staff turn over. This continuity suddenly changed, throughout 2004 and 2005, several long-serving employees left the Branch – two to retire; two others for employment elsewhere. In March of this year, Graeme Powell, after some 35 years with the Branch, also retired. In other words, within a space of two years, the Manuscripts Branch of the National Library collectively lost approximately 104 years of corporate knowledge – that's 104 years of collection knowledge, Branch procedures, readers and donors!

Enter Dr Marie-Louise Ayres. Marie-Louise graduated with a PhD in Literature and spent eight years working in archival and collection management at the Australian Defence Force Academy and then three years as the Project Manager for MusicAustralia at the National Library of Australia. Having acted in Graeme's position upon his retirement, she was permanently appointed to the position in June this year after a competitive interview process. No longer titled a 'Manuscript Librarian' Marie-Louise embarked on her new role as 'Curator of Manuscripts' and so begins a new chapter for the Manuscripts Branch of the National Library of Australia. The Manuscripts team today still retains 33 years of Manuscript knowledge amongst its staff and over the past three years several new-comers have joined the team (including the authors of this paper).

Does this story sound familiar to you? It's likely to be one that many institutions will face over the next few years. We all know about this topic; it's not new to the profession. The retirement of the 'baby boomer' generation, the need for succession planning and discussion on creating and attracting future leaders are topics that have been widely focused on in information management literature. However, this is not

going to be yet another paper on how the retirement of the baby boomers is imminent and how we need to develop strategies to cope with this. No, instead, we are going to provide you with our real experiences of how we in the Manuscripts Branch have coped with the retirement of long-serving employees. We think it will be a useful case-study for colleagues in institutions who are or are about to experience the same scenario.

## **Expectations prior to change**

When we first started to write this paper we had a list of what we expected would happen in losing the corporate knowledge of long-serving Manuscripts staff. We asked our colleagues for their comments on what they expected to happen upon Graeme's retirement. Main areas of concern were:

- "Donors would no longer have the long term working relationship with the Manuscript Librarian"
- "With Graeme leaving, I felt that the Branch would not be the same. That is, Graeme was, in many ways, synonymous with the Branch and the Branch's reputation sat very much with him"
- "With all the institutional knowledge leaving, I was concerned that procedures and decisions had not been documented and were all in Graeme's head"
- "Lack of subject and collection knowledge by staff would result in researchers needing to do more personal searching rather than discussing their research needs with the Manuscript Librarian"
- "I was worried that we would be 'lost' without Graeme and other staff, in the sense that there was always the thought that we could 'Just ask Graeme!'"

So, did all this happen? What was the impact of the departure of long-serving employees? To come up with our findings, we thought it worthwhile to re-examine the 'transitional phase' by reflecting on the changes that have taken place in the Branch since Graeme's departure, eight months ago. We will look at the changes, evaluate lessons learnt and comment on where the Branch is likely to go in the future.

## The Transitional Phase

- Communication, Planning and Procedures
- Staff Skills and Professional Development
- Collection Development and Management
- Readers, Reference and Access to Archival collections

Before we provide a snapshot of the 'transitional phase', we want to point out that this summary is not intended to provide an assessment of one management style versus another. Instead, we have tried to summarise some of the changes that have taken place.

### Communication, planning and procedures

Changes in communication, planning and procedures have mainly been driven by a change in leadership style, but have also been due to other developments across the Library.

One of the biggest changes that has occurred is in how knowledge about Branch activities is shared. Previously information was conveyed by predominantly paper based systems. For example, the 'whites' were a monthly printout of all Branch correspondence that was circulated among staff to convey Branch activities. Now there is greater emphasis on regular Branch meetings, where staff are required to rotate roles as chair and minute takers. These meetings allow us to participate more in discussion and decision-making and we feel that we are more knowledgeable about the 'goings on' not only in the Branch, but in the Library as a whole. There has also been an increase in the amount of e-mails received and sent between staff in relation to Branch activities and updates. This electronic information is flowing faster and there is a sense that information is coming to us rather than we needing to seek it out. There have, however, been times when staff have felt overloaded with information. At these times, we remind each other of email management strategies such as being clear in subject titles so that staff can prioritise the information they need to access.

With much of our communication now 'online', so too are many of our procedures and workflows. Previously many of our procedures were in paper form and we are slowly in the process of transferring them online. In fact the last eight months has really been a re-evaluation of 'how things are done'. For many of us, procedures and workflows were the way things were done and we got used to that. However, with an infiltration of new staff this year, we have been forced to ask ourselves questions such as 'Why do we do things this way?' and 'Can this be done more efficiently?' A good example is how we accession and process material. A new member of staff has recently conducted a report on our accession workflows, with one of her findings being that we tend to repeat tasks, resulting in more time being taken to complete them.

Changes in some of our other procedures and workflows have come about from work within the broader operation of the Library. For example, this year a Collection Processing Working Group, consisting of representatives from different Branches of the Library, met to look at standardising procedures throughout the Library. One of the outcomes from the group for Manuscripts has been to undertake closer work with the Pictures Branch. Earlier this year, we adopted their tools and approach for recording offers of collections. This has resulted in us developing a spreadsheet of all our collection offers and our IT Division is now developing a generic online offers system to be used across the Library. Like the Pictures Branch, some staff members now have monthly acquisitions meetings to discuss collection offers. Previously, Graeme dealt with all collection offers and we are sure that there were times his head was the repository where collection offers were stored! That is not to say that filing was not thorough: Manuscripts staff did meticulously file correspondence, notes and decisions relating to collections on paper registry files. There is a consensus amongst staff that these paper files are much easier to read than our current electronic filing system. They have proved invaluable to current staff wanting to see 'the story' behind the acquisition of a collection, and are a wonderful resource for seeing the history of the Library, the collections and the donors.

### **Staff Skills and Professional Development**

Professional development and staff skills have been developed and used in somewhat different ways during this year. Some of these changes reflect trends within the Library, and again, some have come about from different managerial styles. Throughout the year, we have been given more opportunities to attend professional conferences. For example, most of us attended the Australian Historical Association and the Arts Libraries Society conferences, both held in Canberra this year. We feel that this has given us greater exposure to research being undertaken, the types of collections being used by historians and researchers, and the opportunity to network with our clients and professional colleagues.

Maintenance of professional knowledge has also been encouraged within the Branch with the inception of a monthly professional reading group. Staff read specific professional articles, and then meet over morning tea to discuss them and issues thought relevant to our role within the Manuscripts Branch. A major area of memory loss for the team was the practicalities of arrangement and description of archival collections, and so activities such as our reading group are one way for us to enhance our professional skills.

We are also trying to share knowledge with other colleagues outside the Library, so visits to other institutions have been introduced. Recently we spent a morning at the National Archives learning about government records, access, reference and other common activities. It helped us gain a greater insight into how other institutions work and has contributed to sharing ideas and procedures. For example, we are in the process of developing policies relating to the use of digital cameras in the Manuscripts Reading Room, and the procedures and guidelines set out by the Archives are helping us to write our policies.

'The Branch does not rely on its leader or on any individual'. This is one of the statements in the Branch's new operational work plan and one that reflects how staff skills have been developed over the past eight months. While individuals have responsibility for 'special' areas of knowledge – such as displays, interlibrary loans,

digitisation, reference – staff are now being exposed to new tasks and duties, and procedures have been instigated so that any staff member can undertake a particular role. For example, an Exhibition Resource Kit has been developed so that any staff member in the Branch can be called upon to put together displays and exhibitions. There is a feeling that tasks are being delegated more evenly throughout the Branch, exposing us to different skills. This year, for example, several of us were asked to provide collection assessments for applicants of the Harold White Fellowship. In the past, the Manuscript Librarian provided written assessments on Manuscript collections for each application. Similarly, staff members are developing their liaison skills and establishing donor relations by accompanying managers on collection visits, something which was previously a rarity.

A new area for some of us has been exposure to project management skills. Each member of the Arrangement and Description team is now required to have a project plan and report for each collection that we process. While this is still in its early days, it is something that we are keen to embrace. We can all see the benefit of acquiring project management skills – an area that is starting to have a bigger focus across the whole of the Library and in other institutions.

The Library is currently running courses in leadership and team-building. All Manuscripts staff have completed the training and are concentrating on implementing strategies to enhance teamwork, such as catering for different working preferences. This training has proved to be beneficial in this time of extreme change.

This year we have also seen a greater emphasis on resource sharing with other parts of the Library, particularly within the Australian Collections and Reader Services division of which Manuscripts is a part. During the preparation of this paper, all three authors worked in other parts of the Library – Renée Shuttleworth is spending six months in Music Cataloguing, Beth Lonergan and Bronwyn Ryan worked in Information Services two and half days a week each for three months, and Beth is currently working in the Pictures Branch. Two other staff members have also worked in other areas. As well as providing professional development opportunities for staff,

the Branch has been benefiting from knowledge that is brought back in relation to what systems work well in other areas and may be adopted, and what doesn't. Such placements have given staff the opportunity to widen experiences and improve professional knowledge. Further, they provide the opportunity to dispel the myths of Manuscripts within the Library, and create opportunities for cooperation and coordination between branches. It does highlight the fact that although specialist skills and knowledge are required for some of our work, there is also a lot of commonality with other branches within the Library.

### **Collection Development and Management**

Collection development has naturally continued to be a major focus for senior staff members, who are committed to maintaining the strength and relevance of the collection for contemporary and future research. We are in the process of introducing more formal appraisal techniques and procedures to the acquisitions process, including monthly acquisitions meetings to examine collection offers.

In the past, additions to existing collections were accepted without question. We now ask donors to provide us, in writing, the type and extent of material they wish to add to the collection. This enables managers to assess whether the material will be a valuable addition. Archival institutions do not have the space to take everything, and managing collection offers is an area that requires continual refining and consideration. Such a change has required the individual members of the manuscripts team to be more aware of the sensitivities of donors. Previously, many donors (who had gotten to know and trust Graeme) were used to sending their additions to the Branch without prior notice or consent. In general, we think that donors have started to accept these changes in our policy.

Like most archives and special libraries, our processing backlog, which is approaching 2000 metres (just under one sixth of our entire collection), is a significant issue for the Branch. Processing has been prioritised, and staff who do arrangement and description (who also have other duties, such as reference and copyright checking) have been directed to balance other work to ensure at least a

day a week is kept aside for collection processing. Many institutions will no doubt be able to sympathise with such a challenge, particularly with limited staff and resources, and for us it has required a review of services to see which areas need to be curtailed.

### **Readers, Reference and Access to Archival collections**

One of the areas of great impact in the retirement of long-serving employees has been the loss of their collection knowledge which was so beneficial to readers. For years, new and established readers were able to book 'reference interviews' with the Manuscript Librarian. The new Curator of Manuscripts does not provide specialist research interviews, as she feels she cannot provide the vast collection knowledge of her predecessor and is directing her time to processing and access improvements.

With this gap in reference interviews, we have had to consider other ways of helping researchers with their queries. Reader Education programs, aimed at assisting researchers use the collection, are scheduled for next year. As touched on previously, more time will need to be spent on processing and developing finding aids resulting in greater access to readers. The absence of reference interviews has had some positive implications for reference staff: we have had to take more ownership and responsibility over our reference services and are constantly thinking of new ways to help researchers in accessing the collection.

In fact the Manuscripts reference service is an area that has seen several changes. Our reference enquiries have increased by around 25 percent over the 10 years to the end of 2005/2006 and are currently looking at an increase of up 20 percent over the last year! While to date we have undoubtedly offered a 'Rolls-Royce' reference service, if we are to achieve new processing goals we won't be able to continue to provide the same kind of service. As a result, we are working towards reducing time spent on reference enquiries. For example we direct more users to engage professional researchers, particularly those who require in-depth research of different collections.

We should also point out that our changes to our reference service reflect the Library's philosophy about how we facilitate access to collections. Research undertaken by the Library in 2003<sup>i</sup> has shown that readers want to be able to independently find and access resources in our collection; and consult with knowledgeable staff only when they need to. Thus we have shifted to take a less mediated approach to reference service provision.

A major change in how we handle reference enquiries has been the adoption of a Reference Enquiry Manager (REM). Since REM was introduced to the Library in 2004 more and more sections of the Library have joined it, and the Manuscripts Branch implemented the system in April this year. Previous reference enquiries were filed electronically, written into a log book, printed off monthly and circulated among staff. REM has allowed a more streamlined approach to managing and tracking enquiries and, importantly, brought us in line with the rest of the Library.

One advantage of the system is its reporting mechanism - the system has been beneficial in collecting detailed statistics, such as time spent on enquiries and the type of enquiry. These are the kind of statistics which both help us plan our work, and sometimes to substantiate requests for more budgetary and staffing resources. Perhaps the biggest advantage in using REM is that it enables us to extract Frequently Asked Questions (FAQs) which are published on the Library's website. So far the initial FAQs for Manuscripts have been popular with users with the question 'What is a manuscript and what type of manuscripts does the Library collect?' receiving 3450 visits between the end of July and the beginning of November! We are going to increase the number of questions so that researchers will be able to find further information for themselves.

We are also trying to increase the accessibility of the collection for future readers. Manuscripts staff members are on a number of institution-wide collection management committees where collection and information access is the focus. For

example, improving the accessibility of collections to readers by resolving access conditions with donors at the time collections are acquired.

We would like to emphasise that changes that have taken place that may affect readers have been communicated to them at all times. For example, scheduled retrieval was implemented in June, in place of on-demand retrieval. The successful transition to the new system was achieved by emailing registered Manuscripts readers and amending information on our website and in our reading room one month in advance. We have had very few (if any) complaints about this change. In fact many of our readers have been informing us that it is very generous compared to other institutions!

### **Evaluation and Conclusions**

Looking over the past eight months worth of changes in the Branch has enabled us to re-examine our initial expectations of the loss of 104 years worth of knowledge and experience. Did our list of what we expected to happen when the Manuscript Librarian retired come true? How did we cope with the transitional phase from one management style to another? Did we notice losing 104 years of corporate knowledge? Has it affected our service to researchers and donors? What do we as staff members make of the transitional phase?

We believe that the Branch has coped relatively well with the loss of experience and knowledge and the changes that the loss brought with it. Part of this stems from the Library's planning of the inevitable loss of corporate knowledge by allowing a period of time for mentoring and handover from Graeme to Marie-Louise before she took up her position as acting Curator of Manuscripts. This was a very important factor in assisting us all to cope with the retirement and certainly made the transition easier. The fact that the Manuscripts Branch still has about 33 years of Manuscript knowledge undoubtably has also helped us with the memory loss.

Similarly the issue of documenting decisions, procedures and knowledge is an area that worked well. While it could be argued that our documentation in terms of plans and procedures was not strong, many of these are currently being changed or reviewed, not only for our benefit, but the benefit of new and future employees.

What about readers and donors, have they been affected and has our service to them suffered? We would have to say no. By keeping stakeholders informed of any changes and continuing our polite and friendly service, there appears to have been little disruption to readers and donors needs. This is not to say that it was a totally smooth transition. The current Curator of Manuscripts had to work hard to establish relationships with donors; some of whom had only ever worked with the previous Manuscript Librarian. If our offers of collections are anything to go by, it has made little impact. We think that in many ways our readers have been most affected by the loss of Graeme as they now do not have the expert collection knowledge available 'on tap'. However this would apply more to those readers who knew of Graeme's expertise.

One of the most interesting aspects of our findings was the way the Branch coped with change – primarily a change in leadership style. As in any team setting we found that some team members coped better with the changes than others. While some thrived on the changes and felt as though they could assist in their implementation, others felt threatened and insecure. With so many changes implemented in such a short period of time some staff learnt new procedures quickly, while others required more consistent and longer term training. Whether staff thrived or were threatened by the changes, there certainly was an air of 'stress' within the team throughout the transitional phase.

This was not an outcome that was highlighted in our initial set of expectations. While we were concerned for readers and donors and how they would cope, we gave little thought to how we as a team would cope. It is an area that is really interesting and one that should be considered for the future. We think we should also acknowledge the fact that, while at times the transitional phase was stressful, it did also provide us

with the opportunity to develop our professional skills. It would be fair to say that many of us didn't take as much responsibility when working under Graeme. So the transitional phase has forced us to take on more responsibility for tasks. Take our creation of Finding Aids as an example. Previously we tended to rely on Graeme's intimate knowledge of the collection to improve the final product. Now, we have to rely on our own judgements to ensure that the Finding Aids are as complete as possible.

A number of areas became apparent to staff during the transitional phase. We asked some of our colleagues about the main challenges in the initial stages of change and the loss of substantial institutional knowledge. Team members provided comments based on the changes, challenges and impacts to work roles. These include:

- "It became more apparent to me that the reputation of the section may have rested on a few people rather than the team or institution"
- "I noticed that the team's staff morale was affected after being exposed to one type of management style for so long and then having to cope with a sudden change"
- "I worry that our role as caretakers of the collection is not being prioritised, and that by making collections more accessible to more people they could be damaged"

## **Lessons Learnt and Where to for the Future?**

In summary, what lessons has the Manuscript Branch learnt from losing long-serving employees and where does it leave us for the future?

a) Succession planning: Providing a sufficient change over period and mentoring program wherever possible between leaving and new staff significantly supports the change management process.

b) Planning for change: Courses in change management should be considered by institutions embarking on a periods of rapid change, particularly for staff

members that have been in an organisation for long periods of time and are familiar with a certain style of leadership.

c) Skill and resource sharing: Sections should not be reliant on one person but staff should be trained in a range of areas and skills relevant to service provision.

d) Leadership and professional development: Opportunities should be optimised to ensure staff are equipped to step into higher positions and lead staff through change and into the future.

e) Recruitment practices: Changes in recruitment practices may need to be considered based on skill sets relevant to the changing information environment and to staff coming into our profession who have not come from traditional information backgrounds. (We see this already happening as some libraries and information institutions are not listing library qualifications as mandatory in employment selection criteria)

Without a doubt the Manuscripts Branch has experienced a myriad of changes in a very short period of time. The Branch has recruited and filled four management positions and an archivist position – five out of 12 positions – in just five months! While it would be fair to say that the transitional period was, at times, stressful (particularly with less staff and resources), there has been an acknowledgement that the changes we make now, will be beneficial for the Library, the Branch and future employees. Such changes have been made under the expectation that the current Manuscript curator and probably most current staff members, are unlikely to be in the one job for another two or three decades. We acknowledge that as the Branch begins a new chapter, we need to make our reputation contingent on our quality as a team, and an institution, not on one person.

We also feel that there is a need to develop and widen staff skills so that the Branch as a whole is as flexible and as efficient as possible. Whereas most of our

predecessors held library and/or archival qualifications and remained in the same position for several years, it is probable that future staff will not. Currently, with limited courses in library and archival management, staff are less likely to hold these skills and more likely to have more generalist skills and qualifications. It may be that skills in management, financial training and change management will be just as important in recruitment. These issues need to be considered as the profession move beyond traditional library services.

Looking over the transitional phase has enabled us to reflect upon the future of the Branch. We believe that as the profession moves more and more towards resource and service sharing, institutions should be working more collaboratively to share concepts and thoughts about our future leadership and management concerns.

Our profession constantly discusses concerns for the future of libraries including the loss of institutional knowledge, high levels of simultaneous retirement, the age profile of the profession, and the lack of identified leadership skills in new graduates and even of those currently filling middle level management positions. While we believe that we are planning to address these issues as an individual organisation, more collaboration between institutions is needed. We need to actively test the growing number of suggestions for dealing with change management to prepare for the possibilities of the future. We hope that the experiences we have presented in this paper are a step in this direction.

In conclusion let us consider a scenario for the future. A collaborative working group with representation from varying information organisations including cultural institutions, libraries and professional associations. The group aims to provide practical solutions to the issues of the age profile, retirement concerns, the closures of professional education courses, the next generation of library professionals, changing skill sets, leadership development and so on. What would their agenda look like? Here are some of our ideas:

- Cross institutional and internal mentoring programs
- Cross institutional knowledge sharing regarding change, skills shortages and
- other industry challenges
- Assessing the impact of course closures: How much is this issue for the
- industry versus an issue for people working in the industry?

After considering the issues raised in this paper, and indeed in all the papers and conversations that have taken place at the ALIA New Librarians' Symposium, what would you add?

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<sup>i</sup> The Library's research took place in 2003. It was undertaken by Leapfrog Research on behalf of the Library and consisted of both qualitative and quantitative research. The report is called: *Evaluation of the National Library of Australia's on-site reference and document delivery services*. It covered only the 'general' reading rooms.