



Preserving the COMMONPLACE

Although most 'manuscripts' end up in wastepaper baskets, Graeme Powell finds many have enduring value

For many people, the word 'manuscript' conjures up images of medieval codices and other documents on parchment: small, fragile items of great antiquity and beauty which can only be read by the cognoscenti. In fact, most manuscripts are utterly commonplace. Every day they are produced in vast quantities to serve the immediate practical purposes of people, organisations and governments and, within a short time, most of them are destroyed. Modern societies would not survive without wastepaper baskets. Yet some manuscripts have long-term value. The task of libraries and collecting

archives is to locate such manuscripts and persuade their owners to relinquish them, so that they can be permanently preserved in the public domain.

Very old manuscripts tend to be valued even by people with little interest in history. In Britain old documents referring to the colonisation of Australia have been kept by families who may have only a vague awareness of Australian history. Eventually, they may decide to offer them to a bookseller, auction house or possibly directly to an Australian library. In 2002 the Library bought four letters from James and William Griffiths to their mother, written in 1822 while they were in convict hulks awaiting transportation. They are humble letters, but they illustrate the destruction of family ties that usually resulted from transportation to Australia. The letters were sold by the London antiquarian booksellers

James Griffith (b.c.1799)
Letter to his mother from Portsmouth,
2 June 1822
Manuscript Collection MS 9682

Maggs Brothers, a firm that has had an extremely close association with the Library for almost 100 years.

Manuscripts derive much of their value from illustrations and this is especially true of shipboard journals. Officers on British warships were required to keep official journals, recording the routines of shipboard life in excruciating detail. Some also kept private journals, the best example being the *Endeavour* journal of James Cook. James Hay was a lieutenant on HMS *Emerald*, one of the ships of the Australian Station in 1880–82. As he toured Australia, New Zealand and the island groups of the Western Pacific, and took part in retaliatory raids in the Solomon Islands, he kept a private

journal. It allowed him the freedom to write critically and occasionally with humour about colonial societies, local defences, and the treatment of Maoris and other indigenous peoples. His numerous drawings of native villages, houses and boats are exquisite and set the journal apart from routine naval records. The journal was also purchased from Maggs Brothers.

In the twentieth century, personal papers and manuscripts are far more common and libraries and archives have to be more cautious and discriminating in what they seek and accept. Documents may have great value for a family, a locality or an organisation, in terms of sentiment and history. While it is desirable that they be preserved, the responsibility for preservation may lie with the family, the organisation, or a local library or museum. With limited resources, especially in storage space, the National Library has to focus on records that have national significance. In practice, this means the personal papers of powerful, influential or highly creative individuals or records that document major events and developments in Australian history.

From the 1920s to the present, the Library has approached thousands of notable Australians, or their descendants and executors, in the hope that they may have retained or left papers of historical value. Political records have been especially prized and the Library holds the personal papers of many Prime Ministers and other Federal politicians. These collections, which often arrive in instalments over many years, tend to be highly uneven. Sir John Gorton was a good example: he seems to have kept nothing in his younger days, but towards the end of his life he donated an important group of political papers. Further papers were received after his death in 2003. Literature is another area of great strength and, not surprisingly, writers tend to be good at creating and keeping papers. Judith Wright had little interest in papers in

Judith Wright (1915–2000)

Draft of poem beginning 'Man had two eyes alone'

In the Papers of Judith Wright, 1958–2000
Manuscript Collection MS 5781

her younger days, but after she moved to the Braidwood district in 1975 she began to offer manuscripts and papers to the Library, sometimes as gifts, sometimes by sale. In the end there were 28 instalments and the papers are a wonderful source not only on her writings but on her passionate support for conservation and the rights of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders. She died in 2000 and her daughter Meredith has since transferred further papers.

The Library has received papers of many other notable Australians in the last few years: the medical researcher Graeme Clark, the businessman Sir James Vernon, the novelist Murray Bail, the artist Russell Drysdale, the singer Nellie Melba, the actor John Bell, the journalist Phillip Adams, the biographer Allan Martin, the politician E.G. Theodore, the philosopher David Armstrong and the feminist Elizabeth Reid are a few examples. They vary

greatly in size, orderliness, range of material, and the extent to which they reveal the experiences, thoughts and emotions of their creators.

Most collections are patchy; it is rare to find a complete personal archive. There are, however, exceptions. One is the composer Peter Sculthorpe, who carefully kept all his manuscript scores and correspondence from his schooldays onwards. The archive that he passed over to the Library in 2002 is stunning in its variety and research potential. Another was a Torres Strait Islander who kept letters, drawings, legal documents, and administrative records all his adult life. Eddie Mabo only became famous after his death, but the papers that the Library acquired from his family will always be a fine source on his life and the struggle for indigenous land rights.

GRAEME POWELL is the Manuscript Librarian at the National Library

