



The Lost Art of Journal Writing

Ann Nugent ponders the past, present and future of this most intimate of arts, and explores the human compulsion to record our daily lives

Imagine journal writers of an earlier age as gracious ladies, with leisure to spare, sitting at tiny desks, dressed in flowing gowns with blue silk ribbons in their hair. However, this is a false impression. In the 17th century, when English journal writing was becoming established, diarists were, on the whole, men; busy men. John Evelyn, linguist, scientist and writer, faithfully kept his diary for 65 years, from his youth until his death in 1706. His diaries were found over a century later in a clothes basket. In contrast, Samuel Pepys wrote his journal

for a mere nine years (1660–69). Pepys never intended his diary for publication but he did not destroy it and, by default, gave later generations the chance to read his extremely self-revelatory pages. Indeed, it is the personal, often secret voice of diaries and their chance survival that engage our interest.

A hundred years after Evelyn and Pepys, Fanny Burney began writing her journals. She was not the first woman journal-writer but she was certainly one of the more flamboyant; her diaries include character sketches of the London literati and vivid accounts of court life. Burney started her journal writing in 1768 when she was just 16 and kept it going until she was 87.

All this seems a long way from the National Library of Australia but, in the year that Fanny Burney started

above:
J.C. Armytage
*Return of Burke & Wills to Coopers
Creek* c.1874
hand-coloured engraving; 19.5 x 26.5 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an7372844

below:
Robert White (1645–1703)
Portrait of Samuel Pepys
London: 1690
engraving; 14.1 x 8.8 cm
Pictures Collection
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her journal, Captain James Cook was writing his account of the voyage of the *Endeavour* (1768–71), which was to become manuscript number one (MS1), in the Library's Manuscript Collection. Fanny Burney's brother, 2nd Lieutenant James Burney, sailed with Cook on his second and third Pacific voyages. An edited version of Burney's incomplete journal (MS3244), written on Cook's second voyage, was published by the Library in 1975. Burney's journal includes descriptions of a few days in Tasmania and an encounter with icebergs in the southern Indian Ocean as well as the transcription of some Tongan music.

Captain James Cook's journal set themes of exploration and discovery, themes that have endured in Australian journals until the present day. In the Library's Manuscript Collection are three diaries from the ill-fated Burke and Wills expedition: a small one of Burke's, one of King's, and Wills' with its famous entry, 'I can only look out like Mr Micawber "for something to turn up" but starvation on nardu is by no means unpleasant'. In more recent times, Antarctica has become the site of exploration. The Library holds several Antarctic collections, including the extensive journals of explorer John Bechervaise (1910–98), who led Antarctic expeditions in the 1950s. Throughout the 19th and into the 20th century, explorers on land and sea continued to write their journals; it was part of their work and it was also part of who they were.

Some diarists seem compelled to write. Cartographer Anthony Bomford (1927–2003), who for some years was Director of the National Mapping Authority, started keeping a diary when he was 15 and continued without a break until his death. The Library holds Bomford's 84 volumes of handwritten diaries, with an additional 40 typed 'illustrated diaries' and a series of photograph albums, documenting both his personal and professional life. Artist and writer Barbara Hanrahan could not bear to be separated from her diaries, which she started in 1958 when she was 19 and continued up until her death in 1991. The Library holds Hanrahan's diaries which are restricted until 1 March 2018. The Library also holds diaries of another compulsive diarist, the writer and playwright Barry Oakley, whose journals are written in a miniscule hand. Bomford's, Hanrahan's and Oakley's creativity, literary and artistic skills

promise satisfying reading. Many diaries are written by less skilled authors, but the patina of time adds interest even to their more mundane accounts.

The Library holds the largest Australian collection of 19th-century shipboard emigrant diaries—well over 100—but that, according to historian Andrew Hassam, is only a small proportion of the total written. Most of these diaries were written by men, with women diarists accounting for only 14 per cent of the Library's holdings of this kind of material. Of the 100 plus diaries at the Library, 29 were written by steerage passengers, and only two of those were by women. Convict diaries are represented by those of 'gentleman' convict John Grant, whose diary was the source of *This Beauteous Wicked Place*, edited by Yvonne Cramer and published by the Library in 2000; and the recollections of common convict John Ward, who was transported to Norfolk Island in 1841 on the convict ship *Mangles*.

The Library's former Manuscript Librarian, Graeme Powell, says that the Library purchased many of the emigrant diaries in England either privately or at auctions. And that makes sense because many of the shipboard diaries were written as a record to be shared with families 'back home'.

With the great professional and public journals like Cook's, survival of the physical object and its ultimate publication were almost assured. This was not the case for humbler works when the survival of the material artifact, be it handwritten notebook or typescript, was often a matter of chance. For example, William Reay's journal, written in 1877, was originally sent to England, then to Canada, detoured to the United States and finally returned to Australia where it is now in the Library's Manuscript Collection. In *Sailing to Australia*, Hassam records that Mary Maclean's diary of 1864 was found in a writing desk almost a hundred years after it was written.

Travel seems to inspire all kinds of people to write diaries. Alastair and Hedda Morrison recorded their 1961 trip around Australia in a Kombi van. Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies only wrote diaries when he was travelling overseas. Paradoxically, Menzies was critical of parliamentary colleagues who took to journal-writing, particularly when they circulated extracts

among their friends. In 1928–29, Marjorie Watson recorded her ‘round the world’ cruise on the SS *Argyllshire*; a far cry from the experiences of outward-bound emigrants of the previous century. The Library’s archive allows us to make these comparisons and to savour their ironies.

Parallel to the emigrant shipboard diaries are 19th-century settler diaries. The women of this period who wrote diaries and letters range from convicts to governors’ wives. The voices that strain across the decades, however, are often those of women living in isolated places. For these women, the very act of writing was a means of keeping in touch with themselves, a proof of their own existence. This form of substitute confidante was available only to women who were literate.

Several of the personal chronicles held by the Library have been edited and published, for example: *This Errant Lady*, edited by Penny Russell, records Lady Jane Franklin’s overland journey to Port Phillip and Sydney in 1839; *A Woman of Courage*, translated and edited by Marc Serge Rivière, tells the story of Rose de Freycinet’s voyage around the world in 1817–20, and Patricia Clarke’s *A Colonial Woman: The Life and Times of Mary Braidwood Mowle, 1827–1857*, is based on Mary Mowle’s diaries. *‘The Difficulties of My Position’: The Diaries of Prison Governor John Buckley Castieau 1855–1884*, edited by Mark Finnane, was published by the Library in 2004. That these voices command a readership today

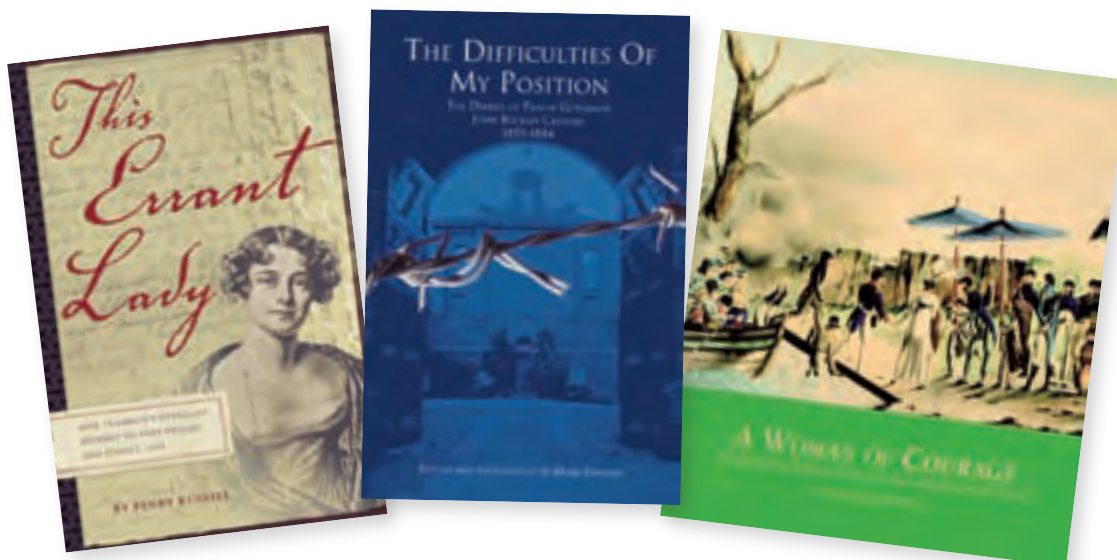


Unknown photographer
Portrait of Patrick McMahon Glynn, South Australian Federation Leader and M.H.R. 1910s
b&w photograph; 19.2 x 13.9 cm
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-an23419642

attests to the talents of the journal writers as well as the skill of their editors.

Although themes of exploration, travel, work and isolation are found in 19th- and 20th-century diaries, there is a discernible shift at the turn of the century from the personal to the public. Patrick McMahon Glynn began his political career in the South Australian parliament and later entered the Federal Parliament where he attained ministerial status. However, he might have been forgotten but for his much quoted journals kept from 1880 until the 1920s. Glynn’s record gets written into political histories because it is a now rare first-hand account. Glynn’s diaries, like those of Menzies, Lord Casey and other prominent

below, left to right:
Cover of *This Errant Lady: Jane Franklin’s Overland Journey to Port Phillip and Sydney, 1839* Penny Russell (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2002)
Cover of *The Difficulties of My Position: The Diaries of Prison Governor John Buckley Castieau, 1855–1884* edited and introduced by Mark Finnane (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2004)
Cover of *A Woman of Courage: The Journal of Rose de Freycinet on Her Voyage Around the World 1817–1820* translated by Marc Serge Rivière (Canberra: National Library of Australia, 2003)





above:
Unknown photographer
*Portrait of Nettie Palmer
(then Nettie Higgins)* 1912
sepia toned photograph;
4.6 cm diam.
Pictures Collection
nla.pic-vn3584653

below, left to right:
Cover of *The Diaries of Donald
Friend, Volume 1*
edited by Anne Gray
(Canberra: National Library of
Australia, 2001)
Covers of *The Diaries of Donald
Friend, Volumes 2 and 3*
edited by Paul Hetherington
(Canberra: National Library of
Australia, 2003, 2005)

people, found their way to the Library's Manuscript Collection as part of a larger archive.

Clyde Cameron and Peter Howson are more recent ministerial diarists whose diaries are held by the Library.

Many writers and artists use their diaries as working tools. Nettie Palmer's book *Fourteen Years* was based on a private journal while, in his diaries, Donald Friend discusses aesthetics, and technical and artistic problems as part

and parcel of everyday life. The Library's forthcoming publication of the last volume of Friend's diaries fulfills his wish that the 44 diaries which he donated to the Library in 1983 would, one day, be published. Judy Cassab's diaries are held by the Library and were published by her in 1995.

All diaries are personal, but they are written for different purposes. The voice of the personal 'I' in 20th-century Australian diaries comes most vividly from the battlefields—recorded by war correspondents such as George Johnston in New Guinea—and from the POW camps. POW Gordon Burt records that 'as each [diary] page was written it was sewn into my trousers as we never knew from day to day when the "Kampey" would make one of their surprise visits and ruthlessly search for firearms, maps, papers, or any incriminating

documents'. Burt died at Muntok on Banka Island on 28 January 1945; his diary, letters, photographs and his Order of the British Empire Medal are in the Library's Manuscript Collection.

In line with the Library's policy of documenting the Australian experience, the Manuscript Collection also receives the diaries of 'ordinary' people. For example, a Canberra woman deposited 40 years of journals with the Library, just before her death in 1997. Somewhere in rural New South Wales, possibly at this moment, there is an Anglican minister writing his diary. In due course, a package will arrive with six or so notebooks to be added to his collection. The value and significance of these 'ordinary' archives remain for future readers to decide.

Has the art of journal writing been lost? Probably not so much lost as co-opted and transmogrified. Today we are advised to 'journal' in order to become a better person, a better writer, a healthier individual and a more creative human being. Then there are the 21st-century heirs to the journal-writers, the bloggers whose personal web logs give instant global expression to their daily lives or what they care to impart online.

I hope that somewhere, someone is still secretly making marks on paper, 'to mark the paper was the decisive act!' (George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-four*) and that one hundred years from now there will still be journals waiting to be found—in old clothes baskets or dusty desks.

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