Librarianship-in-Practice

Making personal libraries accessible: The example of the Robert Menzies Collection
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Abstract
This paper describes an experimental project working with the Robert Menzies Collection at the University of Melbourne Library. This heritage collection comprises the books previously owned by Menzies, the former prime minister of Australia. Our paper describes the process of recording the contents of the collection and assessing the collection for significant signs of provenance. The article highlights a novel approach to making the contents of a personal library accessible to researchers by using non-traditional library technology. Instead of a straightforward catalogue or index, this project uses a relational database to map and connect the books in Menzies’ personal library to his life and times. We consider the implications of this approach from library and archival perspectives and consider the challenges and opportunities presented by personal libraries.

Keywords
personal libraries, heritage collections, digital humanities, collection access, provenance

The Issue
Personal libraries occupy an ambiguous position within library and cultural collections, possessing a hybrid identity that incorporates aspects of both manuscript and book material (Nicholson 2010). Usually comprising the books that belonged to a well-known person, often a writer or scholar, most personal libraries are acquired by a collecting institution because of their provenance and cultural or historical significance. To date, there has been little professional consensus on how these collections should be classified, described and made accessible.

Robert Menzies decided to donate his personal library to the University of Melbourne in 1976. The collection was installed in the Leigh Scott Room at the Baillieu Library in...
1980, a couple of years after Menzies’ death in 1978. His library comprises almost 4000 books, journals, photograph albums and notebooks. In terms of total volumes this collection represents a large personal library; by comparison Miles Franklin’s library contains around 1000 books (Roe, 1992, 52) and Patrick White’s library just over 2000 books (State Library of New South Wales, 2014). Menzies specified his collection must remain intact and be used as a reference collection for scholars and students researching Australian political history (Stone and Berryman 2013). His insistence on the collection being kept intact for posterity is a key point. Not unlike collections of personal papers, where ownership is important and original order is retained, a personal library is an organic collection that reflects its owner's idiosyncrasies.

Menzies’ estate provided an inventory detailing the contents of the collection. The books on this typed list were arranged according to subject categories that reflected Menzies' interests (e.g. law, literature, history, cricket, art, etc.). The list also recorded the original location of each book (i.e. Menzies’ office, study or bedroom). When the collection was relocated to the Baillieu Library the books were shelved according to Menzies’ subject themes. However the books’ new shelf locations were not recorded, and the contents of the collection had not been cross-checked against the original list. Therefore, there was no way of knowing what books actually existed in the collection and where they were located.

**Initial Assessment**

Because the collection was uncatalogued our first priority was to record and describe its contents. Importantly, the typed list of the collection indicated whether a book had been ‘presented’ to Menzies or was ‘autographed’. Each book was individually assessed for:

- Signs of ownership: Menzies signed or stamped many of his books. Those dating from his legal career are rubber-stamped ‘Robert G. Menzies, Barrister-at-Law’. Menzies’ personal book-plate (designed by Lionel Lindsay) was affixed to approximately ninety-five per cent of the books. Further assessment revealed the collection also contains books that belonged to his wife, Dame Pattie, and their three children.
• Signs of previous ownership: Many books had evidently been purchased second-hand and retained the names or book-plates of their previous owners. Menzies also inherited books from his father, James Menzies. Some books bear the names of his colleagues and friends, including High Court judge Owen Dixon and artist Lionel Lindsay.

• Significant markings: Books were checked for annotations, marginalia and underlining. Markings are more common in Menzies’ professional books (e.g. legal texts) than in his recreational reading.

• Inscriptions: Approximately thirty-five per cent of books in the collection contain handwritten inscriptions or signatures. Inscriptions vary in length and legibility; some were carefully composed, others rapidly scrawled.

• Enclosures: Some books have material concealed in their pages. These ‘enclosures’ (Roe 1992, 56) comprise letters, notes, poems, press clippings, business cards, photographs, pressed flowers, bookmarks and postcards.

This assessment overturned our assumption that the collection overwhelmingly comprised books personally acquired by Menzies. The inscriptions raised important questions about the origins and composition of the collection and provided evidence that many books had been given to Menzies. The tone and style of these inscriptions also provided valuable insights. Many book inscriptions were penned by his friends and family, showing that the books were intended as personal gifts. Other inscriptions were more formal. Books signed and inscribed by international dignitaries were abundant. Menzies had received books from presidents Harry Truman, John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. The British and Commonwealth connection was particularly strong. There were books inscribed by Winston Churchill, Clement Attlee, Stanley Baldwin, Anthony Eden and Jawaharlal Nehru. It seems Menzies’ penchant for reading was well known. He received books from his many political allies, rivals and opponents. Unsolicited books from constituents, supporters and publishers are widespread throughout the collection. During his Prime Ministership, Menzies’ office acknowledged each book he was given regardless of the sender; a pencil inscription ‘Ack. dd/mm/yy’ indicates that a letter of acknowledgement was sent. Copies of these letters of
acknowledgement are held in the Menzies Papers at the National Library of Australia (NLA MS 4936, series 27, box 471).

The contents of the library revealed a strong social dimension that shed light on Menzies' vast social network and personal life. The collection was accumulated over the course of his lifetime and contains books from his childhood (presented as school prizes) to books acquired in his final years. Despite some notable exceptions, few books in Menzies' library are recognised as rare books or fine editions. It has been described as a personal collection: 'a reader’s library, not a collector's collection' ('Robert Menzies Collection' 1980). With this in mind, the project called for an archival approach more concerned with determining provenance, context and relationships than a detailed bibliographical analysis.

Action
We compiled a preliminary list of people who had donated books to Menzies' library and ascertained the nature of their relationship to Menzies (e.g. family member, personal friend, political colleague, etc.). Reliable reference material, including the Australian Dictionary of Biography and A.W. Martin’s authoritative two-volume biography of Menzies (Martin 1993; Martin 1999), was consulted for historical context. We explored the possibility of relating books in the library to key events, organisations and people in Menzies' life. However, we soon realised that this task was more ambitious than expected. In search of a precedent, one of our first actions was to consult the literature on personal libraries.

We discovered the existence of numerous personal libraries, in both Australian and international collections. In the course of the project we referred to literature dealing with many specific examples, including the personal libraries of Ludwig Leichardt (Stephens 2007), Miles Franklin (Roe 1992), Adolf Hitler (Ryback 2008), Patrick White (Adelaide 2011), William Gladstone (Windscheffel 2008) and Bertrand Russell (Spadoni and Harley 1985). Sigmund Freud’s personal library proved most valuable in both theoretical and practical terms (Davies and Fichtner 2006). Methodologically, this case study helped conceptualise the relationship that exists between books and their owner; like Menzies, Freud was an avid book collector whose library reflected his interests, career trajectory and professional network.
How should the contents of Menzies’ library be made accessible? Our research into personal libraries had uncovered numerous finding aids and inventories, both in print and online. These included the catalogues of the library of Miles Franklin (Guide to the Papers and Books of Miles Franklin 1980), Kenneth Slessor (University of Sydney Library, 2014); Christopher Brennan (University of Sydney Library, 2014) and Charles Darwin (Biodiversity Heritage Library 2011). Although these were useful for describing the contents of collections, their one-dimensional format was limiting. Our technical options too were limited. Citation management software (e.g. EndNote) lacked flexibility in managing non-bibliographical data. A conventional online catalogue would stress the collection’s bibliographical elements. But we decided this perspective would detract from the collection’s historical and social dimension, which we were keen to emphasise.

We decided to use a relational database to map and describe the connections between books, authors, writers of inscriptions, organisations and events represented in the Robert Menzies Collection. We chose to use the Online Heritage Resource Manager (OHRM), a customised Microsoft Access database developed by the eScholarship Research Centre at the University of Melbourne. The OHRM forms the basis of many online resources including the Australian Dictionary of Biography and the Australian Women’s Register. A key benefit of the OHRM is that HTML output (or web pages) can be created quickly.

Our starting point was the typed inventory provided by Menzies’ estate. Staff at the University Digitisation Service scanned the list as a machine-readable PDF allowing it to be converted to Microsoft Excel and then imported to the OHRM. This saved a considerable amount of manual data entry, though we subsequently found that the list was incomplete and in places inaccurate. In the process of examining each book in the collection we set a standard for recording essential bibliographic data: title, author/editor, and the year of publication of the edition in the collection. Our priority was to record the key distinguishing features (listed above) that added value to a book as a unique biographical artefact. In the course of examining each item, we started the process of relating the collection to people, organisations, places and events important in Menzies’ life and career.
Where available, we also recorded the date of acquisition for each book. The main sources of evidence here were dated signatures by Menzies himself; dated inscriptions in books given by others; presentation slips from organisations; ‘acknowledged’ dates; and Prime Minister’s Office ‘received’ stamps. In relation to books in personal libraries generally, dates of acquisition can be more telling than dates of publication. Dates of acquisition enabled us to connect books to key events in Menzies’ life and contextualise the growth of the collection. This data revealed that the collection grew prodigiously during Menzies’ second term as prime minister (1949–1966).

**Results**

The result of this project is a web-based resource ‘The Robert Menzies Collection: A Living Library’ (available at http://www.menziescollection.esrc.unimelb.edu.au). It was published by the eScholarship Resource Centre at the University of Melbourne as a work in progress in July 2013. This site provides access – for the first time – to a complete list of the books contained in Robert Menzies’ personal library. The site includes a ‘copy-specific’ (Pearson 2013) page for each book in the collection and describes all significant markings. Each book-level record provides links to related people (e.g. authors and writers of inscriptions), events and organisations. Unique to this resource, the books in the collection are searchable via variables other than author, title and subject. Researchers can also access the collection thematically by exploring Menzies’ interests, the organisations with which he was affiliated, the professional composition of his social network, and the key events in his life. So far we have ascertained that more than 400 people have a significant presence in his library. These people include Menzies’ favourite authors (among them Dickens, Shakespeare and Thackeray); principal writers of inscriptions; and his friends, family and colleagues. We have started digitising significant inscriptions. This, we hope, will result in a digital resource rich in primary source material.

The Online Heritage Resource Manager is not a standard bibliographic program. This project is the first time it has been applied to a library-based exercise. The technical features of the OHRM have therefore shaped the end result to a large extent. Because a relational database facilitates a multi-dimensional perspective, the outcome is quite different from a linear index or catalogue of books. The technology encouraged us to think about books in non-bibliographic terms; as authentic artefacts with social characteristics. We concede the results are experimental, and the online resource
remains a work progress. However feedback to date has been positive, and the site has already provided researchers with new evidence about Robert Menzies’ thinking and influences.

**Lessons Learned**

Robert Menzies’ personal library is not a rare book collection as such. The books in the Menzies collection are significant by virtue of their historical and personal associations with their owner and the unique evidence they impart about his life and times. Because this value cannot be described in conventional bibliographic terms, librarians working with personal libraries are advised to look beyond the disciplinary parameters of library and information studies. Librarians can learn valuable lessons from archivists, for example, who appreciate the provenance and context of their collections. Throughout this project our knowledge of archival methods proved more useful than our professional understanding of library cataloguing and classification systems. The principle of provenance guided the project throughout. Although this project is experimental, there are implications for best practice with regards to personal libraries:

1. **Respect the unity of a personal library.** Ideally, personal libraries should be kept intact and their original arrangement retained. Do not unnecessarily disperse the collection or integrate its contents into a general collection. Where a collection cannot be physically kept intact, provenance should be recorded so that the library can be ‘virtually’ reconstructed. If personal libraries are integrated into larger collections, book metadata should record donor details and a catalogue scope should enable general collections to be searched via donor names.

2. **Note all significant signs of ownership,** including handwritten inscriptions, markings, annotations, signatures and book-plates. For conservation reasons, significant editions and books containing important signatures and markings should not be integrated into general collections.

3. **Record the presence of loose enclosures concealed in books.** These objects are problematic and their status as realia or manuscript material is deeply ambiguous. Enclosures provide valuable context, but might also pose conservation issues; in the case of the Menzies collection, pressed flowers and newspaper cuttings caused the discolouration of some book pages. Significant
enclosures might also be removed from books to ensure their own conservation. For example, a handwritten poem by the Australian poet Bernard O'Dowd was discovered in one of Menzies' books. The removal of enclosures from books should be considered on a case-by-case basis. Regardless of the outcome, all relevant details should be carefully recorded.

Personal libraries are distinct book collections that originated from an individual owner. However, as this project has revealed, personal libraries are complicated collections that traverse traditional archival and library boundaries. The library profession should give greater theoretical and practical consideration to the status, management and conservation of personal libraries. With regards to our project, the digital humanities and the academic study of material culture provided a richer understanding of the significance of this collection than our professional training in library studies. For this reason, personal libraries present valuable opportunities for interdisciplinary dialogue and collaboration between librarianship and emerging fields of knowledge.
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