Title: Cultural collecting institutions

as a reflection of their society:

libraries in nineteenth century

South Australia

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# Abstract:

Each State of Australia has a range of publicly funded cultural collecting institutions. I am interested in exploring the idea that the defining characteristics of these institutions reflect the broader society in which they exist. In particular, to what extent has the history of each State of Australia influenced the nature of the institutions of each State, and how this might be reflected in their operations and their collections. In the first instance the development and evolution of library services in South Australia up to the end of the 19th century has been the subject of my investigation.

# **Library milestones**

	Library milestones	Related legislation
1834	Founding of the South Australian Literary Association (later South Australian Literary and Scientific Association) and formation of a subscription library later brought to the colony by members from Britain.	South Australia Act 1834 (UK) – Foundation Act
1836		Foundation of the colony
1838-1843	Adelaide Mechanics Institute established which took over the collection of the earlier Literary Association	
1844-1847	South Australian Subscription Library	
1848-1856	South Australian Subscription Library and Mechanics Institute (combination of earlier organisations) into Mechanics Institute	Bill for the Encouragement of Public Education which set up a Board of Education
1851		Education Act which acknowledged duty of state in provision of education
1857		Responsible government for the Colony of South Australia
1856-1884	South Australian Institute (SAI) (replaced earlier bodies)	
1874		Establishment of the University of Adelaide
1875		Compulsory Education Act (for children up to 13 years)
1878		Education Dept. established
1884	Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Bill splitting the SAI into:	
	Adelaide Circulating Library, a subsidised subscription library which remained in the Institute building and took over the lending stock of the SAI (Biskup, 1994, p. 46)	

	Library milestones	Related legislation
1884-1975	Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia, moved to the new building next door and took over the reference function of the SAI and its legal deposit entitlements (Biskup, 1994, p. 46).	
1891		Abolition of school fees in S.A.
1899	Institutes Association formed to lobby on behalf of the institutes	
1910	Incorporation of Institutes Association and formal separation from Public Library Board oversight	

# The Colony of South Australia

To this day there is a perception that South Australia is different to the rest of Australia. Undoubtedly the early settlers and their descendants perceived this to be the case. The founders of the colony of South Australia were determined it would be different to the other Australian colonies, settled by Britain with the principal function of convict colony. To be considered colonial meant being tainted with the slur of convicts and there was a tendency for South Australians to consider themselves an outlying province of England rather than a colony (Pike, 1967, p. 495). The new colony was also to be a commercial venture with minimal government involvement. Nineteenth century histories of South Australia stressed its differences, frequently for commercial reasons, including promoting it as a destination for new settlers.

In terms of established institutions South Australia was different: 'As a free settlement from the outset, South Australia had the key institutions of government, courts and public administration laid out under the terms of the 1834 Act and so enjoyed a set of political and legal privileges that took considerable time and some struggle to establish elsewhere in Australia' (MacIntyre, 2005, p. 117). MacIntyre also points out that due to the nature of the climate, geography and geology, the gentry in South Australia were more likely to be concentrated in Adelaide and to hold a more diverse range of commercial and social interests than elsewhere in the colonies. This, combined with a more liberal political inheritance which was less concerned about the threats posed by democracy resulted in a more influential gentry (MacIntyre, 2005, p. 117). In fact in the first elected government of the self-governing colony in 1857, the lower House (House of Assembly) was elected by universal male suffrage.

## From beginnings to 1855

The early years were difficult. Financial mismanagement by the South Australian Company and limited government commitment combined with excessive speculation meant that in its first years South Australia experienced economic volatility with extreme downturns especially in the early 1840s. After only a few years of settlement the British government had expended large amounts of money and many of the investors had found that their fortune was not to be made in this venture.

Wakefield strongly influenced the push to establish the colony of South Australia with his idea of systematic colonisation whereby capital and labour were to be attracted in large quantities, within the context of the planned and regulated sale of land which ensured

concentrated settlement. This was to be a self-funding commercial enterprise based on systematic planning which did not incur cost to the government. The scheme was underpinned by Enlightenment ideas of rational progress and the improvement of man and gained support from emergent influential groups such as the Utilitarians, importantly from Bentham, on the understanding that the colonies were being prepared for independence (Gascoigne, 2002, p. 63).

Pike identifies Wakefield's major contributions as twofold. Firstly, he provided liberals with an imaginative approach to self-government of colonies which reconciled two extremes - of either a complete break with England as exemplified by America (but without the bloodshed) or continued government from London. 'His was one of the earliest and clearest visions of an empire-by-consent. If powers were divided, some reserved to the imperial parliament, most confided to the colonists themselves, then mutual advantage would hold the two together more surely than direct rule' (Pike, 1967, p. 74). Secondly, he made emigration respectable for the middle classes: 'Where they had seen (and shunned) only a squalid traffic of convicts, paupers, fugitives, poor relations and rum racketeers, he taught them to see instead solid opportunity and a civilising mission' (Pike, 1967, p. 74). This influenced the composition of the population but proved particularly attractive to young couples, and until 1870 half the population was under twenty-one (Pike, 1967, p. 497). This was to be a new kind of society which offered opportunity to all who were willing to work hard and earn their place.

## From 1856 to 1910

The population of the colony in 1855 was 110,000, then trebling between 1856 and 1884. However, after 1857 migration slowed and loss of population to the Victorian goldfields contributed to the emergence of a more settled, less vibrant, largely homogenous population (Pike, 1967, p. 496-7) despite significant inflows from Germany. The population in 1901 was 362,604 of whom 80 per cent had been born in Australia but only five per cent in other states (Pike, 1967, p. 496). The period up to 1900 saw activity which supported the view of South Australia as

'a socially progressive society, the first to have an elected town council, to accept the court evidence of Aborigines and to use the ballot...among the first governments to separate church and state, legalise trade unions, introduce industrial reforms, elect labour members of parliament, and grant women...the right to vote for and stand as parliamentary candidates' (Macintyre, 2005, p.118).

The second half of the century saw the application of controlled growth and planning across the State thereby creating a visibly distinct built environment with the proliferation of little Adelaide's through the colony.

During this period 'the colony was the granary of Australia and the small farmer the backbone of the colony's wealth to an extent unequalled elsewhere in the country (Wakefield Companion, 2001, p. 258), an important factor in building the strength of the Institutes' movement across the State in the second half of the century.

With self-government in 1857, South Australia entered a new era though not necessarily one which offered either greater stability or enhanced commitment to funding. The new parliamentarians were of an independent frame of mind, they did not adhere to a party and were not focused on law making. However they did agree about a few things. 'There was to be no direct taxation, no costly civil service, no government restraints of any kind. Parliament was not to interfere with opportunity or create an unhealthy spirit of dependence in the community (Pike, 2007, p. 94).

### Characteristics of libraries in nineteenth century South Australia

# The library in society

The transplantation of European settlements onto the Australian continent at the end of the eighteenth and the early part of the nineteenth century came at a time of new ideas emerging from the Enlightenment. This combined with the social changes driving demand for library services meant by the end of the nineteenth century South Australia had established libraries which in many ways met many of the needs of its citizens.

An erudite summary of the evolution of libraries around the world is provided by McChesney (McChesney, 1984, p. 33-60). McChesney considers the development of the library in the nineteenth century within its broader historical context and is worth quoting in full here:

The spread of universal education in Europe and North America in the nineteenth century created a clientele for public libraries. The changed mission of universities in the nineteenth century from transmitters of the culture to creators of new knowledge led to the demand for the vast research libraries of the twentieth century. Similarly the industrial revolution and increased governmental activity eventually created the need for special libraries. Developments in the technology of papermaking, printing, and binding in the nineteenth century made books cheaper and more plentiful than ever before. The establishment of copyright made it possible for some authors to earn a living from their writing (McChesney, 1984, p. 34).

All of these social and economic influences were evident in the new libraries of South Australia.

## 1834-1855

The early libraries of South Australia took several forms but displayed some consistent characteristics. Without exception they were short-lived; with no government support, all were reliant upon subscriptions and fees and experienced almost constant financial instability, at times exacerbated by ill-considered practices of their governing committees; unable to provide adequate accommodation for their operation, they constantly suffered from inadequate housing; periodically rent by conflicting goals of their membership, which was either 'exclusive' or more broadly aimed at meeting the needs of 'respectable working men', they suffered the effects of disunity. All provided access to cultural activities of which the library was only a part.

The case can be made that all of these characteristics were simply a reflection of a new and optimistic society of immigrants trying to find its way in a new land, many motivated by a fierce spirit of independence, dislike of government, and social and political ideals which

could be tested in this new environment where a new society was yet to be forged. Stable institutions were yet to be formed as social organisation and distribution of power evolved in this new society.

#### 1856-1910

There were moments of 'colonial pride' during this period, which saw grand buildings replace 'poky' rooms; an innovative scheme bring expanded library services to the country areas; a new government commitment to provision of funding and the emergence of wealthy benefactors.

However, library funding was highly sensitive to economic downturns. Government commitments were elastic, erratic and unpredictable. The vexed issue of reliable and recurrent funding for the collection was only really addressed with the decision to allocate interest from the Morgan Thomas bequest to the annual acquisitions budget in the first decade of the twentieth century.

By 1910 the library no longer offered the earlier diversity of services such as classes and concerts, services which had dwindled by the 1880s. After several decades of settlement the emerging social groups and interests had established more specialised organisations to meet their needs, and this role had moved elsewhere. More significantly, bitter battles had led to a clear split in responsibility for the provision of library services across the state.

#### The library as artefact

The physical environment in which the library operated was significant not only for the operation of the library but also for the symbolism of the built environment. Until the 1850s the complete absence of suitable housing for the collection and its constant removal to new and usually unsatisfactory premises reflected the ongoing instability of organisations trying to operate in the absence of guaranteed funding. Unable to secure more permanent premises and provide a congenial environment for members and their collections severely hampered their capacity to provide continuing and reliable library services.

Later, a commitment was made by government to provide custom-built, permanent buildings, firstly the Institute building which was quickly outgrown and then the grand building to house the new Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery, still in use for some library services today. Whilst unwilling to commit to adequate recurrent funding, this major

capital expenditure reflected a recognition of the significant role to be played by government in the provision of library services.

#### 1834-1855

The inadequacy of the facilities is illustrated thus: 'the rooms were noisy, stuffy and overcrowded, affording no space for lectures, a museum, or the affiliated societies. The main library room was lit by candles and camphine lamps. In the middle of the ceiling there was a conical skylight that attracted most of Adelaide's pigeons which some of the younger patrons would sometimes catch for the table' (Bridge, 1986, p. 35). At various times there were enthusiastic promises of money for land and funds to build a library but it did not happen during this period (Bridge, 1986, p. 15).

#### 1856-1910

In 1858 the government had finally found £4000 for a new building with provision for 'a separate subscriber's library, public reading room, coffee room, board room, societies room, and upstairs a large room for a Museum and caretaker's quarters' (Bridge, 1986, p. 36). The new purpose-built South Australian Institute building was completed in 1860 and officially opened with great fanfare in 1861.

The growing push for the creation of a public reference library funded by the government resulted in a design competition in 1873 for a set of buildings to incorporate the library, art gallery, museum and an assortment of other rooms with a budget of £50,000. In 1876 the government placed £5000 on the estimates as a first instalment in an attempt to relieve overcrowding in the existing building. In 1879 the foundation stone was laid and by 1884 South Australia had an enormous new building housing a new institution, the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of South Australia (Bridge, 1986, p. 54). Then in 1908 construction began on the east wing to house the rest of the Museum which would free up space for the library (Bridge, 1986, p. 88).

#### Members and users

The South Australian Literary and Scientific Association and the South Australian Subscription Library were both aimed squarely at the ruling class, whilst the Mechanics Institute was a broader based body aiming to benefit that portion of the working class intent upon acquiring skills and 'culture'. Much of the earlier interest was in classes and lectures as well as events, with this giving way over the course of the century to a persistent demand for 'entertaining' literature from the subscribers scattered across the state (Bridge, 1986, p.46).

#### 1856-1910

With the creation of the South Australian Institute library users included both borrowers (subscribers to the subscription library) and readers, (those who signed the visitors' book in the Reading Room and had the right to read in the library free of charge). Library reading rooms weren't considered an appropriate place for women and borrowing was generally done on behalf of the family by the male head of the household who would be the subscriber (Bridge, 1986, p. 46).

Whilst during the earlier part of this period the number of subscribers across the State grew, by 1910 this number was static. At the same time 'In 1901...estimated that about 150,000 people visited the Library and Newspaper Reading Room a year, a figure roughly equivalent to the then population of Adelaide. This was a rate of use comparable to that of the Sydney and Melbourne institutions' (Bridge, 1986, p. 88). Clearly both approaches to the provision of library services – the subscription library and the reference library – were very popular services with a high level of support from the population. Both met different but important needs.

#### **Collections and services**

The chequered development of library collections in the first twenty years was underpinned by reliance upon donation and subscription. The introduction of limited government funding in 1856 assisted in the development of the collection but served to foster the inbuilt tension between the demands of the Institutes and the supporters of the public reference library concept. The Institutes' subscription libraries were firmly focused on serving the needs of their customers, which for the majority meant the provision of light reading as opposed to the more serious and educational intent of the public reference library concept. Government funding was justified on the grounds that it provided access to educational works and opportunities for improvement.

# 1834-1855

South Australia's first library collection of approximately 200 items was formed in England and arrived in Adelaide in December 1836 in a trunk, miraculously surviving an inauspicious dunking in the Port River to safely reach dry land. This was the collection of the South Australian Literary and Scientific Association, formed in London in 1834 with the intent of 'the cultivation and diffusion of useful knowledge throughout the colony' (Talbot, 2008, p. 269). Despite such an enthusiastic beginning, for the next two years this collection was left

in a shop in Adelaide, probably indicating other more pressing demands upon the new colonists.

The collection consisted of an original collection of seventy-eight books and four volumes of pamphlets, largely donated by Gouger, a prominent early colonist. Bridge states that the collection '... did not display the range of books one would expect to find in a nineteenth century gentleman's club library – classics, poetry, theology; rather, it was comprised of the hard-bitten handbooks and texts of an emigration agent, 'useful knowledge'" (Bridge, 1986, p. 4). Recent research by Talbot has concluded that the number of titles was closer to 500 books and that the collection was much broader and more diverse than recognized by Bridge (Talbot, 2008).

The collection passed to the Adelaide Mechanics Institute but depression in the early 1840s meant that in 1843 it had to be deposited with a moneylender to cover a debt (Bridge, 1986, p. 12), and was then acquired by the newly formed and exclusive South Australian Subscription Library in 1844. When this organisation itself languished and merged with the revived Mechanics Institute in 1847/8, an agreement was reached whereby the new body acquired the 2000 volumes now held by the Subscription Library.

Activities such as lectures, classes and concerts were popular with members of all of these organisations, particularly the revitalised Mechanics Institute which was patronised by the Governor and other leading citizens.

#### 1856-1910

A new era was introduced with the creation of the South Australia Institute in 1856. The commitment by government to provide, albeit very limited, funds towards acquisitions, a free reading room open to the public and a purpose-built building signified a major shift in thinking.

With the library now responsible for serving the whole colony (geographically), and backed by the Institutes' supporters, it introduced the highly innovative book boxes scheme to distribute the library collection to subscribers at the various Institutes across the State. Additional government funding in 1857-8 assisted this process and the first boxes were sent in 1859. This idea was copied in 1860 in Victoria, in the 1880's in NSW and the United States (Bridge, 1986, p. 39).

The printed catalogue of 1861 showed a total bookstock of 9,824 volumes. As in the early 1850s, approximately a third were novels, a seventh general literature (essays, letters,

speeches) a seventh geography, travels and voyages, an eighth scientific works, and other serious works an eighth. There were 54 periodical subscriptions ... standard reference works and some rare books e.g. the eight volumes of Gould's Birds of Australia, purchased for several hundred pounds (Bridge, 1986, p. 44). The nature of the novels in the collection increasingly reflected a trend to lighter fiction which suited subscribers' tastes. The books sent in the circulating boxes were mainly in the general literature category – essays, biographies, travel – with some popular science and standard novels (Bridge, 1986, p. 38). In 1869 the Board determined that for every novel borrowed another work had also to be borrowed which was not popular with many subscribers who only wished to read novels (Bridge, 1986, p. 53).

By 1884, the last year of the South Australian Institute, whilst the population had trebled since 1856, the Institute library's bookstock had multiplied; the number of subscribers was static but from eight country and suburban institutes in 1857 there were now 113, with 5185 members; 157 book boxes were in circulation and 23 of these containing only books in the German language; there was twice the participation rate of 1856 and three times the books per head (Bridge, 1986, p. 48).

Upon the creation of the new Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery in 1884, the 26,000 volumes were divided so that 12,000 'books of sterling merit' went to the Public Library to go alongside the 11,000 volumes specially purchased since 1873 for the free reference collection (Bridge, 1986, p. 65). Despite the pressure for more 'educational' works, from 1884 onwards the nature of the collection strongly suggested a desire to retain the general reader.

Comparative library statistics in 1900 suggest that South Australia was second only to Victoria in the volumes per head of population and more than double that in the other colonies. In Victoria about forty per cent of total volumes were in the Melbourne Public Library (State Library) whereas in South Australia the Public Library in Adelaide held only about ten per cent, reflecting the much higher distribution of library services across the colony than elsewhere (statistics quoted in Bridge, 1986, p. 89-90). This was a unique characteristic of library services in South Australia in the second half of the nineteenth century.

#### The Institutes versus Free library supporters

Two strongly held principles of the early founders of South Australia were evident in the provision of library services throughout the nineteenth century (and endured well into the

twentieth century). 'Disciples of individual self-help or voluntarism, they shunned State aid and government run institutions but were also deep believers in the Enlightenment and valued education as a cornerstone of their new society' (Bridge, 1986, p. 20-21).

By the 1870s the growing emphasis upon education served to nurture the tensions inherent in the composition of the Library Board(s), with the Institute supporters on the one hand representing the needs of the subscribers whose major requirement was for light reading, and on the other hand those who believed the main focus of the collections and the justification for government funding was the development of serious and educational collections. This was a need which the subscription libraries could never adequately meet.

Whilst it seemed that the free public library supporters were gaining the upper hand by the 1880s, continued population growth and geographical spread meant the proliferation of Institutes across the State. This, combined with the government subsidy, a central governing body and the dedication of astute, imaginative and tenacious proponents strengthened the role of the Institutes so that by 1910 they were a dominant force.

The Institutes in South Australia grew out of the Mechanics Institutes movement in Britain, but by the middle of the century their wider membership was reflected in dropping the word Mechanics from their name, thus becoming Institutes (Talbot, 1988, p. 129). In receipt of the government subsidy for books and lecturers since 1857 and with the South Australian Institute managing the book box scheme the Institutes flourished. However it was the management of the subsidy that was at the core of contention. The subsidy was based on income and whilst it was wildly erratic up to 1874, for the next decade it stabilised at pound for pound. Economic downturn in the 1880s meant a reduction in the subsidy, sparking strong opposition from the institutes and resulting in the formation of the Institutes Association.

#### THE INSTITUTES ASSOCIATION AND THE MORGAN THOMAS BEQUEST

Surprisingly a Free Libraries Bill which contained provisions that would empower municipal councils to levy a library rate of up to one penny was passed in 1899. Whilst this was never enacted by a municipal council, this legislation was another factor spurring the formation of the Institutes Association in 1899 to protect the institutes' grant (Bridge, 1986, p. 72) as well as to engage in co-operative buying and publishing a journal. In 1902 the Institutes Association sought and gained an additional two representatives on the Board though it was still a minority (five out of fourteen). The unexpected and huge Morgan Thomas bequest to the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery of £65,000 in 1903-4 provided

longer term funding certainty for library acquisitions. However, after a protracted legal dispute as to the beneficiaries the Institutes eventually received none of this money and within four years severed their ties with the Board and went their own way (Bridge, 1986, p. 78). In 1910 the Institutes Association became a separate incorporated body administering its government grant, whilst at the same time the Institutes retained membership on the Public Library Board.

# Conclusion

By the middle of the century a clear split had emerged between supporters of subscription libraries and public reference libraries yet even at this early stage it had become evident that without government funding libraries were unlikely to survive. By the beginning of the twentieth century this simmering dissension had boiled over into a full-blown split between the warring parties. The early spirit of 'self-reliance' and independence so highly valued by the pioneers endured in the advocates of subsidised subscription libraries. On the other side were the supporters of government funding of free library services such as those emerging in Britain and other Australian states, library services targeted at provision of serious and educational but less popular works. To some extent this reflected the earlier split between the supporters of the broader-based, popular Mechanics Institutes and the more elitist libraries, but it was as much a split between the country and city, with Institutes supporters spread across the state whilst their opponents were centred in Adelaide. Members of the ruling classes were aligned on both sides of the argument, and sadly there was no force able to unite them. In a state which had espoused the notion of systematic planning, commercial enterprise and a minimal role for government the battle for control and for retention of government subsidies appeared in 1910 to have been won by the Institutes, those who had long upheld their belief in 'user pays' and independence and resulted in the eventual split in the provision of library services.

The distinctive features of South Australian society in the nineteenth century were reflected in the nature of their libraries. Born into a century imbued with Enlightenment ideals and created through the drive of entrepreneurial 'republicans' with a strong independent but also mercantile streak, South Australia sought to make its own mark on the continent. By the end of the century it could proudly claim to have a library system which reflected the hunger for education but also the desire for light reading through an innovative 'book box' system which delivered books across the State. That they did so with a mixture of government support and 'user pays' suited the South Australian mentality which, while displaying a deep distrust of government and a strong belief in paying for services, had come to accept that government had an important role in actively supporting access to library services for the population.

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Charlotte Henry

Biographical note

Charlotte Henry's professional career as a librarian has spanned over 30 years in public libraries at a senior level. She has also worked in university research administration and continues to work in her own business (in an unrelated field). Charlotte currently works at the Maribyrnong City Council Library Service in a senior role. Charlotte's recent studies (Masters) specialisation was Archival Systems. Charlotte was also able to undertake research which combined her interest in the nineteenth century, in Australian history and in exploring factors which shape institutions and their evolution, with a particular focus upon cultural institutions.

#### Qualifications

Arts Degree (BA)

Diploma in Education (Dip Ed)

Graduate Diploma in Librarianship (Grad Dip Lib)

Graduate Diploma in Document Management (with Distinction) (Grad Dip Doc Management)

Master of Information Management and Systems (MIMS) (Archives specialisation)