

POLITICS, LITERATURE, FOLKLORE AND CIRCUMNAVIGATING THE WORLD: THE WHAT, WHY AND HOW OF DIGITAL COLLECTIONS AT CURTIN UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the journey Curtin University Library has taken in providing digital access to recently acquired collections. It discusses the collections, outlines important criteria and processes, and presents the challenges and benefits of digitising collections.

Building on the expertise gained in establishing the digital archive of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library, Curtin University Library has since developed a number of digital collections with themes as varied as politics, literature, folklore and circumnavigating the world.

In order to consider collections of vastly different subject matter, formats and information types for acceptance, the Library developed 'Archival Collections Principles' and a selection checklist for donations. These documents ensure decisions are made in a consistent and defensible manner, and take into account available resources. The range of formats (e.g. print, audio, video, images, objects) and information types (e.g. speeches, scrapbooks, journal articles, plays, sail plans, echo sound charts, questionnaires, interviews) across the collections has required an individual and creative approach to organising and providing digital access to each collection.

The benefits resulting from these activities include utilising and developing staff expertise, making valuable collections widely available where they otherwise would have remained largely inaccessible, and enhancing the reputation of Curtin University.

For libraries considering developing a digital collection, this paper outlines some useful principles and guidelines with which to proceed.

Introduction

Libraries and archives have long been the preferred repository for special collections. These collections are usually the result of many years' work and, whatever their focus - from the ephemeral to literary manuscripts, they are treasured by their original custodian and can enhance a holding institution's reputation. While the reasons for donating collections are as varied as the content of the collections themselves, the ultimate objective of the donor is to secure a future for the collection in an environment that values access to and preservation of knowledge. Information technology has given collecting agencies the tools to do this on a scale unthinkable in the past. It gives enormous flexibility to index, make accessible,

present and promote a collection. However, collections in a digital form require as much, if not more, thought as those in a physical form.

Following the establishment of the John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library (JCPML) and its digital archive (<http://john.curtin.edu.au/>), Curtin University Library has developed a digital collection of the papers of past Western Australian Premier Dr Geoff Gallop (<http://john.curtin.edu.au/gallop/>) and digitised an annotated bibliography of noted author Elizabeth Jolley (<http://john.curtin.edu.au/jolley/>). It is currently working on the papers of another WA Premier, Dr Carmen Lawrence, and planning digital archives for a collection of records and artefacts related to Jon Sanders' 1988 triple circumnavigation of the world and the WA Folklore Archive.

This paper explores the journey the Library has taken in providing digital access to recently acquired collections. It outlines important criteria and processes involved in the creation of digital collections, discusses the five collections accepted by the Library to date, and presents the challenges and benefits that emerged from working with each of the collections.

Background

In 1998, the JCPML opened its doors to the public, providing access to an archival collection with a primary focus on the life and times of John Curtin, the war time prime minister after whom Curtin University is named (Carman-Brown et al. 2005). The collection contains personal papers, oral histories, photographs, moving pictures, sound recordings, copies of official records and other archival material. From the start, it was envisaged that the JCPML would be not just a repository holding these significant original records, but an electronic gateway providing access to John Curtin related material held both at the JCPML and in other institutions in Australia and around the world.

A digital archive, the Electronic Research Archive (ERA), was developed to provide electronic access to most of the JCPML collection, not just to selected 'jewels'. When it went live on the Internet in early 1999, ERA was a first in Australia and an innovation on the international scene. Initially using Excalibur Technologies' software, ERA now uses ExLibris' asset management system, DigiTool. The digital archive provides online access to images (of photographs, objects and documents), text (of the contents of documents), audio and video (of oral histories, sound recordings and moving footage pictures) and to finding aids for material which has not been digitised (Parisotto and Henderson 2003).

In creating the digital archive and subsequently migrating it to a new platform, Library staff developed significant expertise. Systems staff developed the infrastructure necessary to allow records to be scanned, stored locally and made accessible to users and also to provide for linking to records held elsewhere. The DigiTool system was customised so that records are presented in the hierarchical arrangement necessary to preserve their provenance and in a way compatible with standards of archival description. Importantly, users are able to search on the metadata and full text of items concurrently. Considerable expertise in handling donation documentation and in dealing with the issues of copyright and reproduction rights for archival material was built up and sound procedures and guidelines

developed. Staff also gained awareness of, and sensitivity to, the need to establish and maintain good relationships with other collecting institutions and with donors and supporters. Amongst other means, a mailing list database has been established along with a schedule of regular newsletters and invitations to JCPML events, usually about four per year.

Promotion of the collection is another area where staff have developed competencies related to publishing print and web resources, developing major onsite exhibitions and smaller touring exhibitions, organising public events such as lectures and exhibition openings, and creating educational programs and activities for use onsite and online by school groups and the general public.

The experience gained from establishing and managing the JCPML was an important factor in setting the direction for the approach the Library subsequently took towards digital collections.

Developing selection criteria

Over the years, the Library had received many offers of donations from staff as they retired or moved away from the University. With very few exceptions, one being a Women's Health Collection with a focus on the period 1918 to 1950, these offers were declined for lack of resources and storage space in the Library. In 2006, however, Dr Geoff Gallop, the former Premier of Western Australia (WA), approached the Vice-Chancellor offering to donate his personal papers to the University. The offer was accepted with enthusiasm by the Vice-Chancellor who saw the collection being managed and made accessible by the Library, allocating additional funding for the purpose. Although the Geoff Gallop Collection was the impetus leading to the development of robust selection criteria for future donation offers, other issues influenced the initiative and the discussions surrounding it.

Over the preceding two years, the Library had been approached by academic staff about two collections: an Elizabeth Jolley bibliography and a collection related to Jon Sanders' triple circumnavigation of the world. Each was closely associated with research conducted by Curtin staff and those involved were keen to make their work more widely available, believing the Library was best suited to achieve this. Around the same time, the JCPML expanded its original role of focussing on John Curtin's life and times to become more actively engaged in a range of Library activities in which its expertise with archival collections and public programs could make a significant contribution.

In the first instance, the Library established a costing model for the Geoff Gallop Collection. The model included costs for appraising, transporting, managing, organising, digitising, storing and promoting a collection. This provided a base from which budgets were drawn up for later collections. Inevitably, the differences between collections means an element of flexibility is required, but this original document is extremely useful as a framework for the activities involved subsequent to accepting a collection.

While the costing model provides an excellent guide to allocating personnel and tasks to a collection project, the Library recognised the importance of taking one step back and developing 'Archival Collections Principles' and a selection checklist for future donation

offers. These documents were created to ensure consistency and transparency when considering collections, given that donations accepted in the future would incur costs to the Library. At the same time, and directly related to resourcing a collection project, it was decided that the Library would concentrate on only one collection each year.

The Principles laid down the following criteria for consideration:

- Is there a direct relationship to Curtin University, either as a research project or through association with a staff member?
- Can a substantial proportion of the resources in the collection be digitised and made available through the web?
- Will the collection attract researchers from local, national and international communities?
- Does the collection have ongoing research value?
- Has some organisation or analysis of the collection been undertaken, for example an index or bibliography?
- Will the collection incur unacceptable costs to the Library?
- Are the resources in the collection in good physical condition?
- Are resources in the collection the primary responsibility of other collecting agencies, such as the National Archives of Australia or University Records.

The Principles also established responsibility for appraising collections, access and storage conditions, and promotion. Access and promotion were particularly important issues in the discussions leading up to drafting the Principles. The Library working group held the strong belief that collections should be made freely available through the web, when possible. It also reasoned that on completion of a collection project effective promotion was critical to achieving widespread use of the resource.

Since developing the Principles, the Library has accepted four discrete collections: the Elizabeth Jolley bibliography, the papers of Dr Carmen Lawrence, John Penrose's research materials relating to Jon Sanders' triple circumnavigation of the world, and the WA Folklore Archive. The range of formats and information types in the collections requires an individual and creative approach to organisation and access, which in turn develops staff expertise and enhances the reputation of both the Library and the University.

The Geoff Gallop Collection

Following the acceptance of Dr Gallop's papers, the Library requested and received the promised strategic initiative funding to assist with the arrangement and description of the records, the creation of a digital archive, and promotion of the collection, including a public launch of the online archive. Additional casual staff were brought in to assist with metadata entry and scanning, and a web designer was contracted to create professional graphics and an overall look and feel for the digital archive and its accompanying web pages. Although

some customisation of Digitool was necessary, many of the processes were familiar to staff who worked with the JCPML collection and the project progressed smoothly.

The Geoff Gallop Collection, comprising some 18 linear metres of material, focuses on Dr Gallop's years in the WA Parliament and includes electoral office papers, speeches and speech notes, memorabilia, correspondence, electorate scrapbooks, political cartoons, government achievement reports, direct mail, and papers on a wide variety of themes including WA electoral reform, the Australian republic, the Australian Labor Party and WA history, and the Burke, Dowding and Lawrence Governments. Most records in the JCPML collection are over 60 years old while the Gallop records are obviously much more recent, with most dating from 1986 to 2006. Consequently, copyright holders were more readily traced and permission for digitisation sought. The most significant copyright holders for this collection were Dr Gallop and the Australian Labor Party and their support was key to the viability of the project. Clearance of copyright for other material, such as the political cartoons is ongoing. Working with more modern documents allowed for greater use of OCR software, a technique which had been of very limited use in creating text from the older documents in the JCPML collection. All of Dr Gallop's speeches for example, have been made accessible as searchable text using this functionality.

Having a high profile donor still active in public life is a bonus when it comes to promoting a collection. Dr Gallop spoke at the launch of his collection in late 2006 at a well patronised event and his lecture 'The Case for Politics' received considerable media attention. It was later broadcast on the community television channel and is also available as video, audio and text from the Gallop website and as part of the collection.

As part of raising the profile of the collection, Curtin Library contributed photographs to the National Library's Picture Australia database. Again, the experience gained in adding JCPML images to Picture Australia ensured that this exercise was relatively straightforward, with only minor technical difficulties to be overcome. The collection was then showcased at the Picture Australia participant's meeting in mid-2007. The images provide a pictorial record of the life of a state parliamentarian, minister and premier in the last decade of the twentieth century. The photographs show the local member for Victoria Park involving himself in the life of his electorate (school visits, tree planting, opening bridges and buildings) and also reveal much about Dr Gallop's public life as Premier of WA.

To further promote this unique collection, the Library is currently developing a web resource with related educational 'interactives' focusing on the Gallop Government's achievements and initiatives, and based on research undertaken within the collection and elsewhere. The JCPML Historical Consultant will research and write the text and Library staff will source the accompanying documents, photographs and audiovisual material to bring it to life and frame the educational activities particularly geared to secondary school students studying history, politics or legal studies.

The Elizabeth Jolley Collection

The second donation accepted by the Library, the Elizabeth Jolley Collection, is significant in many aspects. Elizabeth Jolley is an author of international standing who won numerous awards and honours during her lifetime. She was also a Curtin staff member for over 20 years. At the heart of the collection offered to the Library is an extensive bibliography of the works by and about Elizabeth Jolley, much of it annotated. Curtin academics, Professor Brian Dibble and Associate Professor Barbara Milech, had been working on the bibliography for several years, originally envisaging its publication in print. However, they recognised the advantages of providing access to the bibliography through the web and approached the Library to work towards that goal. The physical items collected in the course of creating the bibliography include books, photocopied articles, audiovisual items, ephemera, artworks, and objects.

As this collection comprised mostly published materials rather than unpublished archival documents, staff organising the electronic collection were faced with reconfiguring the Digitool software so that records displayed the bibliographic details of items in a way that is familiar to clients. The archival hierarchy, so important to showing the provenance of records in the JCPML and Geoff Gallop collections, did not suit the structure of the online Elizabeth Jolley bibliography and significant customisation was necessary. For example, where 'creator' is an important field to define the origins of an archival collection, the bibliography required more explicit headings relating to its parts.

It was the first time the Library had worked so directly, on a weekly and at times daily basis with the donors of a collection. Their knowledge of the bibliography and the materials it referred to was invaluable. Professors Milech and Dibble wrote the text for the web pages associated with the searchable online bibliography, including information about honours and awards bestowed on Elizabeth Jolley, an extensive biography of her early years, and background to the creation of the bibliography. These pages bind Elizabeth Jolley's work with the person and add extraordinary value to the collection.

Digitisation of materials listed in the bibliography presented challenges due to copyright issues. The large scale of the project, approximately 2,000 items, meant clear procedures for seeking permissions from publishers and authors were required. In the first instance, permissions were sought from editors of journals which had published multiple items in the bibliography; a similar approach was taken to authors of multiple items. As anticipated, the permissions-seeking process is ongoing and will continue for some time yet to build up the full text content of the collection.

Developing the Elizabeth Jolley Collection involved a great deal of work, but delivered unforeseen rewards for the Library. Staff working on the project gained expertise and engaged with academic staff in a manner uncommon in the day-to-day operations of the Library. In addition, the Library enhanced its reputation both within and outside of the University. The promotion and launch of the collection were hugely successful. This was, for the most part, due to the collaborative approach taken to the entire project; the launch being the result of working closely with the authors of the bibliography and with staff of the school in which Elizabeth Jolley worked. Held almost a year to the day after Elizabeth

Jolley's death, the launch acted as a celebration of Elizabeth Jolley, the person and her work, and as an occasion to remember her. By combining the launch of the collection with a literary forum, the event attracted guests from across WA and interstate who enjoyed an evening which included a speech by her first publisher, readings from her books, and a panel discussion about regionalism in literature.

The Carmen Lawrence Collection

The Library accepted another political collection in 2007 when Dr Carmen Lawrence (WA Premier from 1990-93) donated her personal papers from her years in state parliament, as MLA for Subiaco and Glendalough and as Premier. The collection includes electoral office papers, speeches and speech notes, photographs and other records. Armed with the recent experience of dealing with Dr Gallop's papers, Library staff are confidently setting about creating a digital archive and accompanying website. Work began at the start of 2008, with contract staff being employed to assist with accessioning, digitising and web design. At approximately 34 linear metres, the Lawrence Collection is roughly twice the size of the Gallop Collection. A launch and public lecture by Dr Lawrence is planned for late in 2008 and images will be added to Picture Australia in due course.

John Sanders' Collection

The fourth donation the Library has accepted is a collection of records and artefacts related to Jon Sanders' remarkable non-stop, triple circumnavigation of the world between May 1986 and March 1988, aboard his 47-foot yacht Parry Endeavour. These materials showcase the University's leadership in the marine sciences and the involvement of Curtin researchers, including that of the donor, Emeritus Professor John Penrose who is based at the Centre for Marine Science and Technology, in the Sanders' voyage.

A small but significant collection of some 3 linear metres, the material is very different from that dealt with previously and presents some interesting challenges. Included are echo sound charts and printouts of the four kilometre sea mountain that Curtin researchers' electronic equipment detected during Sanders' voyage, log entries of scientific records, the sail plan, cassette tapes, boxes of slides and proofs, minutes of working party meetings, media cuttings, film reels of news coverage, and records of accounts for the triple circumnavigation project.

Issues under consideration include how best to present this material digitally (especially the echo sound charts) and how much of the audio visual content will be able to be made accessible online. Customisation of the metadata fields will be needed to adequately describe the items and the physical storage of some materials will also require thought.

WA Folklore Archive

Most recently, in March 2008, the Library accepted the donation of the WA Folklore Archive (WFA) from Curtin academic Professor Graham Seal, Director of the Australian Folklore Research Unit within the Faculty of Humanities. WFA was established in 1985 as a repository for the State's folklore. It is the only state folklore archive in Australia and its holdings are a unique record of the diverse folk traditions of WA and its people. The

Archive consists of student, staff and community-collected materials held in a variety of formats, including reports, audio tapes, video tapes, photographs and some items of material culture.

A major component of the collection is work produced by Curtin undergraduate students completing courses in folklore. These fieldwork projects date from 1985 to the present, often include photographs, surveys and interviews, and focus on fascinating WA themes as varied as Perth graffiti, brothel-lore, Greek weddings, group settlement lore, surfing lore, the Blessing of the Fleet at Fremantle port, and the making of traditional craypots.

Another significant part of the collection is the data gathered from questionnaires completed by the students themselves about their own folklore beliefs and experiences, and it is this information that presents the greatest challenge. Ideally, de-identified data would be made available online for researchers in the field. However, permissions gained from students were on the basis that researchers could use the physical collection, as electronic access was not envisaged at the time. This is a thorny issue to be further considered.

Conclusion

Over the past few years, the rewards gained far outweigh the difficulties encountered in the process of developing digital collections. Central to the success of these initiatives are the Archival Collections Principles and selection checklist. They guide all subsequent activities involved in developing a digital collection, providing a clear purpose, parameters and anticipated outcomes, critical for resourcing and managing such a project.

In the course of digitising the different collections, Library staff have gained experience and skills that range from database customisation to webpage design. Considerations such as privacy and maintaining the integrity of a collection have emerged, with the result that staff have developed their professional knowledge. Negotiations with donors and achieving a balance between copyright compliance and open access to full text content can be the undoing of a digital collection, but the Library has managed these processes effectively through attention to detail and careful planning. Collaboration with academic staff has extended the Library's role and enhanced its reputation in the University by drawing attention to the Library staffs' expertise and willingness to work with researchers towards a common goal. Engagement with the research interests of our community, and extending access to the wider community, has meant our digital collections contribute to the intangible wealth of knowledge at the University and provide substantial resources for researchers worldwide.

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