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Finding David: Mitchell's Gift

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ABSTRACT

On his death in July 1907, David Scott Mitchell left to the people of New South Wales his extraordinary collections of books, documents, maps and pictorial works. The year 2007 marks the centenary of this bequest. To honour David Scott Mitchell's great gift, the State Library has commenced the Mitchell Bequest Project. The aims of the project are to identify and improve access by creating electronic records and providing preservation treatments for all material acquired through the original Bequest.

A four-month Pilot Project began in November 2002 to establish workable procedures and protocols within and between branches and divisions of the Library. The Pilot provided a statistical basis for estimating turnaround times and

aided in streamlining the workflow. The Mitchell Bequest Project began in earnest in March 2003, and systems and work areas continue to be developed and refined as the project proceeds. A team of Library Volunteers identify and retrieve the books with the telltale signature and/or bookplate. Collection Services create an electronic catalogue entry for each volume. The books then travel to Preservation for conservation treatment as appropriate and are each fitted with a protective polyester dust jacket. Reader Services advise on priorities and significance, and re-shelve the books.

Under the guidance of a Steering Committee with representatives from across the Library, the Mitchell Bequest Project continues to establish new and reinvigorate existing connections between

the differing sectors of the Library. This successful collaboration is anticipated to act as a template for future Library-wide endeavours.

PROJECT BACKGROUND

The Project aims to identify and provide electronic records for all material in the original Mitchell Bequest. The principle aim of the Project is to provide online access to the bibliographic catalogue records of some of the most significant and unique research material in the Library collection. Previously these were accessible only through a complex variety of catalogues and finding aids within the Library building. A concurrent aim is to preserve those items in the Mitchell Bequest enabling continual physical access and to ensure their survival into the next century

The Project also provides information and a model for undertaking electronic conversion for other parts of the Library collection without online access. In addition, the Project assists with the development of general asset management policies for the collection. The project is Foundation funded and as such it also assists with the Foundation's future Capital Campaigns.

DAVID SCOTT MITCHELL

David Scott Mitchell was born on the 19th of March, 1836. A doctor's only son and an independently wealthy bachelor, devoted most of the 71 years of his life to collecting. He collected books, manuscripts and paintings. Although he commenced with collecting English literature, he was one of the first to recognize and soon concentrate on Australiana. His "...aim was to gather a copy of every document, in whatever format, relating to Australia, the southwest Pacific, the East Indies and Antarctica."(p.14)

Upon his death his collection is estimated to have contained more than 60,000 printed and 11,000 original items, including 1140 manuscript volumes and 251 pictorial items. It is this collection (plus 85 pictorial items donated during his

lifetime) that he bequeathed to the Trustees of the NSW Public Library. The bequest made on the condition that a new building be provided to house the material, thus keeping it separate from the rest of the collection and creating the foundations of the "Mitchell Library". Prior to the commencement of the project only 3% of these items had electronic bibliographic records on the Library's computer catalogue system.

The Project has been divided into two main stages:

- Pilot, October 2002 to February 2003, to establish principles and workflows for the Project.
- Project, March 2003 to the end of June 2007

As the 60,000 printed book items form the bulk of the project it is this collection that this paper will concentrate on.

CONNECTIONS/COLLABORATIONS

The Mitchell Bequest Project involves many sections of the Library. For that purpose a Steering Committee has been setup to guide the running of the project and make policy decisions. The Committee consists of representatives from across the Library.

Smooth running of the project is ensured by regular team meetings within the Library sections. These are used to resolve procedural issues, problem solve and incorporate training sessions in the treatment techniques adopted. Procedural issues involving more than one section of the Library are resolved by the concerned parties examining all facts and negotiating the best solution for all involved. In the process new connections are established and existing connections within the Library are reinvigorated.

The Mitchell Bequest Project is a Foundation funded project. All participants attend Foundation functions to report on progress to date as well as do a "show and tell" of the techniques and objectives of the project.

All items arriving in Preservation are recorded on the Management Information

System, an MsAccess database. For Collection Conservation items all treatment information is recorded on this database. The collected information helps to easily track the progress of the project. It also assists in resource allocation as well as being a reporting tool.

THE PROJECT.

The calculations used in the Mitchell Bequest project proposal were based on the premise that the condition of the collection would correspond to the collection snapshot ratio. This ratio had been arrived at by Heather Mansell from the work carried out and information collected in the SLNSW Preservation Branch over the period of 12 years in the Collection Conservation Section.

In this ratio 20% of items are estimated to be in very good condition, requiring no treatment at all, 40% require minimal treatment, 40% of items are in poor condition requiring more than minimal treatment. Funding was secured for 5 full time positions to treat approximately 48,000 of the 60,000 printed books in the Mitchell Bequest project. Half of these, 24,000 were assumed to require minimal (approx. 10 minutes) treatment.

To streamline procedures a 3 Tier approach was adopted. Tier 1 treatment consisting of low level preservation (max. 10 minutes treatment component); Tier 2 consisted of structural repair of non-iconic items (aver. 3hr/item); and Tier 3 intended as a full individual item conservation treatment given to iconic, or high value items, assessed on an individual basis.

On the completion of the pilot phase of the project this Tier structure was re-evaluated and altered. The details of the alteration will be covered further in the paper.

LIFE/JOURNEY OF A DSM ITEM.

Currently the journey of the DSM items in the project consists of the following stages: 1) Identification, 2) Cataloguing, 3) Preservation, and finally 4) Return to circulation. Each stage involves a number of different sections.

Identification

The Mitchell Library is a growing collection with items continually added to it. Although the original bequest forms the foundation of this collection, there exists no record of what the items in it are. Fortunately, David Scott Mitchell signed the books in his collection. Items belonging to collections he purchased often contain the original owners identifying bookplates. There is also a David Scott Mitchell personal bookplate which he placed in some of his books. The signature and/or bookplates are now used to identify the original bequest items.

All items predating 1908 in the Mitchell Library have to be examined for the identifying signature, which is not always on the 1st page, or one of the bookplates. With over 350,000 items in the Mitchell Library stack, this is no small job. A team of about ten volunteers are rostered to spend time in the stack carrying out this task.

The volunteers are trained by Collection Services to identify the books and by Preservation on how to handle the material. Once identified the items are placed on trolleys and transported to Collection Services for cataloguing. A slip is left on the shelf to record the removal of each item for the project.

Cataloguing

Once an item is in Collection Services the Library catalogue is searched for a record entry of this item. Usually such an entry is not found and a new catalogue entry has to be created. The first step in record creation is a search of Kinetica (Australian bibliographic database). When an existing bibliographic record of the item is not found there, the search is widened to other worldwide databases, card catalogues, reference texts etc. The detective work often requiring foreign language skills or the use of a dictionary. Once found the bibliographic details are corrected or adjusted as required, then entered onto Kinetika. From Kinetika the records are transferred to the Library Catalogue where additional particulars are added. As of the 31st March 2004, 14,788 have been

catalogued with 5,265 unique records being created on Kinetica

The final step for Collection Services is to produce the barcode and call number labels which are attached to long green cards slipped into each book. As the bibliographic records for these books are now on the Library catalogue, they are then checked out to the Preservation MBQ (Mitchell Bequest) patron record on the circulation module of the catalogue and transported by trolleys to Preservation.

Preservation

In Preservation, records of the "checked-out-items" are transferred from the catalogue circulation module onto the preservation database, ready for their arrival from Collection Services on Tuesdays and Thursdays.

On arrival in Preservation the item records for each volume are located among the transferred entries on the database by scanning the barcode of the item. The received date is added to the record for each item.

The condition of the items is assessed and the items are segregated by Tier, with a note made on the database. Slips with all item information are then printed for the items requiring treatment (Tier1-3). The books are then sorted by the treatment level required and distributed to the applicable section of the lab. The preservation treatments are then carried out as required.

Return to Circulation

On completion of treatment the Preservation database record for each book is updated with treatment information and the completion date. The items are then "checked-in" on the Library's catalogue as being 'back on the shelf'. The trolleys of completed books are then delivered to Reader Services. The Reading Room staff replaces the Jacketed Mitchell Bequest books back onto the shelves, ready for public use.

As each of the books now has a full electronic record, they are readily found on

the Library's catalogue, via the web or in-house. Requests for access to these books are subsequently on the increase. These long-hidden books are now being read providing evidence that the objective of the project has been achieved.

CHALLENGES

A project of this size has not previously been attempted at the Library. As with all projects of this magnitude there were some stumbling blocks along the way. The four main issues which arose and have been dealt with to date were those concerning the 1) Jackets, 2) Labeling, 3) Tier structure and the 4) Preservation Database.

Jackets

One of the initial approaches to the preservation of the Mitchell Bequest items involves Polyester book jackets. Initially items requiring preservation were to be placed in these book jackets for protection and slight support. Several designs were developed and tested for this purpose. The designs and recommendation for the preferred jacket were presented at the first Steering Committee meeting and a decision was made as to which to use.

The Steering Committee also made the decision to place all of the Bequest items in the Polyester jackets. The jackets visually identify the David Scott Mitchell items as special in the event of the collection not being housed separately. The jackets also provide a relatively secure place to put the security (barcodes) and identification labels.

This decision requires *all* Mitchell Bequest items to go to Preservation for fitting of the Melinex™ jackets and increases the number of items in Preservation from the potential 48,000 to the whole 60,000.

Labeling

At a December 2002 Steering Committee meeting it was decided that the jackets might be useful for other parts of the Library's collection. The jackets would therefore not identify items as David Scott Mitchell material. The idea of a special David Scott Mitchell label was explored.

Simultaneously large numbers of books requiring call number labels had been arriving in Preservation. In order to avoid spending time on typing these labels, Collection Services were approached to generate labels from their system. Such system-generated labels automatically contain a "DSM" (David Scott Mitchell) prefix. They also come with an additional, larger label displaying the call number and title details.

The Dixon Librarian and Collection Services were consulted, and a decision was made to place the Collection Services generated label on all David Scott Mitchell books. This avoided the need for a special David Scott Mitchell label. The arrival of books in Preservation from collection services with both these labels and the barcode on one green slip eliminated the possibility of the barcodes being mixed up and placed into the wrong books.

Agreement was also reached to position the call number labels on the book jackets, at the bottom, proper right side corner of the front covers. This eases retrieval from stack, and does not distract from the aesthetic appearance of the items on the shelves. The extra call number and title label is also placed on the jacket, inside the back cover, helping to identify which book the jacket belongs to in case it is separated from the book.

Tier Structure

The initial Tier structure proposed for the project consisted of two collection conservation Tiers and one single item conservation Tier, Tier 3. The difference between Tier one and two lay in the time required to carry out the preservation treatment of the item.

Tier 3 treatments were excluded from the Pilot, as these items were to be addressed on individual basis. This Tier was intended for iconic value items only. Many of these items have already received treatment in the past, as part of exhibitions, loans or other projects.

As the pilot progressed a large backlog accumulated, consisting of items requiring

long Tier 2 treatments. Many of the backlog items were in very bad condition, requiring over 6hrs and some as much as 30hrs of treatment. With the backlog growing it became apparent that the Tier structure needed to be re-evaluated. Occasional "icons" automatically entered as Tier 3 often required little or no treatment. Icons requiring treatment are few in number.

A decision was made to alter Tier 3 to be in line with the collections conservation approach of Tiers 1 and 2. All items requiring treatments of over 6 hours are now Tier 3. As it is unknown what proportion of volumes will require these time consuming treatments, the priority of Tier 3 items is also assessed. With an average of only 26 minutes available per book, too much time spent on lengthy Tier 3 treatments would mean that the project would not be completed in time for the centenary of Mitchell's death in 2007, or at all.

A regular consultation session has been set up between Preservation and the Dixon Librarian. Each item in Tier 3 is assessed on the basis of its use, uniqueness and value. A decision is then made on whether the lengthy treatment is to go ahead.

Where the item is of low use, there is an alternate copy in the collection and/or is not very significant, the item is shrink-wrapped with a note requiring it to be brought to the attention of the Dixon Librarian on opening. If an item in this category is opened twice within a reasonably short period of time, its treatment will be re-evaluated.

Icons/high value items were removed from the scope of the main project and a list of High Priority Mitchell Bequest items was commenced. These items will then undergo single item conservation based on their priority and availability of resources.

Preservation Database

Until recently there has been no link between the library catalogue and the

preservation database. Each item required manual entry onto the Preservation database. This involved re-entering and duplicating information which already existed on the Library catalogue.

In collaboration between Preservation, Collection Services and Information Technology a method was devised to transfer information from the catalogue to the database. The information recorded in the catalog for the Mitchell Bequest items is copied from the circulation module and pasted into the database.

The 'check-out date' field is used as selection criteria, with all records 'checked-out' on a particular day transferred as one bulk entry. The barcode and the scanning wand are then used to locate individual records on the database, once the item is in Preservation.

The development of this solution has resulted in a significant time saving. The time required to register 15 items arriving in Preservation has changed from 20 minutes in the manual method to 14 minutes in the new method. This solution approximates to a saving of ½ years work by one person

The barcode is an individual unique identifier of each item. With many items in the David Scott Mitchell collection having similar or identical titles, the use of this field prohibits mistakes from occurring when recording treatment information and enables better tracking of material within Preservation.

SOLUTIONS

From the moment of its conception the Mitchell Bequest Project has been a learning exercise. In order to deal with a project of this magnitude processes had to be streamlined. New approaches and treatments were set up and old, established methods had to be re-evaluated. Improvements were made as necessary, taking care to choose the best approach for all involved.

Solutions have been reached by collaboration, ensuring it to be a constant

theme of this project. To date this has proven to be extremely fruitful. Many solutions were reached by acting on ideas originating from the least obvious source. The successful collaboration is anticipated to act as a template for future Library-wide endeavors.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Catherine Thomson and Agata Rostek-Robak are both Senior Conservators at the State Library of New South Wales. They each studied at the University of Canberra and have worked at the Library since 1996 and 1992 respectively. Catherine has been a member (ordinary and treasurer) of the AICCM NSW committee since 1999.

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