ANDREW McCONVILLE

Thomas Bride's room full of books

Dr Thomas Francis Bride was appointed chief librarian of Melbourne Public Library (now State Library Victoria) in July 1881.[1] He proved to be an excellent choice, revitalising the institution, bringing a new professionalism to the staff and overseeing effective organisation of the growing collection. Serving the wider interest of the community, he expanded the Library's reach through the establishment of the Lending Library, which operated between 1892 and 1971, and maintained the Travelling Library servicing country Victoria. As the collection outgrew Queen's Hall, he oversaw the building of Barry Hall. During his time as chief librarian, Bride turned a room full of fine books into an organised and accessible research library.

Thomas Bride was born in County Cork, Ireland, in around 1851. When he was roughly seven years old, his parents set out with him and his eight siblings for Melbourne, disembarking on 29 June 1858, after a 70-day voyage aboard *Young America*. The Bride family arrived when Melbourne was in the midst of enormous change. The gold rush was in full swing, and vast numbers of immigrants were arriving every week. The Brides were more affluent than most and had travelled as unassisted migrants. Thomas's father, Henry Bride,

Johnstone O'Shannessy & Co. (photographer) & L. Lang (lithographer), *Dr T.F. Bride*, lithograph: sepia, 27.5 x 21.5 cm, c. 1886, City of Boroondara Library Service, 12176066. Courtesy City of Boroondara Library Service

The Library around the time Thomas Bride would have first seen it, on completion of the south wing, in 1859. Melbourne Public Library (later State Library Victoria), southern portion of Swanston Street frontage, photograph: albumen silver, c. 1860, H4324

was qualified and found work first at the East Collingwood Council and then, from 1862, as a surveyor with the Borough of Hawthorn.[2]

Thomas attended St Patrick's College in East Melbourne and was an outstanding student. He studied law at Melbourne University and was conferred a doctor of laws in May 1879. While pursuing his doctorate, he was appointed assistant librarian at the university library, taking on most of the responsibility for running the library and acting for periods in the registrar role. He was highly thought of among his colleagues at the university, and in 1881 Vice Chancellor Anthony Brownless identified the 'energy and zeal' he brought to the library position.[3]

The Melbourne Public Library had opened on 11 February 1856 (see above). Its founder, Redmond Barry, a judge by profession, had a vision of a 'voluntary university … a great emporium of learning and philosophy, of literature, science, and art'.[4]

The politics of the day were tumultuous. Victoria's combative reforming premier Graham Berry had written to the Library's trustees in 1878 suggesting it might be time for the incumbent librarian, Henry Sheffield, to retire. Redmond Barry and his fellow trustees, however, had asserted that it was *their* role to 'exercise the right of presenting for appointment and dismissal all officers and servants of the corporation'.[5] There was a further exchange of letters, but no compromise was agreed.

In 1880, Henry Sheffield, aged 70, finally expressed a wish to retire. The trustees placed newspaper advertisements for a new chief librarian with 'a knowledge of bibliography' who should also 'possess the power of organisation and maintaining discipline, as well as be acquainted with ancient literature, and with the chief modern European languages'.[6] This again brought them into conflict with Graham Berry, who wrote pointing out that it was *his* role to recommend the new librarian. Barry responded that the trustees would advise the premier when they chose a successor. Berry replied that 'he could not consent, even by implication, to abandon the right to make recommendations for appointments in the Library'.[7]

Ignoring Berry's concerns, on 16 November 1880, the trustees selected William Archer for the position. Archer had been the registrar-general with the crown lands and survey department. In 1878, he was one of many senior public servants who fell victim to the escalating battle between Graham Berry and the conservative Legislative Council over the Payments of Members Bill. Berry had linked the bill to the Appropriations Bill. The Legislative Council had promptly rejected it, thereby blocking supply. Berry, in response, had summarily dismissed a vast number of senior government staff.[8] Unlike other senior civil servants, Archer had been unable to re-establish himself and had drawn some savage attacks in both parliament and the press.[9] The Library trustees, however, expected their appointment to be rubber-stamped by the government, and they scheduled Archer to commence duties on 1 January 1881. But on 23 November, Redmond Barry, who had dominated decisions for the entirety of the Library's existence, died.

Without Barry's presence, Graham Berry gained the upper hand in his battle with the trustees. Over the next month, he ignored their recommendation, and Sheffield was persuaded to remain at the Library until the impasse could be resolved. Finally, the trustees agreed to submit two names for the premier's consideration. They were William Archer, still the trustees' choice, and Thomas Bride. The politics of neither man are likely to have been palatable to Berry.

Bride had run as a political conservative in the election of February 1880, losing narrowly. During his campaign, he had offered trenchant public

The Library dominating the Melbourne skyline in 1881, at the time Bride commenced working there. Charles Nettleton, *Panorama of Melbourne in 1881 taken from the tower of the law courts*, photograph: albumen silver, 1881, H854/2

criticism of Berry, who had briefly lost office. However, the premier chose Bride. From the opening of the Library, in 1856, until 1966, Bride was the only outside appointment to the top job. Suggestions that Berry's choice was made, in part, to remove a potential political opponent seem fanciful: Bride had failed at the February election and had declined to run in a further election five months later. But regardless of his motives, it is hard to argue that Berry didn't choose the right man.[10]

Prior to Bride's appointment, the Library had stagnated. On opening, in 1856, it had held 3596 volumes, and the number had since grown to 115,000, forming a 'splendid collection', but the books were stored haphazardly, and locating any of them relied primarily on the memory of the staff.

> The Library was in a state of confusion through lack of systematic management … To add to the troubles of the new librarian, the shelves were overcrowded, and books were stacked in great heaps in different parts of the building, awaiting accommodation. The classification was on a system long since out of date.[11]

Thomas Bride, in his 30th year, had a vast task ahead of him, and he

Barry Hall, built to help accommodate the growing collection. Note the electric lighting. Charles Rudd, *The 'Barry Hall' Melb. [Melbourne] Public Library*, photographic print: printing out paper, c. 1892–1900, H39357/114

energetically set about taking the Library forward. Within a month of his commencement he had submitted a report stressing the dire need for additional space to house the growing collection.

> [The] floor is, from one end of the [eastern] gallery to the other, strewed with thousands of volumes … Theology is allocated, not only in the bay for Theology, but also in the gallery, in the Librarian's room, in the Sub-Librarian's room, and in the Ladies' room [ladies reading area] … Additional buildings to accommodate 50,000 volumes are urgently required.[12]

It took some years, but on 2 September 1886, Barry Hall opened, providing accommodation for 26,000 volumes (see above). As welcome as this additional space was, the collection was growing at an increasingly rapid pace, and storage capacity became an ongoing challenge.[13]

Bride next set about the monumental task of creating a card catalogue. At the same time, he introduced a fixed location system developed by Library trustee and Melbourne University academic Professor Edward Nanson. Each book was allocated a card, on which its location in the Library was indicated by three numbers, signifying respectively its broad subject, its shelf number and its position on the shelf. Bride brought in Dr Ferdinando Gagliardi to assist with the reclassification of the Library collection.[14] Gagliardi 'brought …

a trained mind and a considerable knowledge of books' to this enormous task. In 1891, the catalogue reached a total of 200,000 cards, including both author and subject entries, and was made available to the public.[15] By 1892, it was almost complete and 'in constant use during the year', providing 'a powerful means of disclosing the resources of the Library'.[16]

The Library initially relied on gas lighting, but by the 1880s the heat and the gas were destroying the book bindings. In 1883, Bride had electric lighting installed. While it was not without teething problems, it improved the atmosphere in the building substantially.

> The adoption of the electric light has had excellent results: the air is now purer, the books, and especially their bindings, have gained considerably by this change, while the health and convenience of the frequenters of the Library have benefited by it.[17]

Bride also organised better staff training and employed promising young university students as assistants. In 1886, he introduced an inquiry desk located in the centre of Queen's Hall. While the desk was 'ugly, noisy and uncomfortable', it established accessible research assistance as a key element of the Library's operations.[18]

From the mid-19th century, free public lending libraries had begun to be established in the United States and England, and in April 1883, Bride produced a report urging the establishment of a lending library, with a collection separate from that of the Reference Library.

> I am of the opinion that an important function of the library will be left unfulfilled if a lending library be not established …
>
> If the aim of public libraries be not only to preserve but to diffuse knowledge as widely as possible, every facility should be afforded for the encouragement of healthy reading and it would seem that the system of lending libraries is a most potent agent to this end.[19]

Bride pursued this project tenaciously, and finally, on 8 August 1892, the Lending Library opened. It was an immediate success. In 1893, there were 93,608 loans. Concerns about the safety of books were dispelled: during that year only six books were lost, of which four were paid for.[20]

The Library also ran a Travelling Library, established by the trustees in 1859 with 500 volumes. Institutions could request loans of its books for use by the public.[21] Initially, access had been restricted to a 10-mile (16-kilometre) radius of Melbourne, but in 1867, the collection had become available across

John Helder Wedge, *Wilson's Promontory from Glennie's Island*, in JH Wedge, Field book 1835–36, 9.5 x 19.4 cm, 1835–36, p. 74 (labelled 37), MS 10768

Victoria. In 1893, the Travelling Library lent 6600 volumes across 36 country libraries.[22]

Government funding for the purchase of books varied, and donations, which arrived from all parts of the world, generally outnumbered purchased volumes. In 1883, the Library was delighted to receive the *Œuvres de Frédéric le Grand*, donated by the German emperor. Not to be outdone, in 1887 the king of Italy forwarded a copy of *Di un esemplare della Commedia di Dante Allighieri*.[23] The Library's collection also benefited through donations from societies, other libraries, governments and private citizens. For example, in 1883, the Norwegian North-Atlantic Expedition Committee forwarded volumes of their expedition papers, in both English and Norwegian. The expedition, exploring the ocean depths, was important but not well known, and the publication would have been an unlikely purchase. However, it now complements another work in the Library's collection about the much more famous and extensive explorations of the British *Challenger* expedition of 1872–76.[24]

In 1885, the Library acquired the field book of John Helder Wedge (see above). Wedge had surveyed large areas of Tasmania and had travelled across Bass Strait in 1835 to survey the land grabbed by John Batman's Port Phillip Association. His field book contains his recording of Indigenous language, illustrations and diary entries and provides an important insight into the early European entry into Victoria.

Unusual donations during Bride's tenure included the London periodical *The Anti-Vaccinator and Public Health Journal*, which challenged the distribution of small-pox vaccinations.[25] This obscure, rarely used journal takes on new relevance in the current climate.

For a number of years, Bride and the trustees tried to convince the government to allow the Library to distribute Victorian government publications to international libraries. In 1887, it succeeded, distributing 54 publications to 489 institutions around the world.[26] Today, for example, the Library's annual reports from this period are in the collections of many libraries in Europe and the United States.

The booming 1880s gave way to economic depression in the 1890s, leading to savage cutbacks in the public service and reductions in salaries and entitlements. At a meeting of the Public Service Association in 1894, Bride accused the government of a 'might is right' attitude and of 'disregarding all legal and moral obligations'. He received rousing cheers when he claimed the government had 'cut to the bone' and suggested that it had in fact 'wished to go down to the marrow' and might even go as far as 'pulverising … the service bones to manure'.[27]

In April 1895, Bride was appointed to the position of curator of deceased estates with the treasury department. This role offered him the opportunity to specifically use his legal training. The position received a small allowance but had been entitled to commission on estate values, which had greatly inflated remuneration. However, following alarm and hostility in parliament towards the arrangement, by the time Bride was appointed, the amount from commissions had been greatly reduced, which was likely a disappointment to him. While in 1890 the position had received £1410, in 1894–95 the total remuneration was only £846, the same as his library salary, and there was parliamentary pressure to reduce the maximum salary to £800.[28] Nevertheless, at the time of his retirement he was estimated to have received between £1100 and £1200, which was still a very generous amount. Following his retirement, the position became a salaried one, no longer subject to commissions.[29]

Bride's successor at the Library, Michael Dowden, died at age 37 after only a few months in the role. The trustees were keen to have Bride return, but in the straitened economic climate the salary for the position had been nearly halved.[30] Bride seriously considered the trustees' request, but only at his former salary. In this he received support from Chief Secretary Alexander Peacock, and the issue drew comment in the parliament and the press. The newspaper *The Free-Lance* took a satirical approach in its report:

> Dr. Bride is, to put it mildly, 'd—n sorry' he ever left the cultured ease of Melb. Public Library to be Intestate Undertaker. Also, he is extremely anxious to get back. 'Cos why? His trouser pocket is emptier than when at the Library.[31]

WHILE THERE'S LIFE THERE'S SOAP.

DR. BRIDE, AT THE MELBOURNE PUBLIC LIBRARY, HAS BEEN QUIETLY ANGLING FOR THE "SOAP STEALERS," AND WITH ONE PIECE OF SOAP HAS SUCCEEDED IN HOOKING THREE QUEER FISH. [See page 18.

One of the more unusual challenges Bride faced at the Library was the regular theft of soap from the men's toilets. He successfully thwarted the thieves, earning both a caricature and a poem in *Melbourne Punch*. Francis TD (Tom) Carrington, *While there's life there's soap*, in *Melbourne Punch*, 13 January 1887, p. 15 (poem, p. 18)

Some criticism was more savage and more political. *The Champion* claimed 'his knowledge of books extend[ed] no further than their title pages' and accused him of lobbying for a various senior government roles.[32] Peacock, an astute politician, handed the decision to the public service commissioners, who did not accede to Bride's request. Edmund La Touche Armstrong was appointed as the new librarian.

Perhaps Bride had resigned just in time, after all. Armstrong was left to bemoan the drastic cuts to the Library funding. In 1897, he wrote,

> For the third year in succession the Government has found it necessary to discontinue the vote for the purchase of books, only providing sufficient money under this heading to pay for periodicals and binding. Such a state of affairs is without precedent in the history of the institution, and it is certain that unless a substantial grant be made next year, the position of the Library will be so permanently injured that it will be well nigh impossible to recover the lost ground.[33]

Bride did fulfil one more obligation. He had been on the organising committee for the inaugural Intercolonial Library Conference, held in April 1896, and he presented a paper during the proceedings on the organisation of the Lending Library.[34]

In his memoirs, Armstrong was equivocal in his assessment of Bride's contribution to the Library, suggesting, 'Dr. Bride lacked the fine feeling for books and letters … He could get no thrill from the acquisition of a rare edition, nor from an exquisitely printed, wide margined volume … He had not the spirit of a collector in its truest sense'.[35] This criticism perhaps indicates that Bride had a rather more modern understanding of a research library than his contemporaries. His actions suggest he valued content over form and focused on ensuring the 'great emporium' of knowledge was a widely and easily accessible collection of well-organised information of great breadth, depth and substance.

Armstrong further suggested that Bride's 'heart was not really in his work at the Library. He was ambitious and restless and constantly sought for posts in which he thought he would be happier than in the Library'.[36] Again, it is hard to accept ambition in a chief librarian as a fault, and his achievements at the Library suggest very much a man whose heart was in his work. Bride's willingness to consider returning to the Library may have been partly due to disappointment at the salary of his new job being less than expected. (His final will indicates he was not a wealthy man.[37]) But equally, it suggests a genuine affection and interest in the Library.

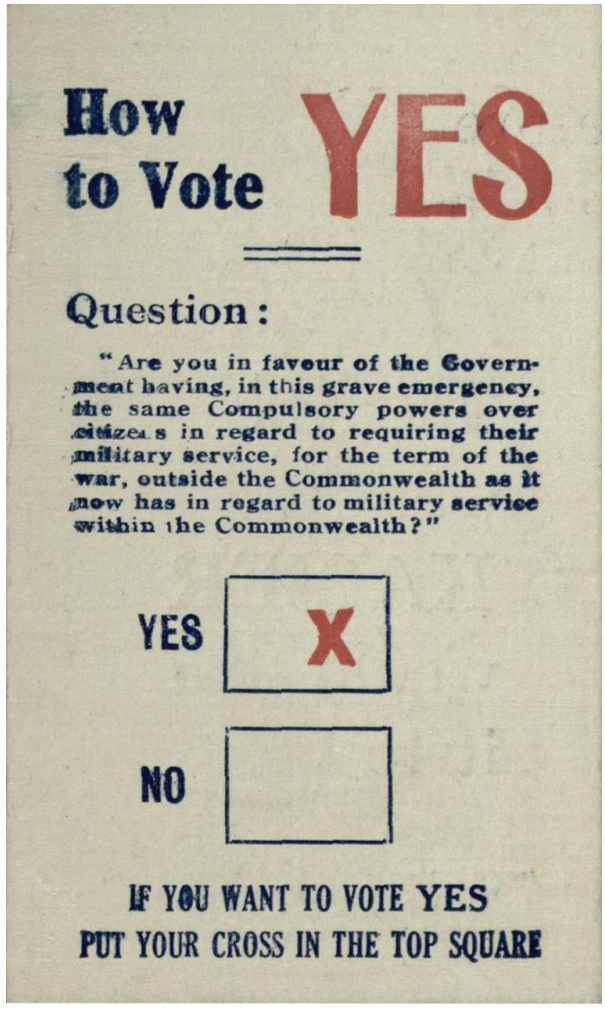
Armstrong's views were perhaps coloured by the move to bring Bride back when he himself had the expectation of promotion from second principal assistant (the role Dowden had held prior to his elevation as Bride's successor).[38] When Armstrong did succeed Dowden it was at a much lower salary than Bride had received, which no doubt was disappointing.

Beyond the Library, Bride had a particular interest in geography and was a fellow of the Royal Geographical Society of London. At a meeting he chaired on 22 October 1883, he used his casting vote to establish a Victorian chapter of the Geographical Society of Australasia. He and his colleagues were particularly keen to revive interest in Antarctic exploration and joined with members of the Royal Society to form the Antarctic Exploration Committee. The committee was very active and created wide interest in Europe, but ultimately it was unable to raise adequate funds to finance an expedition.[39]

The 1890s proved to be a particularly tragic time in Bride's personal life. In 1889, an influenza pandemic spread from eastern Russia, arriving in Australia in late winter 1891. In October, Bride's sister and his elderly father both succumbed on the same day. Much worse was to follow. Bride had married Mary Newton in 1887, and she had borne five children in seven years. In November 1895, she entered hospital for a minor operation and died suddenly from the effects of the anaesthetic. She was 26. In March 1898, Bride's 3-year-old son and 5-year-old daughter died from scarlet fever; and in 1900, his 10-year-old daughter died from diphtheria.[40] Premature death and infant and childhood mortality were sorrows visited on many families in the 19th century, but Bride endured more than his fair share of tragedy.

Throughout his life, Bride took a keen interest in politics. As mentioned above, he ran in the election of February 1880, losing narrowly. He became president of the new United Public Service Association in 1895 and in 1902 was a key figure in fighting (unsuccessfully) the conservative government's significant retrenchments and reductions of salaries and conditions in the public service.[41]

In 1916, during divisive debates about a World War I conscription plebiscite, Bride volunteered with the National Referendum Campaign Council to support the 'yes' case at public meetings (see page 96). His stated view was that 'this was not a war between political parties, but between countries, and as part of the Empire it was [Australia's] duty to bear [its] share of the burden and hardships of this war'.[42] He had the courage of his convictions. The plebiscite meetings were often hostile, with audiences sometimes 'being determined



National Referendum Council, *How to vote yes*, how-to-vote card, Melbourne: Queen City Printers, 1917[?], Riley and ephemera collection, Conscription, Pro Folder no. 1

not to give the speakers a fair hearing'.[43] While gaining a narrow majority in Victoria, the 'yes' vote was defeated nationally in the plebiscite.

An Irish Catholic Australian so publicly supporting conscription may come as a surprise, but Bride appears not to have taken a leading role in that community beyond being a long-serving member of the St Patrick's old collegians committee (and president in 1914). The position of the Catholic hierarchy, equivocal in 1916, became more staunchly and publicly anti-conscription during the debates on the second plebiscite in 1917.[44] It is not known what influence this had on Bride, who seems not to have publicly represented the pro-conscription campaign in 1917, when the 'no' campaign was more decisively victorious.

Bride made one further significant foray into public politics when he became, in his 70th year, the secretary and a major spokesperson for the

Initiative, Referendum and Recall League. This was a curious movement – based on direct democracy, practised in Switzerland in the 16th century – whose primary aim was to allow citizens to propose new, and repeal existing, legislation. The Labor Party had introduced the idea at its 1908 conference, and it became Labor policy at both the state and federal levels from 1913.[45] The movement gained support during the 1920s but ultimately was not adopted by either state or federal parliaments.

Bride also supported education, serving on the council of Melbourne University from 1887 to 1923.[46] He was the university representative on the council of the Working Men's College (now RMIT University) and in 1913 served as president of that council. In 1914, he became secretary of the newly formed Technical Schools Association and was also on the management committee of the Melbourne Hospital.[47]

Thomas Bride passed away on 7 April 1927, leaving a mere £97 in his will. His second wife, Charlotte (née Meagher), died two months later. Bride lived through a most interesting period of Melbourne's history and made important contributions to libraries and librarianship generally, and to State Library Victoria especially. *The Advocate* described him as 'a gifted and high-souled citizen … of genial disposition … Never lacking in courage, he was always the soul of honour and a warm-hearted friend'.[48]