

URSULA O'CONNOR

State Library of Victoria, 1927-65

Edited with an introduction by Shona Dewar

Introduction

Mary Ursula O'Connor was born on 21 April 1910, one of five children of civil servant James O'Connor and his wife, Mary Alice (née Walsh). The family lived in Tooronga Road, East Malvern, a suburb of Melbourne.¹ Ursula attended Catholic Ladies' College in East Melbourne, gaining her Leaving Certificate with honours. She and school friend Freda McGlade were appointed as assistants at the Public Library of Victoria on 14 June 1927.² They were among the Library's earliest female employees. O'Connor studied part time for a bachelor of arts at the University of Melbourne, graduating in 1933.³ After three years in the Lending Library, she transferred to the Cataloguing Department. During the 1930s she moved to the Reference Library, maintaining the Inquiry Room's service during the difficulties of the war years. She was appointed head cataloguer at the end of 1946.⁴ She was a foundation member of the Australian Institute of Librarians and an associate of its successor, the Library Association of Australia, and of the Library Association in the United Kingdom. She served on the council of the Victorian branch of the Library Association of Australia, including a period as secretary.⁵

In an interview in 1951, she described her busy professional life, lecturing at the Library Training School at Public Library of Victoria, meeting many celebrities as well as 'ordinary' people, dealing with inquiries on a wide variety of subjects and developing the collections in new areas. She loved rare and



Ursula O'Connor, at the retirement of her colleague Freda McGlade (detail), 5 May 1970, Pictures Collection H32950/7. Photograph by Leone Rose Mills

beautiful books and had a particular affection for 13th- and 14th-century manuscripts, especially illustrated prayer books.⁶ In 1952, she travelled abroad to study advances in library practices in England and elsewhere in Europe.⁷ In Ireland, she viewed the richly illuminated manuscript *Book of Kells* at Trinity College, Dublin, and visited County Cork, where her grandparents were born, feeling a great 'sense of belonging'.⁸ She worked as a cataloguer at the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, in 1955 and later spent time at the Library Training Institute at the National Diet Library, Tokyo.⁹ In 1961, she was appointed principal of the Library Training School, where she

influenced a generation of young librarians, many of them women. At the end of 1967, at her own request, she returned to the role of head cataloguer until her retirement, on 10 April 1970.¹⁰

In 1981, she sent her handwritten memoir to retired principal librarian Margery Ramsay, observing, 'I did not venture beyond 1965 as there are many people who are familiar with the later period and the people concerned'. Kathleen Young, the La Trobe librarian (the librarian in charge of the La Trobe Library, formerly the Australiana wing of the Library), wrote to thank her, advising that the memoir had been placed in the Library's collection, where it 'would provide detailed information for a history of the institution and, along with other personal accounts, would add life and colour to the library's story'.¹¹

In later life, O'Connor lived in Sandringham, a suburb of Melbourne, with her sisters. She died on 12 November 1987 and is buried with her sister Hilda Kathleen O'Connor (1917–91) at Cheltenham Memorial Park.¹²

O'Connor was held in high esteem by her colleagues. Former chief librarian Colin McCallum counted her among his 'almost lifelong friends'.¹³ Former librarian and lecturer Barrett Reid described a gentle, modest and sympathetic person whose advocacy for equal rights for women and insistence on high professional standards demonstrated integrity and courage. Former La Trobe librarian Dianne Reilly remembered a wise and revered mentor who enjoyed the company of the young people she worked with and trained.¹⁴ O'Connor's memoir is reproduced here in full. Minor grammatical changes and revisions to the form of names have been made in the interests of accuracy and consistency.

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These reminiscences of life in the Public Library of Victoria [PLV] (as it was then known) are patchy. They are merely an attempt to give a picture of the role played by this institution and some of the people who worked there over the years.¹⁵

Until the separation of the Library from the art gallery and the two museums, these four institutions were grouped together under the direction of a very large body of trustees, selected for their special interests. As the chief librarian was also secretary to the trustees his activities were so diverse that he could only give limited attention to the Library. Responsibility for the general administration of the Library devolved on the assistant librarian.

In 1927 Robert Douglass Boys, a dapper, precise man, was chief. He was the author of the original history of the PLV¹⁶ and responsible for the introduction of the Dewey Decimal System of Classification in place of the British Museum style of fixed location. His predecessor Edmund La Touche Armstrong, a solemn, reserved man, was a frequent visitor. As juniors we had no personal contact with him.

The PLV was the public library not only for the people of Melbourne but for the state of Victoria. Apart from a few established libraries – Prahran, South Melbourne, Ballarat and the libraries of Mechanics' Institutes scattered throughout the state, no other library service was available.¹⁷

The stock of existing libraries was supplemented by cases of books sent out, on extended loan, from the Travelling Library, housed in a dingy basement below the present museum building in Russell Street.¹⁸ The Lending Library, housed above, provided a local lending service and a postal service direct to country borrowers.

Other libraries of note were the rather small Melbourne University Library under Leigh Scott and ALG McDonald (later first librarian at Australian National University, Canberra) and the Parliamentary Library, Melbourne, under Eric Frazer. These three men had originally been on the PLV staff.

The CSIRO libraries developing under Ellinor Archer [Mary Ellinor Lucy Archer] were staffed by women.¹⁹

Co-operation between these existing libraries was tremendous and was further strengthened by the establishment of the Australian Institute of Librarians, in 1937.²⁰

Conditions of entry to junior positions in the PLV were matriculation with two languages plus an undertaking to complete an arts course. Promotion to the next grade, when a vacancy occurred, required six subjects towards the degree. Positions for women were rarely available and much sought after. Isabel Fraser [Isabella Agnes Mary Fraser], a graduate, was the first to enter. Through some anomaly she was appointed to a male position and so received a full male salary, but her seniority was never recognised when applying for senior positions. Three more women were appointed to junior positions in the 1926–27 period.²¹ No time off was given to attend lectures and we paid our own fees. Shift work enabled us to attend daytime lectures.

In those days the Reference Library was considered *the* place to work – the Lending Library under Thomas Fleming Cooke was Siberia. Isabel Fraser, Freda McGlade and I were sent there. Working conditions and the lack of amenities were appalling. TF Cooke was a martinet of the first order, but he was a good librarian who gave us the opportunity to learn, in a limited way,



Australian Institute of Librarians' inaugural meeting, Canberra, August 1937. Photograph by A. Collingridge. Mitchell Library, State Library of New South Wales, SPG / 141, IE3321014. Ursula O'Connor (in the third row, fourth from left) is among a number of Public Library of Victoria staff in the group.

the routines of cataloguing, classification and reference work. We met a wide variety of people, including our lecturers from the university. Junior officers in the Reference Library did not have these opportunities as they often remained in one department for a long period.

Despite his toughness Cooke was a good chief who could be relied on to stand up for his staff. He was a thickset, bustling man with a voice that bellowed from one end of the Library to the other and struck terror into the hearts of some of his staff. Those who survived had a kind of affection for him. In personal trouble he was very kind. He was popular with the Greek community and attended many lengthy luncheons (to our delight) at the Greek club nearby.

In his spare time he was writing a history of the Carlton Cricket Club, mostly on the backs of old catalogue cards; portions of it were constantly being lost.²²

Over the years a cold war existed between TFC [Cooke] and the assistant librarian ER [Ernest Roland] Pitt.

After three years Isabel Fraser and I were reprieved and transferred to the Cataloguing Department of the Reference Library under the care of CA [Colin Alexander] McCallum, then chief cataloguer.

The final checking of our work was done by Albert Broadbent Foxcroft (Foxie to the staff). He was an extraordinary man of medium build and rather short sighted. His knowledge of incunabula and historical bibliography was outstanding and he corresponded with overseas bibliographers. He always maintained that he was fortunate to have work that was also his hobby. Due to him the Sticht collection of examples of early printing was acquired. His publications were in great demand as overseas exchange material. He was always ready to help and to explain work to those who were genuinely interested but had no time for those he considered slackers. He was often too rigid in his interpretation of the term.

He conducted classes and provided typed notes in cataloguing, classification and historical bibliography, and regular tests were held to check our progress. In the Reference hierarchy he came next to Pitt. As the staff was small we lunched together, and it was Foxie's custom to produce the *Times Literary Supplement* crossword with its learned literary clues. We were all questioned, and to his delight he always knew the answers; we rarely did.

He was awarded a Carnegie grant to study library developments overseas. It was a very big change for a man who always lived very quietly with no apparent interests beyond his family and his work. He visited England, the United States of America and Scandinavia. His letters were most interesting, full of new ideas and plans for the future. Unfortunately he died at sea on the way home from Vancouver [Canada]. His notes that came to the PLV later indicated that his report would have been most valuable. However no conclusions could be assumed and they were just set aside.

In the meantime Ernest Roland Pitt had succeeded RD Boys as chief librarian. He appeared to be a cold, remote man who showed no personal interest in the staff. He was a great tennis player, and those who knew him socially saw him in a different light. He rarely appeared before 10 am and was rarely seen after 4 pm. He, too, was a skilled bibliographer concentrating on scientific publications. His noteworthy contribution was his *Catalogue of the Scientific and Technical Periodicals in the Libraries of Australia* (Pitt's *Catalogue*), carried out in conjunction with CSIRO staff – later supplements by CA McCallum and Duncan Cannam. This was the original of the present SSAL [*Scientific Serials in Australian Libraries*]. CSIRO staff who worked with Pitt recall him as a pleasant, approachable man.

1934. Dr Ralph Munn from Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, visited Australia to report on libraries. (The visit was financed by the Carnegie Corporation of New York.) In company with Pitt he toured Australian libraries, and the Munn-Pitt report which resulted is library history.²³



Public Library of Victoria Training School staff and students, advanced course, 1951. Photographer unknown. Pictures Collection H36741. Ursula O'Connor is in the front row, fourth from the left.

A return visit to the United States and Great Britain was made by Pitt but there was no published report. He was fascinated by the new microfilm techniques. After discussion with Kodak a special camera was installed with the intention of reducing the large handwritten catalogue cards to the size of the LC [Library of Congress] unit cards just becoming available. A member of Kodak staff was seconded to the Library to carry out this work. After much travail the entries A – portion of the Bible entry were photographed, with dismal results. These had to be checked by junior staff, and the copious bibliographical notes of Pitt and Foxcroft pencilled on the backs of the originals had to be copied on the new cards – a soul-destroying job often neglected after the tedious checking. Eventually this project was abandoned and the camera equipment was later adapted for photocopying.

On the retirement of ER Pitt, TF Cooke became chief librarian for a brief period. He was very close to Pitt in age. William Charles Baud followed him. He was a cheerful, outgoing man. He seemed more interested in people than in books. He was a good public relations man much in demand for lunchtime talks. His period in office was cut very short – he died suddenly while attending a lunch at which he was the guest speaker.

Colin Alexander McCallum was catapulted into the job almost overnight, at a most difficult period. World War II was well underway, staff and money and books were in short supply, and the demand on library services was very heavy.

Most of the younger male staff were in the services. The way was now opened up to women – Mary Marsden (Macfarlan), Helen Thompson (Olive)²⁴, Nancy Whittingham (Bossen),²⁵ all graduates – were the first to come. They proved so successful that many others followed. Promotional opportunities for women were still very limited.

At this period the Library was used extensively by various branches of the services, particularly the Allied Geographical Group [Allied Geographical Section], US, Dutch and Free French (all with offices in Melbourne) and a special Commonwealth department – the War Organization of Industry.

CA McCallum's period as chief was one of the most difficult, but he remained calm throughout, always helpful to staff and public. He had the faculty of commanding loyalty and affection from everyone who worked with him and could bring out the best in even the most difficult person.

1945. A period of great change for the Library, with the great influx of mature students returning from the war and taking up courses at Melbourne University and RMIT.²⁶ These included a number of American GIs who chose to do their studies at Melbourne University.

The University Library (before the days of Baillieu²⁷) could not cope with the demand, and the PLV had to provide a special service to students as well as to the general public. Texts were in such short supply that a special Students' Room, staffed by students on a part-time basis, was set up, and books had to be signed for before taking them to the Reading Room.

In 1946 Lionel McColvin, an English public librarian, visited Melbourne on his tour of Australian libraries, and his report led to extensive developments in the public library field. CA McCallum made a return visit to England, US and Scandinavia. The Free Library Service Board [FLSB] was established by a special Act, also the Library Training School, to train librarians for the new public libraries to be established throughout the state.²⁸

The four institutions were separated. The chief librarian was no longer secretary to the trustees but became an ex-officio member of the FLSB. His time was now divided between the PLV and the FLSB.

McCallum's period brought many new developments:

1. Archives Department set up.
2. Research Department.
3. The Historical Collection further developed (the genesis of the La Trobe Library).
4. FLSB and Library Training School.

The chief librarian also took an active part in the Library Association of Australia, which replaced the Australian Institute of Librarians.



400th anniversary of the English prayer book. Ursula O'Connor is centre in the photo. *The Age*, 18 June 1949, p. 8.

On his retirement CA McCallum was succeeded by his deputy, John Feely, a gregarious, genial man, very approachable and open to new ideas and suggestions, but impatient of detail and library routines. A science graduate, he came to the Library after some years at the [Melbourne] observatory. A good public relations man and a journalist at heart rather than a librarian, he had a flair for words and was a great raconteur. With Phil Garrett as his assistant he was responsible for moving the Lending Library from its rather squashed Russell Street location to better quarters in La Trobe Street (now part of the La Trobe Library). He was always brimming with big, broad schemes and planned some superb exhibitions to mark great occasions.

Through his connections with the media, the Library received a great deal of publicity, not always favourable, but aimed successfully at improving staff salaries, opportunities and amenities. He was also responsible for the building of the La Trobe Library, which became his overriding interest and is really his monument. Through his friendship with JK [John Kinmont] Moir, the Library received the Moir collection. His term was cut short by his sudden death.

Any reminiscences of the PLV would be incomplete without a mention of some of the personalities, chosen at random, who contributed so much to the Library:

Ethel Ingram: Secretary to the chief librarian when he was secretary to the trustees, later secretary to the chief of Central Administration. Calm and kind, she could cope with any crisis.

William Mossop: who with Keith McFarlane²⁹ presided over the Newspaper Room for many years.



Ursula O'Connor, fourth from left, at the retirement of her colleague Freda McGlade (detail), 5 May 1970, Pictures Collection H32950/8. Photograph by Leone Rose Mills

[Thomas] Leslie Dober: Head attendant and a great personality. He was a small, rotund, cheerful man, rather like George Robey of English music hall fame. He loved the theatre and films and would have been a success on the stage. He was a gourmet cook, a very successful gardener and was renowned for his excellent home brew, at a time when the commercial product was hard to obtain. He had an innate feeling for fine things and was esteemed by [Ernest] Daryl Lindsay, director of the art gallery.

He had grown up in the Library. His father had been caretaker of the four institutions, and the family had lived on the premises in a house originally intended for the chief librarian. (For many years the big, old Victorian kitchen served as staff lunchroom. The present theatrette³⁰ was a public restaurant, and their kitchen, situated between the staff and public rooms, also supplied meals to the staff at moderate cost.)

When the special train toured Victoria during the State Centenary Celebrations, in 1934, Les Dober travelled in charge of the Library historical display. He always regarded this trip as a highlight in his library career.

Jack Brotchie: The head cleaner. A big, cheerful man who moved around the stacks doing his chores and quoting Shakespeare.³¹

Mr Hutchinson (Hutchie): Head attendant at the Lending Library in TF Cooke's time. A calm, kindly man, very popular with staff and public.

Mrs McLaren: A dear lady on permanent loan from the Government Printing Office. She was responsible for the Lending Library binding and



Lending Library, Public Library of Victoria, c. 1955. Photographer unknown.
Pictures Collection H27338

repairs and always found time to make cakes for birthdays and special occasions.³²

Harold Newman: Also seconded from the Government Printing Office to look after Reference Library binding and repairs. He was the friend and confidant of all.

In the [19]30s and 40s Reference staff included:

John Dwyer: Left the Library on obtaining his law degree and was replaced by John Feely. Later became mayor of Warrnambool.³³

Harold Astley: Also entered the legal profession.

Duncan Cannam: Gifted, versatile and popular. Died tragically in New Guinea during WWII [World War II].

Frank Perry: Popular with all the staff. Appointed lieutenant colonel in WWII, served in India and Japan after the peace. Returned to establish the Library Training School. Later became [Victorian] parliamentary librarian.

Axel Lodewyckx: As a junior officer did valuable work during the Great Depression looking after the men on relief who were assigned to the Library at regular intervals. They came from all walks of life. Part of their time was spent working in clerical positions and part working on outdoor projects – e.g., the construction of the Boulevard.³⁴ Later he joined the staff of the Melbourne University Library, and the completion of the Baillieu Library was his achievement.

Ian Mair: A well-known figure in the Inquiry Room with his encyclopaedic

memory and courtly manner. Popular as a member of the radio quiz panel *Information Please*. Eventually went to radio and journalism.

Graeme Macfarlan: Also joined Melbourne University Library staff after his service in WWII. Spent some time on the staff of the FLSB.

Gordon Stewart: Decorated for his war service. On his return appointed secretary to the newly established FLSB. An excellent public relations man who made a great contribution to the development of public libraries throughout Victoria.

The US Information Library was housed for several years in an annexe off the Newspaper Room. Librarians who became our colleagues were Geraldine LeMay, a public librarian from Savannah, Georgia. In her time this library provided a reference service on all matters relating to the USA and an extension service to outback areas including the Northern Territory. Her successor was Thelma Passo from Minnesota, a former school librarian. She developed a local lending service and built up a fine collection of American children's books. This service was closed abruptly in 1952 and some of the books were placed in the PLV collection.

Trustees: Among those who gave special attention to the Library were Sir Keith Murdoch (*Herald*), Sir John Medley (vice-chancellor, Melbourne University), Professor [George] Paton, Sir Irving Benson and Father [William] Hackett, SJ, of the Catholic Library (formerly rector of Xavier College) and AE McMicken, treasurer for many years.³⁵

Library users: A wide variety of people – journalists, radio people and many colourful characters pursuing all kinds of odd interests. Dr [Alfred Ernest] Floyd was a frequent visitor to the Art Room, where he would sit reading and humming to himself for hours. Sir Zelman Cowen, as a student. Sir Isaac Isaacs, before he became governor general, often spent Saturday afternoons at the Library. Rev. Hugh Kelly (Scots Church),³⁶ who wrote *The Age* leading article on Saturdays, and AS Kenyon, honorary numismatist at the museum and interested in Egyptology and Aboriginal languages.