

## SHONA DEWAR

### ‘... from the bottom of a wardrobe’: collecting World War I personal papers at State Library Victoria

State Library Victoria holds a significant collection of World War I-related diaries, letters, written and oral reminiscences, pictures and objects. This paper surveys the development of the Library’s collection of World War I soldiers’ diaries and letters. The collecting can be conveniently divided into four periods: during and immediately after the war, the 50 years following the war, during writer Patsy Adam-Smith’s time as the Library’s inaugural manuscripts field officer, and ‘post Patsy’ to the present. Collecting trends and significant anniversaries have played a key part in the development of the Library’s World War I collections.

During the Great War, the then Melbourne Public Library sought to enhance its collections by acquiring not only substantial published works about the war but also soldiers’ diaries, printed ephemera and other documents.<sup>1</sup>

In June 1916, the Library’s trustees elected to pay £100 for a collection of war documents from the ‘Asiles des soldats invalides belges’ of Le Havre, France. The money was to go to a fund for the widows of Belgian soldiers.<sup>2</sup> Soon after, they made an appeal for donations:

The trustees of the Public Library will be pleased to hear from returned soldiers or members of the public who are in possession of documents of importance relating to the war, which they would be willing to present to the State library. Letters of a purely private nature are not desired, but maps, diaries, newspapers, and pamphlets issued in the war fields or on board



Gallipoli 1915. James Edmond McPhee, Album of photographs and printed ephemera, 1914–1918, p. 12, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 9876

ships of war, and any documents that are likely to be of interest or value to the historian of the future will be very acceptable. The chief librarian will be glad to receive any offers on behalf of the committee dealing with the matter.<sup>3</sup>

Three years later, it was reported that:

The Trustees have added largely to the collection of works on the war, but they have received very few gifts of manuscripts or works actually issued on the field of war. They hope to get more of these as time passes, and they have been promised assistance from the officers of the Defence Department who are dealing with the establishment of a War Museum.<sup>4</sup>

The limited success of the Library's appeal for manuscripts may be explained by the presence of two other prestigious collecting institutions. One was the Australian War Museum, established in 1917 to collect trophies

and private records, and based in Melbourne until a permanent home could be built. The official war historian CEW Bean believed that the preservation and display of records was an integral part of the national memorial to Australia's war effort. He listed soldiers' diaries amongst his sources, albeit with some reservations about their usefulness.<sup>5</sup>

Victorian donors may have liked the idea of giving their material to a readily accessible national institution and, in March 1919, plans were announced for storing and displaying the War Museum's 'huge collection of trophies':

Some day in the future Australia will possess a national war museum, which in all probability will be situated in Melbourne. It has been suggested that the building should be erected at the proposed bush capital at Canberra, but public opinion will be dead against a national collection of war trophies being hidden away in such a remote corner of the Commonwealth.<sup>6</sup>

Historian Ann Millar has suggested that the effort to create a national war museum conflicted with state and local loyalties, which were also important to soldiers gathering war trophies. They were encouraged by CEW Bean and JL Treloar, head of the Australian War Records Section, to believe that material would be deposited in state museums or displayed in capital cities and larger towns.<sup>7</sup> Collection building continued after the war, and donations were actively solicited by Treloar and Bean's assistant, Arthur Bazley, through correspondence with returned soldiers and families of those who had died. The *Australian War Memorial Act 1925* confirmed the importance of these activities. Treloar and Bazley were particularly active in building the collection during the years 1927–31 and World War I material is still collected.<sup>8</sup>

The Melbourne Public Library's other rival was the Australiana wing of the Public Library of New South Wales (Mitchell Library). In February 1916, the Mitchell Library announced its intention to collect soldiers' letters. In January 1919, it began advertising widely throughout the country for soldiers' diaries and offering to pay well for 'good material'. Newspaper articles emphasised that the diaries would be preserved safely alongside important manuscripts by explorers and politicians. In September, Melburnians were invited to visit Sydney to see the growing collection. In December, it was reported that nearly 150 diaries had been acquired, as well as other manuscripts, pictures and printed items. Advertising in Melbourne newspapers ceased in April 1920.<sup>9</sup>

Despite these challenges, the Melbourne Public Library, later renamed the State Library of Victoria, continued to acquire the few war-related manuscripts they were offered. Most were written either by, or to, a person of high rank. A typescript in French of Marshal Ferdinand Foch's foreword



*Snow at Abbeville Xmas 1917.* Thomas Lynewolde Anderson, Album, 1915–1919, p. 10a, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 9928

to *The Story of the Fifth Australian Division* was donated by the book's author, Captain AD Ellis, in 1920. Copies of the diaries of Sir Brudenell White were acquired in 1965. Other early acquisitions included two letters from Sir John Monash to the Melbourne-based Wallaby Club, a letter by Sir Ian Hamilton, a Gallipoli armistice agreement signed by Sir Thomas Blamey, and a letter by Reginald Collins to the wartime Minister for Defence, Senator GF Pearce.<sup>10</sup>

In the earlier years, the Library had placed a strong emphasis on collecting 19th-century Victorian manuscripts. Select lists of the State Library's new manuscript accessions for 1940 to 1964 were published in *Historical Studies, Australia and New Zealand* and, for 1965 onwards, in the then *La Trobe Library Journal*.<sup>11</sup>

Collecting was, and still is, influenced by the personal interests of staff and the supporters with whom they are connected. One example is the friendship of librarian Patricia Reynolds and historian Margaret Kiddle. Kiddle established good relationships with many Western District pastoral families during the 1950s while researching her book *Men of Yesterday*, published after her death in 1958. Under her influence, a number of manuscript collections were donated to the Library.<sup>12</sup> During that period, the impetus to strengthen the Library's collection of Victorian material led to the establishment of a specialised 'library within a library' – the La Trobe Library.

### The La Trobe Library and the manuscripts field officer

The foundation stone of the La Trobe Library, the Australiana wing of the State Library, was laid in 1951, marking the centenary of Victoria's separation from New South Wales. It opened in its own building facing La Trobe Street in 1965. The Friends of the La Trobe Library was established the following year and discussions soon began about the need to support the Library's activities, including the acquisition of manuscripts.<sup>13</sup> A note in the October 1969 issue of the *La Trobe Library Journal* said:

It is pleasing to report that the Friends of the La Trobe Library have been able to arrange for the appointment of a Manuscripts Field Officer for the Library. The Myer, Ian Potter and Sunshine Foundations have most generously made joint provision for a one- and possibly two-year appointment by the Library Council of Victoria. An appointment will probably be made in November. The officer's tasks will be to locate family papers, diaries, correspondence, etc., in private hands, institutional records and other material of importance to Victorian and Australian history, and to endeavour to acquire or photo-copy such material for the Library.<sup>14</sup>

Historian Geoffrey Serle was the editor of the *Journal* and honorary secretary of the Friends. He wrote to author Marjorie Tipping about the new role. She had just spent a year in Washington with her journalist husband, but their time abroad was cut short when he developed cancer:

Geoff Serle had welcomed me home with an encouraging letter that began with 'Keep your pecker up', even before he realised that my return was to have a sad ending. He informed me that the Friends were about to announce a move to engage a Manuscript Field Officer, and hoped that I could be interested. He wrote: 'It would, of course, be no difficulty about postponing the job indefinitely'. I replied immediately that whatever happened to Bill<sup>15</sup> I would not be interested, as I would expect to establish my own career as a professional writer. I suggested that Patsy Adam-Smith, whom I knew quite well, might be a good choice. She certainly proved it.<sup>16</sup>

The position was advertised in the press and applicants were advised that they 'should be well-informed on Australian history, preferably with university training. The position will involve travelling throughout the State; a car would be an advantage. Travelling expenses will be paid'.<sup>17</sup>

Patsy Adam-Smith began work in the La Trobe Library in January 1970. Although born and brought up in Victoria, she had lived in Tasmania for about 26 years. The move to Melbourne came at an opportune time for her. Her

wartime marriage had ended in divorce and she had raised her two children alone. They were now in their 20s and living independently.

Patsy did not have the recommended university training but had a lifelong love of learning and was the author of many magazine articles and several books. In announcing her appointment, Geoffrey Serle described her as 'well versed in the problems of locating historical material and persuading reluctant owners to produce their holdings'. He expected the task of collecting to be difficult and the material to be scarce:<sup>18</sup>

The question is how much manuscript material (family papers, diaries, correspondence) remains to be found. There are good reasons for pessimism. Over the years historians who have traced descendants of notable men have drawn blanks nine times out of ten.

He drew on his experience of researching *The Rush to be Rich* (1971)<sup>19</sup> when he described the lack of substantial collections of personal papers relating to prominent Victorian men. He thought they may have been destroyed because descendants were uncaring or ignorant of their importance, because the land boom scandals of the 1880s made families keen to erase evidence of the past, or because elderly people were unequal to the task of sorting and assessing their collections. He went on to say:

The ease of modern photo-copying has provided a largely satisfactory alternative to negotiations for donation or purchase. If the pessimists are correct in their view that little remains from the nineteenth century, then it is all the more important to locate and safeguard what does survive and to concentrate then on the twentieth century.

Friends of the La Trobe are earnestly requested to refer to Miss Adam Smith any leads they may have to material in private hands and to ponder over inquiries she might profitably make.

Patsy took to her work with relish. Later she remembered it as her 'most satisfying job':

I was just enchanted with the work, and within a year I had so much material! Within two years I had built up one of the finest collections in Australia. There is scarcely a property left in Victoria with a notable collection that I haven't brought in for the State Library.<sup>20</sup>

The La Trobe Library collections were developed, at least in part, by connections with more prosperous members of Victorian society:

A party had been arranged for me to be introduced to prominent Victorians as I would be spending the year attempting (and succeeding!) in divesting them of their private papers for deposit in the State Library of Victoria. I was brought into the midst of a group of men and I found myself shaking hands with Edward Dunlop. 'Are you from one of the Western District families?' I was asked by one of the men, referring to the so-called leaders of society and politics from that area. 'No!' said Edward, 'she can't be – she's too good-looking for that!'<sup>21</sup>

Patsy was interested in people from all walks of life and her warmth and charm contributed to her success:

All sorts of documents and papers. Early shipboard diaries. Overland diaries. They come from the country mostly. From old people who don't want their papers destroyed after they're gone. History isn't just dates and places, you know. It's people. And these documents put man into history.<sup>22</sup>

She acquired 'truckloads' of manuscripts and remembered the Docker family papers as 'wonderful material', one of the greatest collections she brought in:<sup>23</sup>

It was a position that had no blueprint until I drew it. I was to travel throughout the State of Victoria and attempt to discover documents historical, rare, or of value to future scholars. If possible, I was to attempt to encourage the owners of these papers to present them (via the back of my government station-wagon and sometimes through the loan of the State Museum's truck), under legal conditions, to the State Library. Here the documents would be protected and be available for bona fide scholars of the future.<sup>24</sup>

The role had its difficulties, even apart from the need to separate reluctant guardians from their treasures. The schedule was gruelling. Patsy travelled widely within Victoria and spent 23 weekends away from home in the first year. She was 'hardly off the road' and sometimes had to drive through the night. Between January 1972 and January 1975, she travelled 47,000 kilometres.<sup>25</sup>

Sometimes she found that potential acquisitions had been destroyed. Families dealing with deceased estates burned documents when they regarded them as unimportant and did not know what else to do with them. People would say to her 'You should have been here when Granny died'.<sup>26</sup>

It was not a job for the squeamish or physically unfit. She was 'usually one jump ahead of the silverfish and mice'.<sup>27</sup>

I have climbed many ladders into attics and ceilings, into the scaffolding above shearing sheds, into old hotels, magnificent homes, tiny houses, and boxes under the house. Many times I have had to shower immediately I finished the search, and once I got into a bath fully clothed and soaked myself and undressed there after a long night in a grand old home with dead mice, living mice, and insects for company.<sup>28</sup>

The potential complexity of the field officer's role was not fully understood when Patsy arrived at the Library. In 1975, she applied to have her salary upgraded and wrote a role description, which was supported by La Trobe Librarian Patricia Reynolds.<sup>29</sup> The role involved creating and commissioning original material; educating the public about the Library's work, about historical research and writing, and about the care and use of fragile material; acting as the Library's representative especially in rural areas; delivering public programs such as talks, exhibitions, and workshops; and setting directions for collecting, moving into new areas as historical thinking moved on and older fields of collecting dried up.

### Collecting World War I manuscripts, 1974–82

The rapid development of the Library's collection of World War I personal papers in the 1970s and its emphasis on the ordinary soldier may be attributed in large measure to Patsy Adam-Smith. She took a particular and personal interest in the experiences of Australians at war and published two works that relied heavily on the Library's collection. She quoted from soldiers' letters and diaries, and interviewed veterans who were among the last surviving participants in the war.<sup>30</sup>

The 60th anniversary of the start of World War I was marked in 1974. On 20 April, the Melbourne *Herald* published a full-page article, using photographs and quotations from the soldiers' letters and diaries featured in Bill Gammage's new book *The Broken Years*.<sup>31</sup> The book, now a classic of Australian war writing, was based on the doctoral research Gammage had undertaken on the Australian War Memorial's collections. With the aid of Dan Webb of Channel 7, Patsy made a public appeal during the television broadcast of the Anzac Day march in Melbourne. She 'believed there were extant many letters and diaries of Victorians who had served in various wars and that we knew by our experience that the bulk of these papers would be eventually lost unless they were collected for preservation'. The campaign was immediately successful: 'by the following day men were already beginning to phone us at the La Trobe Library and bring documents in'.<sup>32</sup>

Six months later, she had enough material to mount the exhibition



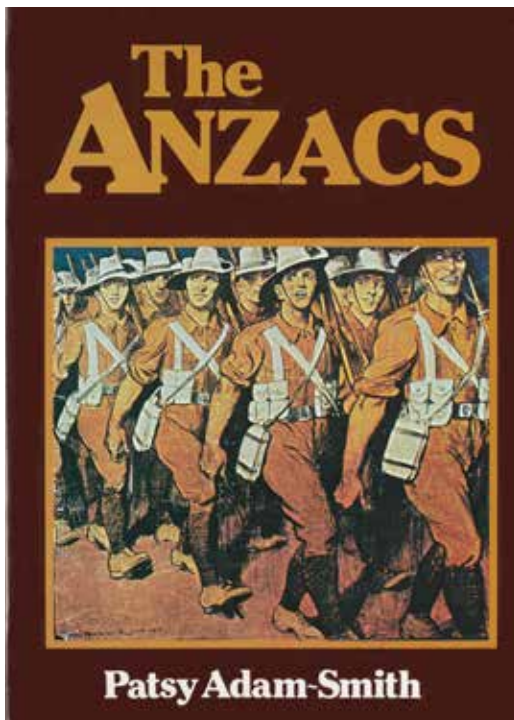
*All Those Empty Pages*, accompanied by a *La Trobe Library Journal* issue with the same title. At the head of the first page, acknowledging Bill Gammage's influence, she quoted from *The Broken Years*: "There never was a greater tragedy than World War I". Later she recalled:

My folklore work<sup>33</sup> had resulted in my collecting a large amount of material from the old Diggers who had fought in the First World War. I mounted an exhibition about the Anzacs in Melbourne's Public Library which brought in more people on the opening day than had ever attended any of the other exhibitions which had been held there. The vast and complex concept of *The Anzacs* book began to take shape in my mind and, for a number of years, the writing of it took over my life and pushed my other writing projects into the background.<sup>34</sup>

Art historian Juliette Peers was personally acquainted with Patsy. She was in her final years of secondary schooling in the 1970s and vividly remembers the collecting campaign. She describes Patsy's warm, emotional, dramatic response to the people she met and believes that 'her concern for other's experiences, the feelings that she conveyed about the romance and integrity of ordinary people's lives were a major catalyst in gathering the World War One material'. The *La Trobe Library Journal* article and the bestselling book *The Anzacs* focused on 'the tragedy, the waste, the stupidity of it all' and not on the details of military operations.<sup>35</sup>

Peers also reflects on the timing of the campaign. The previous few years saw the upheaval created by Australia's involvement in the Vietnam War, and particularly in the use of conscripted soldiers. Many people, especially the young, opposed conscription. Peers mentions Patsy's encounters with Vietnam veterans who felt isolated from and unappreciated by those civilian Australians who opposed the war. At the same time, elderly World War I veterans felt that the importance of their experiences, loyalties and values were misunderstood by later generations whose social and political views were different from those prevailing in 1914–18. If they felt forgotten and alienated from their grandchildren, they feared that their treasured relics of World War I would suffer at the hands of a hostile or indifferent younger generation. Patsy quotes them as saying 'I've been worried. I know it would have been burnt when I go'.<sup>36</sup> This fear was a powerful motive for old soldiers to deposit their material in the professional hands of a public institution, especially one represented by a field officer whose concern and empathy were so openly expressed.

At a time when much Library correspondence was formal, letters exchanged by Patsy and donors are often more personal. Jim McPhee wrote:



Left: Front cover of the first edition of Patsy Adam-Smith's *The Anzacs* (West Melbourne, Vic.: Thomas Nelson, 1978)

Right: *Patsy's Summer Heat*, c. 1981. Patsy Adam-Smith Papers, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 13749, Box 65

A 'joy to behold' just about describes my feelings when I saw what 'La Trobe' had made of my little brown bird of a diary – it looked very handsome, and it came as a very pleasant surprise to both Mrs McPhee and myself: we admired its being so professionally bound, and this in two colours, the back overlapping part, first guess being maroon, and the cover much brighter, but a matching red. The 'title' was just right & fairly & squarely placed.

Nothing will hold me back from letting the diary be seen by visitors in the lounge, the La Trobe stationery jutting from its leaves – a big jump in promotion from the bottom of a wardrobe.<sup>37</sup>

Patsy had to balance her Library duties and writing commitments and this meant very long working days. In 1981, she showed *Age* journalist Jill Rivers around her home in South Yarra and described her life as a writer:

When she resorts to her favourite workplace, the ebb and flow shifts to the opposite end of the house. Her bed, draped dramatically in purple, holds centre stage in an ante-room off the sitting room. Here she relishes the combined luxuries of a warm fire, restful view and total privacy ... Over half

of 'The Anzacs' was written here ... After she came home from the job of Manuscript Field Officer, created for her at the State Library, she climbed into bed and took the phone off the hook: 'I fed myself on Weeties to finish that book.'<sup>38</sup>

In 1978, in her bibliography for *The Anzacs*, Patsy wrote:

Much of the material is now lodged in the La Trobe Collection in the State Library of Victoria. The Library are interested in adding to this collection and would be grateful for manuscripts, diaries and letters from any of the wars in which Australians have been involved.<sup>39</sup>

Reviewing *The Anzacs*, Bill Gammage said that 'for the first time in history, it is impossible to sweep ordinary men under the carpet of generalization'. He did not support Patsy's collecting activities and said 'I hope readers will ignore the author's appeal for wartime diaries and letters on behalf of the La Trobe Library, and send them instead to join the large national collection in the Australian War Memorial'.<sup>40</sup>

The extent to which Patsy influenced the Library's collecting of manuscript material can be seen by studying the manuscript accession registers. Each newly acquired collection received a unique accession number and a brief description of its contents. The name and address of the donor or vendor and the date of acquisition were also recorded. During Patsy's tenure, these provenance details were tagged with an asterisk if an acquisition had been brought in by the manuscripts field officer rather than by a librarian. Her collecting activities, and those of subsequent field officers, were also documented in provenance files, which contain receipt forms and correspondence with donors.

As a sample of the Library's World War I collecting activity, I have examined the provenance of manuscript collections containing some Gallipoli-related content.<sup>41</sup> Of 488 World War I collections identified in the online catalogue, 129 had Gallipoli content. Using accession registers and provenance files, I found that, of these 129 collections, seven were acquired before Patsy was appointed (1955–69), 84 were acquired during her time (1970–82), and 38 in the years since (1983–2016). Of the collections acquired during Patsy's time, 45 were donations brought in by her, seven were donations facilitated by author and editor Sir Ronald East<sup>42</sup>, 21 were donations acquired and acknowledged by other La Trobe Library staff members, two were purchases, and nine were oral history interviews conducted by her.

In the group of 21 donations arising from the activities of Library staff, a number were received while Patsy was on leave or otherwise unavailable.

3<sup>rd</sup> Wait for watch team. Into firing line 7.30 am with Belcher and Murray. Fine day. Letter from Petric. Bombs thrown on (Chatham) all day long (150 yards to us) + 4<sup>th</sup> Came out of line 7.30 am. Letters from Ephie and Aunt Jimmy and parcel from former. Parcels are very acceptable here. Nation fatigues 3.15 pm. Turks attacked Chatham but repulsed. Quickest day. 5<sup>th</sup> Nation fatigues team. Into line 9.30 am. Repriming trenches all day and dumped earth into valley behind. Jacko saw us and made things interesting with whizz bangs (most objectionable missiles). Turks setting a good deal all day and placed a few into their own trenches in evening

Library Victoria

Gallipoli in November. Martin Petrie Blundell, 'Peninsula diary', 17 Oct. – 31 Dec. 1915, Australian Manuscripts Collection MS 10485

Correspondence contained in provenance files indicate that some were prompted by an awareness of Patsy's interest in the history of Australians at war. For example, in 1976, Patricia Reynolds, wrote to a donor:

I believe you are aware of the collection Miss Patsy Adam-Smith has been building, of the personal records of the Australians who served in the war. She will be thrilled when she sees this material, particularly the photographs showing conditions in field hospitals.

We are extremely interested to learn of the existence in your family of personal records of a soldier who served in the South African War. Very little information of this nature concerning Australia's involvement in the war has survived, either in our own library, or we believe, in the War Museum in Canberra.<sup>43</sup>

Even when Patsy was not explicitly mentioned in correspondence with donors, her work was acknowledged. In 1980, La Trobe Librarian Kathleen Young wrote to another donor 'we have a growing and valuable collection of First World War diaries and reminiscences',<sup>44</sup>

Like Sir Ronald East, Major-General RR McNicoll, honorary secretary of the Friends of the La Trobe Library during Patsy's time, took a keen interest in

the Library and used his networks to assist with collection building. In 1976, Patricia Reynolds wrote to Dr Guy Springthorpe:

We understand from Major-General McNicoll that you are at present giving some thought to the future of the papers of your father, the late Dr J. D. Springthorpe.<sup>45</sup>

Patsy also conducted numerous oral history interviews with donors as well as collecting their papers. Beginning with her own father, she interviewed World War I veterans at a time when the Australian War Memorial did not have suitable staff for this purpose.<sup>46</sup>

The years 1974–76 marked the most intense period of collecting Gallipoli material. Acquisitions declined in 1977 and rose again in 1978 and 1979. Just before its publication in hardback in October 1978, *The Anzacs* was serialised in six parts in the *Age* and received The Age Book of the Year award soon after.<sup>47</sup> Collecting activity declined from 1980 onwards, even when *The Anzacs* was republished in paperback to complement the release of Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* in 1981.

Patsy retired from the Library in October 1982. Her colleagues presented her with a card and wished her well with an apt summary of her writing and collecting interests:

Good luck digger  
May your trains run on time  
And your shears cut clean  
The best of Irish luck to you!<sup>48</sup>

### Collecting World War I manuscripts, 1983–2016

Patsy's successors were professional historians with postgraduate qualifications, some in the emerging discipline of public history. The Library's collecting program broadened further under their influence. As Tony Marshall, a former manuscripts librarian, observed:

Several factors influence the rate and direction of the Collection's development. Perhaps the most important (certainly in setting directions and quality, though not necessarily in terms of sheer volume of acquisition) is the work of the field officer.<sup>49</sup>

A steady trickle of new World War I acquisitions was handled, mainly by staff of the Manuscripts Collection. During the period 1983–89, when Tom Griffiths was field officer, 14 new Gallipoli collections were acquired but he

was involved with only three. Griffiths was interested in the war in the context of local history in general. Shortly before he came to the Library, he published an evocative account of his experience of Anzac Day in a Victorian town.<sup>50</sup> In 1990, when Sue Hodges was appointed to the role, its name was changed to field historian. The Public History Centre was launched in October 1997 with Hodges as manager and Frances Thiele (formerly Gladwin) as field historian.<sup>51</sup> The Centre closed when Hodges left the Library in 2000 but Thiele continued as field historian. When she left in March 2006 the role was discontinued. During the period 1990–2006, 13 new Gallipoli collections were acquired but with little or no involvement from the field historians. The centenary of World War I has brought an increase in activity with 10 Gallipoli collections being donated in the period 2013–16.

In the period 1955–2016, only six Gallipoli collections were purchased. One came from a private individual in 1977 and two from Melbourne dealer Peter Arnold in 1979 and 2014. Between 1997 and 2000, Sara Joynes of the Australian High Commission in London identified three Gallipoli acquisitions on offer from dealers in the United Kingdom and liaised with them on behalf of the State Library. For many years, until June 2011, Joynes was contracted by the National Library of Australia to provide this valuable service to Australian libraries.<sup>52</sup>

### Cataloguing, exhibiting and preserving World War I collections

Studying librarianship in 1979, I considered specialising in archives and manuscripts. My interest became more personal when some family papers came to light a couple of years later.

My mother's parents, Arthur Lord and Doris Argyle, married just before my grandfather departed for active service in September 1915. He served on the Western Front and was seriously wounded at Messines. Forty years later, he died when a piece of shrapnel, lodged in his body since 1917, came loose and blocked a blood vessel. His brother, Frank, served at Gallipoli, the Western Front, in the Middle East with Dunsterforce, and in World War II. Another brother, Sam, died in 1921, having spent his brief war service at Broadmeadows Camp where he contracted tuberculosis. Doris's brother, Roy Argyle, served at Gallipoli and was killed at Passchendaele in 1917. His remains were never found.

I was the 10th grandchild, the only one born after Arthur's death. As a child, I knew little about these soldiers and their fortunes. The war was a long time ago and I had difficulty imagining it. When Doris moved to a nursing home in 1981, my mother found a box in her wardrobe containing Arthur's

war memorabilia. This comprised 250 letters, postcards, photographs, books, magazines, souvenirs and the belt he was wearing when he was wounded. My grandmother's response to earlier enquiries about the letters was to say that she had burnt them. She regarded them as private. After her death in 1985, the collection stayed with my mother and then passed to me.

The collection fascinated me. I sorted, listed and transcribed the material and came to know my grandparents as newlyweds, separated by the war for four years. Arthur's letters are full of gentle humour and interesting anecdotes about his experiences. Doris waited anxiously at home with their little daughter, my mother. Her letters have not survived but Arthur frequently commented on the news from home. Their story is typical of the experiences of that generation. In the 1980s, a number of descendants of Great War soldiers responded much as I did to the discovery of a collection of personal papers. Historians Carolyn Holbrook and Bart Ziino have described the experiences of other descendants of Great War soldiers who were recipients of documents kept private by parents and grandparents until the 1980s. As with me, their eyes were opened to the experience of war.<sup>53</sup>

To learn more, I read *The Anzacs* and *The Broken Years*. From a brief quote in Bill Gammage's book, I discovered that Roy Argyle's diary was held by the Australian War Memorial. My grandmother was unaware of it but my letter to the War Memorial received a helpful reply. It enclosed copies of letters written by Argyle's father, responding to the War Memorial's collection-building campaign in 1930. I transcribed the diary in the War Memorial's reading room and, at the State Library of Victoria, found extracts from Frank's letters in country newspapers and school magazines. I learned from a cousin that more family papers had been burned when Arthur and Frank's mother died in 1940.<sup>54</sup> Personal and family papers survive or perish almost by chance.

In 1988, I obtained a position in the Australian Manuscripts Collection at the La Trobe Library. I had almost completed a degree in history but there was still an honours thesis to do. I proposed a topic that interested me personally and which would benefit my new employer. In exchange for three hours study leave per week I prepared a catalogue and critical essay about the Library's World War I manuscripts, which amounted to about 300 collections. The Manuscripts Collection had grown quickly during Patsy Adam-Smith's time and, by 1989, measured about 2500 metres.<sup>55</sup> The staff of six were unable to keep up with the cataloguing in the 1970s and early 1980s. Basic information was typed on 'temporary' pink catalogue cards and material was housed in a sequence of boxes labelled 'MSB'. It was intended to improve catalogue entries and storage arrangements when time permitted.

In 1989, my first full year at the Library, I spent weekends reading and cataloguing letters, diaries, written and oral reminiscences, poems and photographs. I created research cards, copying the meagre information from the pink cards and supplementing it with whatever I could find in provenance files, unit histories, business and school commemorative books, the La Trobe Biography Index, and the Australian Imperial Force nominal roll. At the War Memorial in Canberra, I checked embarkation rolls that, even though they had been copied to microfiche, were unavailable in Melbourne. Soldier's war service dossiers were then housed at Central Army Records Office in Melbourne but were heavily restricted or unavailable as some of the information they contained could offend soldiers' families.

The Library's information technology services were not extensive. John Hull, a librarian in the Reference Library, set up an Inmagic database for me to use on the lone computer shared by staff of the Manuscripts and Picture collections. As time went on, I realised that the project was not going to be achievable in a year and I persuaded my supervisor to allow me to concentrate on collections that included accounts of the Gallipoli campaign. The rest of my research, still on cards, was kept for later use.

Art curator Jennifer Phipps was working in the Picture Collection on secondment from the National Gallery of Victoria. When I finished my thesis, she suggested that the Library mount an exhibition to mark the 75th anniversary of Gallipoli in 1990. In the absence of professional exhibition curators, Library displays were usually prepared by librarians with an interest in and knowledge of the subject. In three months, with tuition from Jennifer, I prepared the *Having a Lively Time* exhibition, which opened on Anzac Day in the La Trobe Library's first floor foyer, now the Joyce McGrath Gallery. It was accompanied by a book with the same title, a modified version of my thesis containing the catalogue entries, an abridged essay, and illustrations drawn from the collections. Phipps persuaded Derek Whitehead, Director of Collection Management, to support its publication. She accompanied me to the small printer's office in Little La Trobe Street where we used our modest budget to order a print run of 100 copies. Geoffrey Serle cast a critical eye over the text before it went to press and pronounced it to be 'Good stuff'. The book has been in steady use by researchers ever since and was digitised in 2015.<sup>56</sup>

In the mid-1990s, I was a member of a project team creating online entries from the Manuscripts Collection's card catalogue. We aimed to improve the quality of the cataloguing and, amongst other things, ensured that each entry had a biographical note and a summary of contents. I re-catalogued many of the World War I collections at this time. With strict deadlines to meet it was



not possible to do much fresh research, but the information I had collected for the thesis was used to create biographical notes. Currently, I am preparing documentation for a World War I digitising program that will make many diaries, letters and photographs available online.

### Conclusion

Reviewing Patsy Adam-Smith's career after her death in 2001, Peter Stanley observed that:

Like most professional historians, I was inclined to be snooty about Adam-Smith. Her books were mostly found on the shelves of David Jones and Grace Bros rather than real bookshops. They were bought for Christmas and birthdays. Most gallingly, they sold in the thousands. Virtually all her 30 books became best-sellers, no small achievement for an Australian non-fiction writer.

As ever with a sudden loss, it's a shame that it has taken her death to re-evaluate her standing among those who tell Australia's story.

Her book *The Anzacs* coincided with – perhaps even created – the popular interest in Australia's military history which has continued undiminished for two decades. Adam-Smith did not so much enlarge as popularise our understanding of Australian military history. She did not write about Anzacs, women or prisoners with the insight and originality of, say, Bill Gammage, Jan Bassett or Joan Beaumont. Rather, she told stories superbly, seizing on characters and language that made her accessible to a huge readership.<sup>57</sup>

In March 2014, in honour of the centenary of the start of World War I, Penguin Books published a series of War Popular Penguins, comprising ten classics by Australian and international authors that were bound in two-tone covers of khaki and cream. The Australian titles included Patsy Adam-Smith's *The Anzacs*.<sup>58</sup> Although the book never found much favour with academic historians, its enormous popularity with the general public has earned it the status of a classic.<sup>59</sup>

Just as Patsy's writing lives on, so does the collection she worked so hard to establish. The La Trobe Library no longer exists as an administrative unit and the role of field historian has gone. But the State Library's staff and supporters are as committed as ever to building, preserving and making accessible a collection that complements those of other institutions and is a source of inspiration to many.