

NEW AND OLD DIRECTIONS FOR INDIGENOUS SERVICES OF THE STATE LIBRARY NSW

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ABSTRACT

The State Library of New South Wales has employed two specialist Indigenous Services Librarians since 1991. Their primary role has remained unchanged – to enhance access to information from the Library’s collections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers, particularly to information that is about them.

They have a wealth of knowledge and experience in library services for Indigenous people and others interested in Indigenous research. Their paper will look at some of the successful programs and initiatives that the State Library has undertaken over the years to facilitate access for this diverse user group.

BODY OF PAPER

The State Library of NSW (the Library), incorporating the Mitchell and Dixson Libraries and State Reference Library, is considered one of the world’s great Australiana collections and houses a remarkable range of items significant to Indigenous communities from across Australia.

The Library’s strength in this area is reflected in its [collection development policy](#):

“Indigenous Australians encompasses materials reflecting largely European interpretations of the history, language, art and culture of the Aboriginal peoples of Australia. This is particularly evident in the early written accounts detailing the first contacts between Europeans and Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples. It also includes documentation created by Aboriginal Australians about their life and activities.”

The Library continues to collect all current and retrospective material that documents the Indigenous experience in Australia with an emphasis on NSW. These days, of course, the writings of Indigenous people are especially sought.

The challenge for collecting institutions is making their collections accessible. The Library has demonstrated its commitment to the Indigenous people of NSW through a range of programs that make it easier to access information from its collections. These programs also actively promote a greater understanding of Indigenous peoples, cultures and histories.

To the Library's credit, it understood that the employment of Indigenous people was pivotal to any Indigenous access strategy. Funding was secured from the NSW Department of Education, Employment and Training and recruitment was begun for "Aboriginal Liaison" positions. Originally three positions were available, a librarian and two technicians. When two Aboriginal graduates applied the Library was quick to employ them both, and their apprenticeship in Librarianship was begun.

When Ronald and Melissa commenced in November 1991 they were based in the Mitchell Library and mentored by Ann Enderby, who was then Manager of the Mitchell Reading Room. Both began post-graduate Librarianship studies with Ronald eventually graduating from UNSW and Melissa from UTS.

Acknowledging their non-library background the Library created an innovative training programme that gave them a thorough understanding of the different functions of the Library. They spent the first few years working their way through the ranks on tasks such as collecting and re-shelving books, working the request desk, tidying the reference collections and basic information requests. They had also learned a lot about the Library's collections. As their confidence grew they took more responsibility for creating a service that enhances access to information from the Library's collections for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander researchers.

Various teams from the Reader Services division of the Library have recently re-focused. Teams now cater to particular user groups rather than to particular subject areas. There is now, for example, a team whose main area of responsibility is to library users who are academics or tertiary students. This approach suits the Indigenous Services "Team" to the ground, as they have always been client focused. Over the years Indigenous Services were fortunate enough to have been given the autonomy to develop their services and be involved in a number of projects specific to their user group.

What do they do? The answer is anything and everything that relates to Indigenous researchers, collections and directions of the library.

They liaise with individual researchers and Indigenous group visitors to orientate them to the Library and provide assistance when required. These range from short-term visits to research taking months or even years to complete. As a component of their work with individual researchers they can undertake limited research for NSW country and non-NSW clients requiring access to the Library's unique collections.

The Library has a world-renowned collection and delights in "showing it off" in exhibitions and displays. Indigenous Services have recently worked extensively on exhibitions that feature Indigenous content, much of which becomes digitally available online. Their latest contributions have included a component in the Nelson Meers Heritage Gallery of the Libraries collection of Breastplates and a boutique display highlighting the Indigenous contribution to the game of rugby league in celebration of NAIDOC Week. Next year we will stage a 3-gallery exhibition focussing on Aboriginal mariners from the early colonial period.

In 2006 the Library staged the successful exhibition *Eora: Mapping Aboriginal Sydney, 1770-1850* that gave an account of the lives of Aboriginal people during the first years of European settlement. For the exhibition to succeed it was crucial that the Aboriginal people living in Sydney today were consulted and engaged. Well before the exhibition was opened Indigenous Services organised events to update the local community on progress and a newsletter was circulated to key Indigenous people and organisations.

The Library, in partnership with the Rio Tinto Aboriginal Foundation, has developed a series of award-winning [online collections](#) that highlight aspects of Indigenous history using unique resources from the Library's vaults. The partnership provides the incentive to digitise material relating to Indigenous people and make them more accessible, in context, online.

Digitisation has been embraced by the Library as a way to increase access to collections and for preservation. Projects undertaken so far, like online collections, have been popular and successful. The challenge for the Library, and a priority for Indigenous Services, is to ensure that images and information about Indigenous Australians made publicly available are culturally appropriate. ATSI LIRN has identified this issue an area of concern to Indigenous people and libraries and is in the process of developing guidelines to address it. Indigenous Services will be developing a consultation strategy in regards to digitisation.

The Library has participated in a co-operative research study into libraries and digitisation conducted by Dr Martin Nakata, Chair of Australian Indigenous Education & Director of Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning at the University of Technology, Sydney. This study also included consultation with the Northern Territory Library and the State Library of Queensland. Dr Nakata's report will no doubt be a valuable and informative document for the profession.

InfoKoori is an online index to the *Koori Mail* newspaper freely available from the Library's website and is a Library initiative from the 1993 UN Year of the World's Indigenous Peoples. Indexing for this database is done by the Indigenous Services Team and also includes references to many other published sources of information about the Aboriginal people of NSW. It is a well-used tool for researching local and family history and has proven useful to members of the Stolen Generations as it includes information about various Government and church run children's homes.

Both Ronald and Melissa have individually and as a team presented papers at conferences on a local, national and an international level. In 2005 Melissa travelled to Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada to present a paper about the Library's digitisation programme at the 4th International Indigenous Librarians Forum while Ronald has spoken at various public libraries and NAIDOC Week events. Ronald and Melissa assisted when the Library hosted ALA President Dr Loriene Roy in August, who spoke to NSW public library staff about her inspiring "If I can read I can do anything" literacy program for Native American children.

Indigenous Services run workshops at public libraries that aim to develop library staff members' skill in Aboriginal family and local history research. These have been successful in attracting the Indigenous community to the library and informing about local studies collections. When invited to a library to conduct training Ronald and Melissa create programmes that are tailored specifically to that local community.

The Library also works in collaboration with other government departments and organisations such as State Records NSW and the NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs to hold information days, locally and throughout the State, about the availability of records relating to Aboriginal people. Most recently Ronald took part in a NSW Department of Aboriginal Affairs and State Records NSW event in Singleton, providing information about services for the local Aboriginal community.

Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson are founding members of the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Library and Information Resource Network ([ASTILIRN](#)) – the national body representing Indigenous interests in libraries in Australia. Melissa is currently President, with Ronald acting as Treasurer. ATSLIRN meets annually in many exotic locations to discuss trends and issues in Indigenous library services as well as to

strengthen links between (often remote) service providers. ATSLIRN's next conference will be held at the University of Notre Dame Australia, Broome Campus in 15-16 April 2009.

The State Library of NSW is not an institution that stands still but is always looking for new and improved ways of delivering quality services to its patrons. We have two very exciting initiatives for Indigenous clients and potential employees in the pipeline at present.

Employment of Indigenous staff has been an ongoing endeavour of the Library. We have recently received funding from the Elsa Dixon Aboriginal Employment Program, which is an initiative of the NSW Government to encourage job opportunities and career advancement for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. The NSW Department of Education and Training administers the program. Recruitment is yet to commence but it is envisaged that the Library will employ and train two library technicians under this program, with at least one of them working with Indigenous Services.

An online research guide relating to convicts, for family historians, was recently made available from the Library's website. This is the first in a series for genealogists. It is planned that Indigenous local studies research guides for NSW will also be available from the Library's website, produced by the Indigenous Services Team. These are being designed to allow the researcher to "drill" into the Library's collections one layer at a time. The materials we plan to include on the web site are local histories, cultural histories, pictures and maps.

All of this fabulous work cannot possibly happen without the continued support of other Library staff and management at all levels. We will no doubt face challenges that are unforeseen but we have in place the support of the library and more importantly the goodwill of the Indigenous community.

BRIEF BIOGRAPHY OF PRESENTERS

Ronald Briggs is a Kamilaroi man who comes from Moree NSW. He has worked as an Indigenous Services Librarian at the State Library of New South Wales since 1991. Ronald was a teacher before obtaining his librarianship qualifications from University of New South Wales. He has also worked with the Family History Unit of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and has a keen interest in Australian Aboriginal genealogy.

Melissa Jackson is of Bundjalung descent with family links to the Baryulgil area near Grafton. Born in Crown Street Women's Hospital she spent all of her life to date in Sydney. Melissa has worked in various government agencies, including the Department

of Housing and Attorney Generals Department before starting work at the State Library of New South Wales as one of 2 Indigenous Services Librarians in 1991. She has a background in teaching and obtained her librarianship qualifications from University of Technology Sydney.

*Dreaming 08 – Australian Library and Information Association Biennial Conference
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