Identity and nation in the Australian public library:  
the development of local and national collections 1850s – 1940s,  
using the Tasmanian Public Library as case study

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ABSTRACT

The major public reference libraries in the capital cities of Australia all maintain a ‘heritage’ role that is a central aspect of their function in their communities. All have acquired rich and extensive collections relating to the history and literature of their respective states and, in a number of cases, to the nation as a whole. However, this aspect of philosophy and practice has not always been part of the public library’s institutional goals. When the major public reference libraries were established in the Australian colonies in the second half of the nineteenth century, the acquisition of a ‘local archive’ reflecting local colonial history and culture was desultory or non-existent in most cases.

This thesis is a cultural history of the growth of the ‘will to archive’ in the public library in Australia over the course of a century, focusing on the period from the 1850s to the 1940s. It addresses how, when, and why the Australian public library came to be a repository of the local and national past, as distinct from (but never replacing) its role as a purveyor of Enlightenment culture and learning. The evolution of this function is situated within a broader framework of emerging historical consciousness, the growth of civic nationalism related to the federation of the Australian colonies in 1901, changing attitudes to the production of history and the new value accorded to accurate historical records, and efforts to establish a ‘national’ creative literature. The thesis argues that the archiving mentality that emerged in the last decades of the nineteenth century, stimulated by the emerging interest in local history, became naturalised in the twentieth century through the forces of nationalism and patriotism. The evolution of this function was complex, influenced variously by factors such as the degree and type of cultural philanthropic activity, historical ‘amnesia’ toward the colonial convict past, and residual ‘cultural cringe’ toward Australian literary production.

While addressing local archiving practices across all the major ‘state’ public libraries, the thesis focuses on the Tasmanian Public Library. While providing an overview of the development of the local archive in Tasmania over a century, the thesis examines in detail the agency of key figures such as trustee James
Backhouse Walker and philanthropist William Walker, and the effect of the local penal past on the formation of the local archive, exemplified by the ‘life cycle’ of convict text *The Hermit in Van Diemen’s Land* by Henry Savery.

This study emerges from the conviction that a close examination of the formation and stratification of library collections that symbolise and promote national identity contributes valuable information about emerging and changing ‘worldviews’ of communities, particularly the ways in which communities identify as members of a region and nation. Utilising the lens of public library philosophy and collections, the thesis offers a new way of reflecting on the formation of local and national identities in Australia.
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## ABBREVIATIONS

<table>
<thead>
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<th>Tasmanian Archives and Research Office</th>
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<tr>
<td>University of Tasmania Library</td>
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