

The Ian McLaren Collection

A rich and vital source of Australiana

Rachel Kennedy

Ian McLaren's library: Malvern, the 1970s

Let's imagine, for a moment, that you are a researcher of Australian history, working in Melbourne in the 1970s. Your area of interest may be politics, it may be explorers, it may be Aboriginal history, or gold, or the military. You may be a student or a scholar, a member of a community group or an interested individual. At any rate, there's a good chance that your research will lead you to the suburb of Malvern, to the home and private library of the Liberal Party MLA for Bennetswood, Ian F. McLaren.

Visitors to McLaren's large Malvern residence and library were fortunate to access his extensive and remarkable collection of Australian materials, which in 1974 numbered 40,000 books, pamphlets and serials. In an effort to fathom the extent of the collection, you might peruse McLaren's guide to his library, which states, among its aims, the modest goal of collecting 'all available literature on Australasia, the Pacific south of the Equator, Indonesia and Antarctica, as well as on other regions, events and people relating to the stated areas'.¹ Arranged throughout McLaren's home, materials are divided, by subject, between 'The Billiard Room', 'The

Pamphlet Room', 'The Passage' (which houses along its walls theological works, and books on education, gold, mining, Indonesia, women and youth), 'The Main Library', 'The Study' and 'The Garage'. Although this last room might cause some confusion, the guide to the library helpfully clarifies the space's dual purpose, explaining that 'the family says that a garage is built to hold a motor car. In this case, it also holds an extensive collection of Victorian Government papers, filed under subject or department order'.²

In 1976 McLaren sold the bulk of his collection to the University of Melbourne's Special Collections.³ Transferred to the Baillieu Library that year, the collection is still housed here, kept in the original order arranged by McLaren. The Ian McLaren Collection remains a vital and compelling collection of resources, and its origins give some insight into the weird and wild world of the ardent book collector.

The development of McLaren's collection

Ian Francis McLaren was born in Launceston on 30 March 1912. He attended Caulfield Grammar School in Melbourne then trained and worked as a chartered accountant. During the 1930s he served as a signaller in the army, became involved in peace

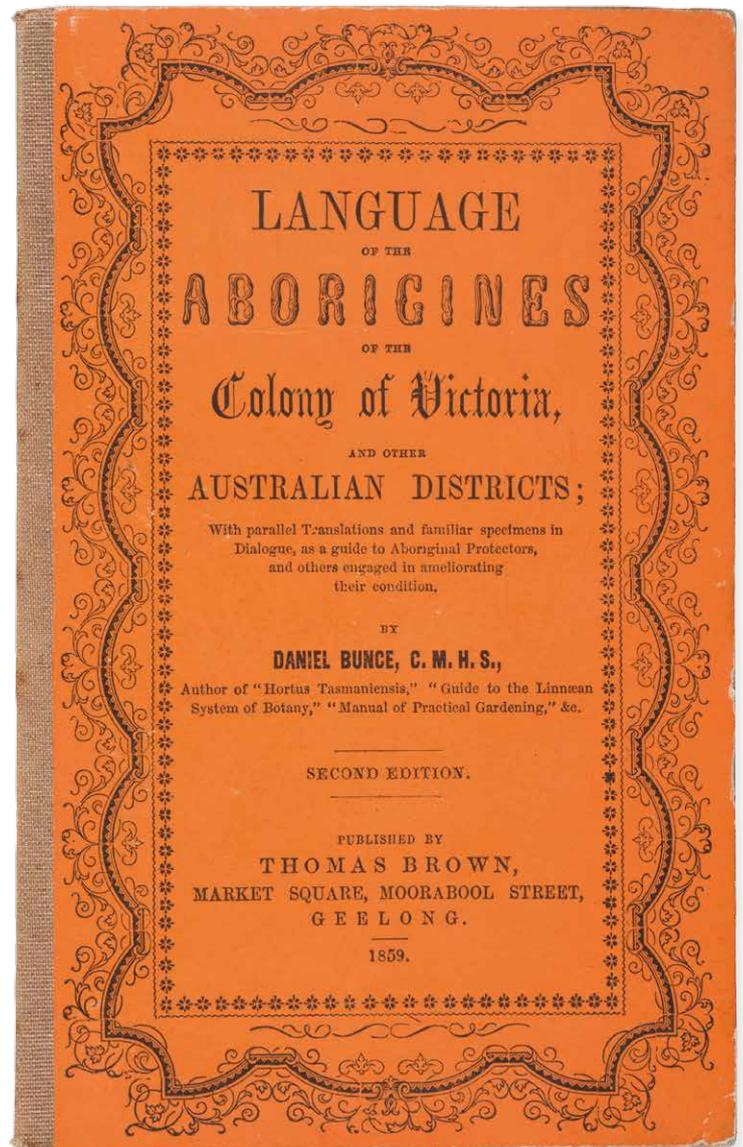
activism, and during World War II joined the Royal Australian Navy, working in intelligence in Brisbane and later New Guinea. It was in 1943, while starting a commerce degree at the University of Melbourne, that McLaren first developed an interest in book collecting. By 1946 he was an independent MLA (Member of the Legislative Assembly) for the seat of Glen Iris, and his collecting accelerated when he found that he was frequently unable to access Australian political and economic material through public and university libraries. During his political career McLaren stood for election to a number of seats, under various parties, but book collecting remained a constant in his life for the next 50 years.

For someone like McLaren, book collecting was a passion that required commitment and dedication. McLaren joined the Victorian Branch of the Book Collectors' Society of Australia in 1958 (its founding year) and became one of a small group of men who spent their time scouring booksellers' catalogues, consulting bibliographies of their subject areas, cultivating relationships with booksellers to ensure that they were the first to know about recent acquisitions, and single-mindedly following the trail to locate rare or sought-after items.

Daniel Bunce, *Language of the Aborigines of the colony of Victoria, and other Australian districts; with parallel translations and familiar specimens in dialogue, as a guide to Aboriginal Protectors, and others engaged in ameliorating their condition*, 2nd edn, Geelong: Thomas Brown, 1859. Ian McLaren Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne. The Ian McLaren Collection contains three copies of this edition, and one copy of the 1851 edition.

McLaren's areas of interest were diverse, with a primary focus on Australiana. At one point he stated that it was his ambition to obtain a copy of every Australian book ever published,⁴ and while it would not be true to say that this ambition was achieved, the scope of his collection is certainly impressive. Collection areas include Australian history, Aboriginal people and cultures, discovery and exploration, early voyages, gold, Australian politics, political pamphlets, Australian and New Zealand militaria, Australian poets, transport, Henry Lawson, New Guinea, New Zealand, Indonesia and Antarctica.⁵

By the 1960s McLaren had become a prominent businessman, with positions as deputy chairman of Kiwi International and, later, director of the Gas and Fuel Corporation from 1963 to 1965.⁶ Interviewed in the 1960s about his collection, McLaren stated that over the previous three years he had been acquiring about 40 to 50 items per week, with the entire holdings at that time numbering more than 25,000 items.⁷ McLaren sought out individual items that might have a place in his collection, but he also acquired collections assembled by others, such as his 1960 purchase of Robert Hanlon's entire holding of 600 items on crime and militaria. Developing his collection was a time-



Australia: Showing Aboriginal reserves etc. as at December 1963, Canberra: Division of National Mapping, Department of National Development 1962–63. Ian McLaren Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.

consuming affair, requiring McLaren to ‘visit all Melbourne bookshops at least once a week, keep watching the catalogues of overseas sellers and of sellers in Sydney and Adelaide ... [and] also buy privately’. On one occasion McLaren’s unwavering dedication got him into trouble with Melbourne bookseller Bruce Evans, who in 1967 had been given responsibility by the trustees of the Ernest L. Brown estate for the dispersal of Brown’s extensive collection of Australiana. Evans was keen to encourage book collecting in Melbourne, and believed that if he sold these books at cheaper prices they would be more accessible and give more people the opportunity to collect. In an effort to discourage bulk purchase by the same (and at this point notorious) group of collectors, Evans decided that each day he would put out between 10 and 20 items, available at random times that would not be known in advance. He surely did not reckon on the zeal of Melbourne’s serious book collectors, who took to visiting the shop several times a day, and providing tip-offs to each other as the books were released. Within weeks McLaren had been banned from the shop, as Evans felt that he was buying too much, and limiting the number of items available to others.



By the 1970s McLaren’s collection was assuming unmanageable proportions. As it grew he was faced with the issue of storing it—at one point contemplating either buying the house next door to his own to set up as a separate library, or moving to a much larger home that could accommodate his family and the collection. He decided on the purchase of a large, two-storey house a little further out in Malvern, which became the home for his library until 1976.⁸

The collection moves to the Baillieu Library

In 1976, the Baillieu Library negotiated the acquisition of McLaren’s collection, which by this time numbered 34,000 books, pamphlets, parliamentary papers and printed ephemera. Included were 2,200 books of Australian verse (800 signed by authors), 2,000 books on transportation of convicts, 2,000 books on crime, 1,750 on the subject of aviation,⁹ and volumes on theology, economics, politics and

the military. There were pamphlets from trade unions, peace activists and other political groups, parliamentary documents and government reports on a plethora of subjects, and an extensive collection of children's literature, comprising comics, annuals, novels and school books, as well as lectures aimed at the moral education of girls. While some of the acquisitions were undoubtedly duplicates of items already held by the Baillieu Library, McLaren's collection also contained many rare early Australian works, which had been printed in relatively short runs. The breadth of McLaren's collection meant that it covered many subjects that other collectors eschewed as less worthy or important, while at the same time including works that were widely well regarded and therefore accorded greater monetary value. The importance of such an extensive collection of Australiana was noted by the university librarian, Mr W.D. Richardson, who commented in the *University Staff News* that it was 'necessary for libraries to collect and conserve the record of our earlier years'.¹⁰

At the time of its purchase by the university, McLaren's collection occupied seven rooms in his large Malvern home. Interviewed by *The Age* newspaper on his feelings at

WESTRALIAN
Aborigine

PUBLISHED BY THE COOLBAROO LEAGUE OCT. - NOV., 1956 Registered at the General Post Office, Perth, for transmission by post as a periodical. PRICE: 6d.

Popular Couple Married

Popular Coolbaroo League secretary Nora Shea was married to Harold Fickett, of York, at the Pallottine Mission Centre, Riverton, in August.

It was the first wedding of coloured Catholics to be solemnized at the mission's chapel.

The ceremony was performed by the Rev. J. Laummen.

All the parties concerned were mission trained. Nora—an employe of the Native Welfare Department—is an ex-pupil of the Pallottine Mission school at Tardin.

The bridegroom received his early education at New Norcia.

Bridesmaids

Miss Joan Cameron, formerly of St. Francis Xavier's Native Mission at Wandering and Miss Shirley Bynder were bridesmaids.

The bride wore a ballerina length frock of white lace. At the Nuptial Mass a combined choir from the Tardin and Wandering missions sang the Mass.

After the ceremony the bridal group passed through a guard of honour of native girls.

About 40 guests sat down to breakfast prepared by the Schoenstatt Sisters of Mary and the women of the Riverton parish.

ATOMIC TESTS DANGEROUS TO DESERT NATIVES

ATOMIC tests at Maralinga, in South Australia, could deprive 800 West Australian natives of half their tribal grounds, contaminate the few water holes and affect game with atomic fall-out.

South Perth M.L.A. Mr. W. Grayden said this in the Legislative Assembly recently.

He asked Native Welfare Minister Brady to seek an assurance from the Commonwealth Government that nomadic desert natives who lived near the interstate border would be clear when the tests were held and would not wander back while there was any danger.

Consequences

The consequences could be extremely serious unless adequate precautions were taken.

It would be most difficult to warn natives in the area of the impending dangers.

There should be a thorough search of the potential danger zone before the tests were conducted.

Mr. Grayden said that when he was at the mission three years ago he heard of natives who wandered south and east into South Australia searching for food.

Fine Balance

In those parts the balance between starvation and survival was very fine.

As a result of the atomic tests the natives might lose half their tribal grounds.

Official reports had said that tests would not be conducted unless the prevailing wind would take the radioactive cloud across the uninhabited island.

Federal Aid

Until now the State Government had not interfered with the life of these natives, but if it was intended to reverse this policy, help for them should be obtained from the Commonwealth Government.

A highway connecting the Warburton mission with the Commonwealth weather station at Rawlinson Range would open up big areas for pastoral holdings.

The provision of water supplies along the route would be of tremendous benefit to the natives.

Justice Is Strange

In Northern recently Ronald James Ryder fell off a horse in York.

He tried to mount, but police arrested him for drunkenness.

The charge: Riding a horse while drunk.

The sentence: Fined £2 and disqualified from holding a CAR DRIVERS LICENCE for three months.

High Costs Force Up Aborigine League Dance Prices Week Off

RIISING costs have forced the Coolbaroo League to raise the admission charge to its dances.

From the beginning of November admission for adults will be 4/-, an increase of 6d., and 1/- for children under 15 (no increase).

A league spokesman said that the increase would be the first in four years.

During the past 12 months the majority of dances had been run at a financial loss to the league.

The only alternative to raising admission prices would be the abandonment of the dances which had become so popular since the foundation of the league.

Any further news of Aborigine Week and a visit to W.A. by these two famous Australians will be published in "Westralian Aborigine".

N.S.W. GIRL TO STUDY

A 16-year-old native girl from Caslon, in northern New South Wales, may become the first of her race to enter an Australian university.

She is Margaret Williams, a fifth-year student at Caslon high school.

Margaret has two ambitions: To gain an economics degree at the Queensland University and to represent Australia at hockey.

LEAGUE BALL AT YORK PROVES A BIG SUCCESS

THE 1956 Coolbaroo League ball at York on October 20 was one of the best organised by the league.

Well-attended, the ball had many attractions. The league's glamour parade proved to be one of the outstanding floorshows and the male mannequin parade brought a chorus of laughter as each of the male mannequins appeared on stage.

Another of the ball's attractions was radio, stage and nightclub entertainer Angelo Christopher who brought strong applause after an act with his guitar.

Westralian Aborigine SUBSCRIPTION VOUCHER

Please register me as a subscriber to Westralian Aborigine, for one year, for which I enclose 6/-.
NAME _____
ADDRESS _____

Post this to The W.A. Coolbaroo League, 102 Beaufort Street, Perth.

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parting with his collection, McLaren commented that he had ‘taken it a lot better than I thought I would’, adding prosaically, ‘my wife says she can use quite a few of the rooms’.¹¹

After purchasing McLaren’s collection, the Baillieu Library appointed him to a position of honorary bibliographer, and he worked in an office adjoining the collection. McLaren was a passionate bibliographer, and had by this time compiled a number of bibliographies on various Australian subjects. His two interests—collecting and bibliography—complemented each other, with a complete bibliography on an area of Australian history or literature perhaps doubling as a wish list for the collection. He continued to work on the collection, and on the process of cataloguing it, with the assistance of various helpers and volunteers. He also pursued his own research, and published several more bibliographies (around 50 in total) on various subjects, including C.J. Dennis, Henry Kendall, Marcus Clarke, La Pérouse in the Pacific and John Dunmore Lang.

McLaren continued to add to the collection, and was still donating books into the 1990s. In 1996 the university awarded him an honorary Doctorate of Letters.¹² McLaren died on 17 April 2000. He was

remembered in an obituary as having been a long-time member of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria (president from 1956 to 1960, and a fellow since 1964). His clarity and coherence of thought were noted, as were his integrity, friendliness and courtesy.¹³ He was survived by his wife, Eileen, and four children.

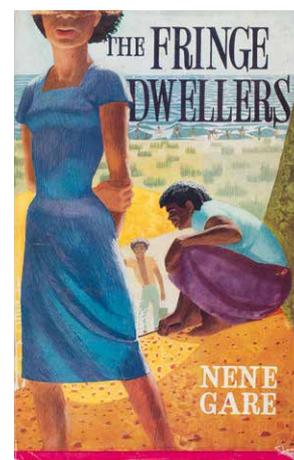
The Ian McLaren Collection today

Housed in the Baillieu Library’s Special Collections, the Ian McLaren Collection extends far back into the depths of the building, filling 32 rows of shelves with books, periodicals and boxed papers and pamphlets, plus half-a-dozen filing cabinets beyond, containing articles, newspaper clippings, McLaren’s correspondence, notes and other documents of interest.

The breadth and depth of the collection are staggering. A glance at just one area—the Aboriginal materials are those with which I am most familiar—reveals an astounding array of resources. There are early colonial government documents relating to massacres, petitions from white settlers demanding that the government defend their livestock, and petitions from missionaries requesting the restriction of liquor sales to Indigenous populations.

There are investigations into the Native Police, and reports on the pay and conditions of Indigenous police officers. There are early colonial ethnographic studies into the customs and lifestyles of various Indigenous groups—predictably revealing a great deal more about those conducting the research than about those they are observing. There are pamphlets and newsletters from missionary groups explaining their work in Central Australia and requesting funds from supporters in the major cities. There are petitions and papers from missionary groups during the 1930s and ’40s, requesting that the government do something about the plight of ‘half-caste’ children who are being raised by their Indigenous families. There is an extensive collection of early fiction written by white authors, telling stories involving the adventures of Aboriginal characters. There are reports from various government departments: the Department of Native Affairs; the Protector of Aborigines’ annual reports; and health reports into conditions on the missions, full of photos of children suffering from curable diseases. There are political newspapers produced by Aboriginal activist groups in the 1930s, critiquing the entrenched racism of society and government

Nene Gare, *The fringe dwellers*, London: Heinemann, 1961. Ian McLaren Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.



policy. There is a series of materials produced by missionary groups each year for 26 January, requesting that this day be seen as a time to reflect on the loss and damage done to Indigenous Australians by white colonisation. Taken together, the Aboriginal material does not paint a pretty picture, but it does reveal a tremendous amount about Australia's history, and particularly about white Australia's engagement with Indigenous cultures and populations.

When the collection arrived at the university in 1976 it was not completely catalogued. Although the majority of the books are listed in McLaren's card catalogue, the process of fully documenting the collection—including the numerous papers and pamphlets—on the University Library's database continues, and the collection is still being added to when relevant materials become available. McLaren's library has also been used in ways that McLaren himself could not have imagined: some of the more unusual materials have been digitised, and researchers have made use of the collection in new and exciting ways, such as being a source for Bronwyn Margaret Lowe's examination of historical gender representations in juvenile fiction.¹⁴

McLaren himself was a significant figure of his time: member of

parliament, adviser on any number of business and community boards, and something of a key personality among Melbourne's small group of dedicated book collectors. His character looms large in the collection, not just in his original classification system, but in the papers and research materials he gathered for his own multiple projects. McLaren built his collection according to his own diverse interests, and the subjects that interested Australia at that time. As time passes his library becomes not just a collection of Australiana, but acquires more depth of meaning as a snapshot of a particular part of Australia's history and developing identity. For scholars and students of Australia's political, economic and cultural history, the Ian McLaren Collection will continue to provide a plethora of fascinating and valuable resources.

Rachel Kennedy is a recent graduate of the Master of Information Management program at RMIT University. She undertook a student placement working on the Aboriginal materials in the Ian McLaren Collection.

Students, staff and other readers are welcome to request items from the **Ian McLaren Collection**, for use in the Cultural Collections Reading Room on the third floor of the Baillieu Library. See www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/special/collections/australiana/mclaren.html for details.

- 1 Ian F. McLaren, *The library of Ian F. McLaren*, Melbourne: Hawthorn Press, 1974, p. 6.
- 2 McLaren, *The library of Ian F. McLaren*, p. 6.
- 3 Blake & Rigall, Solicitors & Notaries, 'Agreement between the University of Melbourne and Ian Francis McLaren', 26 April 1976. Ian McLaren Collection, Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 4 Charles Stitz (ed.), *Australian book collectors*, Bendigo: Bread Street Press, 2010, p. 170.
- 5 University of Melbourne Special Collections, Cultural Collections Reading Room information sheet no. 6: *Australian studies resources in the McLaren Collection*.
- 6 John D. Adams, 'Ian Francis McLaren OBE', (obituary), *Victorian Historical Journal*, vol. 71, issue 1, 2000, pp. 52–3.
- 7 Stitz (ed.), *Australian book collectors*, p. 170.
- 8 Stitz (ed.), *Australian book collectors*, p. 170.
- 9 Stuart Sayers, 'Baillieu Library gets big windfall', *Age*, [1976], p. 20, undated press cutting in administration file. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 10 *Staff News*, University of Melbourne, [1976], undated cutting in administration file. Special Collections, Baillieu Library, University of Melbourne.
- 11 Sayers, 'Baillieu Library gets big windfall'.
- 12 Adams, 'Ian Francis McLaren OBE'.
- 13 Adams, 'Ian Francis McLaren OBE'.
- 14 Bronwyn Margaret Lowe, 'The historical-cultural value of the juvenile collection: The McLaren Collection at the University of Melbourne and its girls' books', *Papers: Explorations in Children's Literature*, vol. 22, issue 1, 2012, pp. 56–67.