

# Introduction

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The University's cultural collections have developed as a result of a range of influences. In the Library many of our outstanding collections reflect the personal interests and collecting passions of people who subsequently donated some or all of their material to the University. In the 1980s I was privileged to work in the University Library at a time when people like Sophie Ducker (a retired academic from Botany), Clem and Nina Christesen (respectively editor of *Meanjin* and founder of the University's Department of Russian Studies), and Ian McLaren (MLA and noted book collector) were frequent visitors. All these people made major donations to the Library and their generosity has had a profound influence on the depth of the collections and their importance for scholars and researchers. Clem and Ian in particular held strong views about how their collections should be catalogued and managed.

If any of these donors were alive today each of them would be astounded at the opportunities now available to those who use the Library. In the 1980s, use of the Library's cultural collections inevitably required a visit to the Baillieu Library building. There was no other means of gaining access to the holdings. In contrast, this issue

of *University of Melbourne Collections* has been prepared for publication at the same time as the University Library has just held its first Scholarly Information Innovation Showcase. The Showcase was an opportunity for the University community to see how new technologies can be used to create, share, publish and exchange information in innovative ways. At first glance it would be easy to think that an Innovation Showcase with a strong technology focus would share little in common with the University's cultural collections. Yet five of the eleven successful applications for funding from the Innovation Grants Program drew for their raw material on one or other of the University's cultural collections. Each of these projects focussed on new ways in which these collections may be identified, understood and interpreted.

In developing the Scholarly Innovation Grants and its digitising program, the University of Melbourne Library is typical of research libraries around the world. Digital technology is allowing unique collections to be made readily available to all who have internet access, opening up the extraordinary wealth of material that has been preserved. Today an item such as the McLaren Collection's copy of

the 1886 edition of Fergus Hume's *Mystery of a hansom cab* can be read online through Professor Ken Gelder's website *Colonial Australian popular fiction*. Yet this fragile book, which eventually sold in the many hundreds of thousands, is now one of only two known surviving copies of the first edition, the other one being preserved at the Mitchell Library in Sydney.

In many ways the digital revolution has had one of its most profound impacts in the way that unique collections such as those at the University of Melbourne are interpreted and understood. As a result many of these collections are gaining a new and much stronger profile in the community.

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