

ADFA Library exhibition launch

25 years of AustLit

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Friends and colleagues

For those of you who don't know me personally, my name is Paul Eggert. I have been part of the English program here at UNSW Canberra since 1985: in fact the year before we came over from the nearby Royal Military College, Duntroon.

More of that history anon but first I need to thank the ADFA Librarian Penelope Fenley and Denise Shepherd, the Client Services Team Leader in the Library, for hosting this exhibition of the first 25 years of the AustLit database at ADFA. Special thanks go to Jane Rankine, one of the AustLit indexers here, for devising and designing the exhibition, with contributions from a number of her workmates.

In any cultural institution worth the name the library serves as a museum and cradle of its history. It carries the record. And so it is here at UNSW Canberra, as we have been starting to realise that we are gaining something of a history. This exhibition is part of that dawning awareness. University College, the new campus of UNSW within the Australian Defence Force Academy, got going properly in early 1986 although some functions had been moved around the hill from RMC Duntroon the previous year.

The AustLit database was launched in 1988 right here in this Library by the Right Honourable Gough Whitlam 25 years ago, almost to the day. There is footage of the launch but Gough, as was his wont in those days, is said to have talked mainly about other things. Finally the then librarian Lynn Hard steered back to the topic in hand, HP [Harry] Heseltine AO, professor of English, spoke very much to the point and the thing was launched. But what this thing would grow up to be we had little idea in those days.

Why was such an enterprise located at ADFA (as the taxi drivers soon came to call us) in the first place? In fact the teaching of tertiary level English goes back to 1911 when the first professor of English was appointed to the brand-new Duntroon. His name was VJR [Rundell] Miles; he held the appointment until 1918 in those years in which professors in the humanities might be the only person lecturing – and doing so in more than one field. He needs some research. I can find

nothing published by him, although he crops up in newspaper articles in the 1920s. With an MA from the University of Sydney – probably an honorary degree following the normal completion of a BA – Miles will, if he was born in Australia, have been the first professor of English to have been born and educated here.

He was succeeded by LH [Leslie] Allen, professor from 1918–1931, and whose daughter Joan was still secretary of the ANU English department when I arrived in Canberra in 1985. Like a number of Australian appointments in English at the time he possessed postgraduate qualifications from Germany, the acknowledged centre of philological endeavour. An Australian by birth, his Leipzig PhD was written on Shelley, and he would go on to write some volumes of poetry. As the *ADB* languidly puts it: ‘His work was undemanding and allowed him to pursue his wide cultural interests’. In later years, from 1937, he would serve as the chairman of the Literature Censorship Board, as the research of my colleague Nicole Moore has recently revealed.

Nevertheless, Australian literary research does not get onto the radar of today’s event until 1968 when the New Zealander GKW [Grahame] Johnston was appointed to the chair in English at Duntroon, by then part of the UNSW Faculty of Military Studies. A quick look at the catalogue reveals nothing published by his immediate two predecessors ER [Ridley] Bryan OBE, professor 1940–1967 or LN Morrison 1931–1940. But, again, more work is needed there to elicit the full story.

Grahame Johnston had been professor at the University of Melbourne before coming to Duntroon. His edited collection *Australian Literature* (1962) had already appeared – to some dispute, but also effect. His *Annals of Australian Literature* would appear in 1970 and his *Australian Pocket Oxford Dictionary* in 1976.

As my former colleague Joy Hooton told me in an email a couple of days ago:

... Austlit grew from a card catalogue I was keeping which was an index of the major Austlit journals. This started when I was working for Grahame Johnston. Grahame was the general editor of the *Australian Writers and Their Work* series published by OUP and my work with him was my initiation into Austlit. When Harry [Heseltine] came [in 1981] he realised its value and I think the library took it up from there. Re the involvement of the English Department with Austlit I think it was already there when Grahame was appointed Professor, which must have been in the

late 1960s – but you would have to check that date. Bill Wilde was already working in that field.

WB [Bill] Wilde was in his last year when I arrived at Duntroon. He had written a book on Henry Kendall and a biography of Mary Gilmore, and he had published his edition of her letters. Barry Andrews was the more recent arrival and his edition of Price Warung's stories from the early 1890s had established his name, one that has carried on since his early death in 1987 via the annual lecture series in his honour at the ASAL conference. Joy's bibliographical work on Alec Hope, and later on Australian autobiography, was another aspect to the scene in which the AustLit database could find this most unlikely but ultimately natural of birth-homes.

Although I can't establish exactly when the 5 inch x 3 inch cards that Joy mentions began to be compiled that would finally lead to the database we would call AUSTLIT, I can say that there were very many drawers full of them when I arrived at Duntroon in early 1985. There may have been 10,000, which is what Harry Heseltine now remembers, but I reported 50,000 in a conference paper in 1993 doubtless on the basis of someone else's recollection from the time.

The number is less important than another vital ingredient: the sheer gall of a professor of English in 1985 – who had never used a computer and would never become fully conversant with its mysteries – deciding to send off those cards to the Philippines to have them scanned and then entered into the fields of a database. But that's what happened. I suspect the influence of Trish Middleton, his secretary, in the background and possibly others in what would shortly be called the ADFA Library, especially Lynn Hard the Librarian who was a firm supporter, and perhaps Roger May and Fran Cassidy who handled the programming duties that would see the first fully computerised library catalogue in Australia.

There are many others who, over the following years, participated in the cleanup and then the extension of that original swag of data: Mary Bryden then Annette McGuinness then Marie-Louise Ayres who in succession took AUSTLIT through to its eventual amalgamation with several other cultural data sets in 2001 to produce what we would call the new AustLit. Many contributions to the data compilation in the ADFA Library and on the part of research assistants in the English Department along the way need to be acknowledged, including those sterling indexers: Lesley Banson, Susan Cowan, Jenny Huntley, Sarah Randles, Jane Rankine, Kay Walsh and Tessa Wooldridge, as well as the great efforts in the technical redesign of the new AustLit in 2000 by Kent Fitch.

By this time the database had grown large and it was very difficult for ADFA any longer to support it financially. And the ARC wanted a single thing rather than multiple small ones all applying for infrastructure funding. When Gough Whitlam launched AUSTLIT in 1988 there were 120,000 records. By 2000 there were 285,000, the lion's share of the new AustLit.

So AustLit went national, the ARC has continued its generous support, the database is nearing one million records, and at the end of this year it is going open-access and free rather than being supported by the subscription income it has enjoyed since the start. There are financial and organisational and technical challenges, but the partner universities are confident of success.

UNSW through its Canberra campus at the Australian Defence Force Academy can afford to be proud of its achievement over the last 25 years and more with this pre-eminent Australian literary database that is now widely recognised as 'the best show in town'.

I invite you to look at the exhibits, especially the 'AUSTLIT box' that was used at the National Library of Australia in the early days, the forms that the indexers used to fill in for each record for subsequent and separate inputting by data clerks, the posters that display its evolution and successive brandings, and the research monographs that have fed off its data.