

More than just books

The Classics and Archaeology Library

Miriam Riverlea

When asked how important it is for a department to maintain its own library, Hannah Templeman, an honours student in the Centre for Classics and Archaeology, responded 'incredibly so, since the Classics and Archaeology Library is more than just books'. Hannah went on to speak of 'the sense of community' that is fostered when staff, postgraduate and undergraduate students make use of a common collection of academic resources.

Hannah was one of 21 respondents to a survey which I distributed among the staff and students of the Centre for Classics and Archaeology, asking users about the frequency of their visits to the Library and what they considered to be the greatest assets and problems of the collection. I was seeking to clarify the Library's social significance as part of a significance assessment of the collection, which I undertook during the latter part of 2007 and completed in early 2008. Many of the other interviewees echoed Hannah's sentiments, with another Honours student crediting the Library as one of the main reasons she had decided to pursue postgraduate study at the University of Melbourne.

The Classics and Archaeology Library comprises almost 20,000 volumes relating to the cultures of the

ancient Mediterranean and near east, from the Bronze Age to late antiquity. The collection, which was formally established in 1969, is vast and varied, featuring the primary works of ancient authors, critical commentaries, monographs, textbooks, dictionaries and grammar books, encyclopedias and other reference works, maps, site plans, periodicals, as well as the honours, masters and doctoral theses of Classics and Archaeology graduates from the last five decades.

My assessment confirmed that parts of the collection have significance in accordance with the criteria established by the Heritage Collections Council.¹ Of particular importance are the 1,200 volumes published prior to 1900, many of which are endowed with historic and aesthetic significance. Among them are items of extreme antiquity and rarity, such as a 1696 folio sized edition of book eight of the ancient Greek historian Thucydides' *History of the Peloponnesian War*, and a two-volume set containing the complete works of the Scottish classicist George Buchanan, published in 1715. A selection of even older texts, including 16th century editions of Aristotle (1545), Cicero (1573), Diogenes (1524) and Tacitus (1590), were transferred from the Classics

and Archaeology Library to Special Collections of the Baillieu Library in 1998.

Many of the books in the collection are extremely beautiful. Some feature elaborate leather bindings and have gilt-edged pages. The marbled endpapers in some of these volumes are stunning. Each design is utterly distinct, with its own riotous colour scheme and pattern of dots or swirls or spatters. Within the texts themselves, the illustrations, diagrams, and maps have further aesthetic appeal. And it is not always the very old, rare texts which fulfill this criterion. The pocket-sized, brightly coloured volumes in the Bells' Illustrated Classics, Elementary Classics and Everyman Library series of school Greek and Latin texts have an undeniable charm, as do the vibrant Harvard University Press Loeb editions, coloured green for Greek texts and red for Roman, which are shelved in neat rows in the Library's north-west corner.

The final section of the assessment measured the collection's social significance, in essence, what the Library means to the people who make use of it. The words of another respondent to the survey, Aleks Michalewicz, proved useful here. Aleks, a postgraduate student and sessional staff member who submitted



her masters thesis soon afterwards, declared that ‘the collection represents a history of the study of Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne ... quite literally centuries of scholarship from which we benefit and to which we belong and contribute’.

Like Hannah’s, Aleks’ comment articulates the notion that a library is much more than a space where books are kept. In addition, she implies, a collection preserves the memories of its own history, a tradition which implicates a library’s users right down to the present day. Many of the books in the Classics and Archaeology Library contain traces of their past usage. Some reveal who read them, and what these people thought about the content. Others provide clues to complex sequences of possession that ultimately result in a bequest to the Library. In this way, the books in the Classics and Archaeology Library are valuable sources not only for antiquity, but also for a much more recent period of time. For example, H.A. Henderson and C.W. Baty’s *A progressive course of Latin unseens*, first published in 1929 by Oxford University Press, is a school text containing excerpts from the works of Caesar, Cicero and Sallust, among other Roman writers. As one of numerous Latin readers in the collection, the text

testifies to the dominance of Latin (along with ancient Greek) in the classical studies curriculum prior to the introduction of classical civilisation subjects, taught with texts in translation, in the mid-1960s.

This is interesting in its own right, but what is most striking about this little book is what appears on its front endpapers. The name of a former owner, an H. Dobell, has been crossed out and the page has been doodled with several pictures of pompous looking gentlemen dressed in suits with tails and bow ties. ‘Your wishes are orders to me, my dear good sir’, one of them appears to be saying. To the right of these figures another polite message has been written, this one in the form of a request: ‘Will you please sign the visitors’ book’. On the opposite page more than 50 readers have obliged, leaving their initials in three long columns. Some have gone further and signed their full names, and one person, a J.C. Elliot, has helpfully provided a contextualising date for his entry—1941.

This rather whimsical page of doodles paints an evocative portrait of Latin studies at the University of Melbourne in the middle of the 20th century. It sheds light on the kind of textbooks favoured at that time, and indicates that they were loaned to

students. (The Classics Library would not be established for another three decades, and has never been a lending library.) Like a student desk covered in graffiti, the ‘visitors’ book’ indicates a sense of camaraderie between students and reveals that they communicated in a silly, perhaps even subversive, manner. This single page is rich in meaning, and further research may even reveal that some of the ‘visitors’ went on to have an impact in classical studies or other fields.

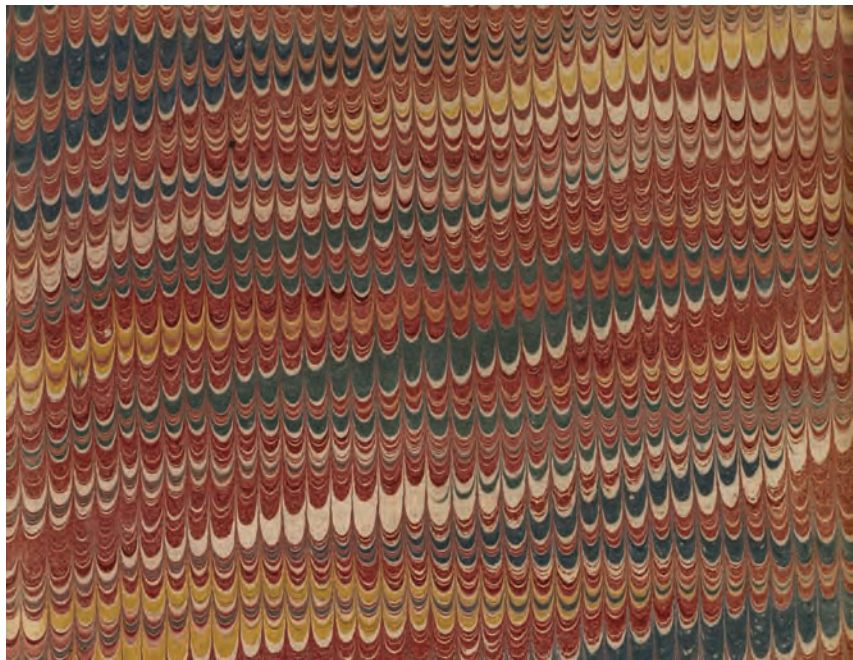
Though few are as elaborately decorated as Henderson and Baty’s text, open any of the older books in the Library and more likely than not its title page will be inscribed with the name of a former owner. While some feature beautiful printed bookplates, others have been inscribed with simple handwriting. It is clear that many books in the Library were previously owned by important figures in the department’s history. The names Cecil Scutt (1889–1961; Chair of Classical Philology from 1919 until 1955), George Henry Gellie (1918–1988; Lecturer in Greek Tragedy from 1946 to 1954, Senior Lecturer from 1954 to 1960), Harold Hunt (1903–1977; Professor of Classics from 1955 until 1969), John Bowman (1916–2006; Chair of Semitic Studies, later Middle-Eastern Studies, from 1959), and W.A.

Previous page: Panoramic view of the Classics and Archaeology Library. Photography by Lee McRae.

Below: Detail of marbled endpaper from Homer, *Homeri carmina et cycli epici reliquiae*, Paris: Firmin Didot, 1837. Classics and Archaeology Library, Centre for Classics and Archaeology, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne.

Osborne (1873–1967; Professor of Physiology, with a lifelong interest in Roman history and literature) figure frequently. One particularly evocative plate appears in a Latin dictionary from 1917. The book was awarded as a prize at Newington College, Stanmore, Sydney, to H.K. Hunt, sixth form, for the Nolan Languages Prize, December 1920. This talented young Latin scholar would go on to play a crucial role in classical studies at the University of Melbourne for almost four decades.

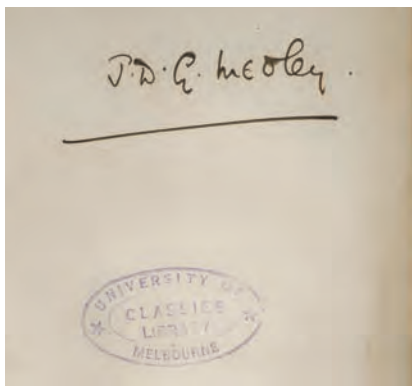
Some texts have more than one name added to their title page, revealing more complex chains of ownership. The Library reveals that classics lecturer William Kerry inherited the personal collection of T.G. Tucker (1859–1946; Professor of Classical Philology from 1885 until 1919), including an attractive *Dictionary of classical antiquities*, published in 1891. When Kerry retired, the texts were donated to the Library. Interestingly, the collection contains very few texts in which Kerry's name appears on its own. Without acquisition and administrative records, we can only speculate as to whether Kerry's collection went somewhere else, or whether his personal library consisted almost entirely of books passed on to him by Tucker.



The names of some previous owners serve to locate classics within broader contexts. A volume of Sophocles from 1902 is inscribed with the name J.D.G. Medley (1891–1962; Vice-Chancellor of the University of Melbourne from 1938 until 1951). Jaynie Anderson, now Professor of Art History, gave to the Library the copies of Plato and Manetho she studied as an undergraduate. As one of the University's founding disciplines, classical studies was for many decades

considered a cornerstone of a tertiary education, and some texts reveal that scholars renowned for their contributions to other fields have a background in classics and archaeology.

Women's names figure occasionally, highlighting the presence of female scholars in the department. A copy of Aeschylus' *Seven against Thebes* is inscribed 'Maggie Holmes, University of Melbourne, July 1906'. A particularly beautiful bookplate, featuring a classical figure studying a papyrus, is

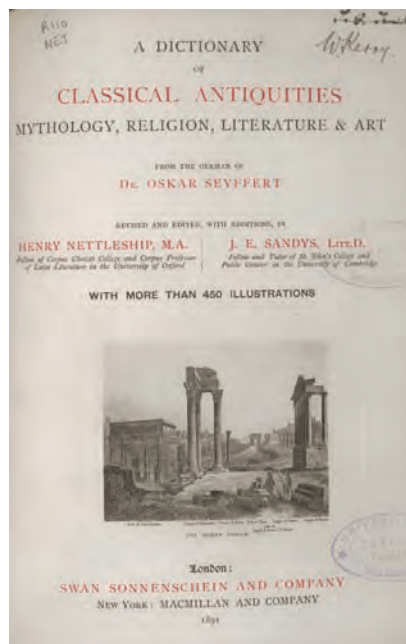


Left: John Medley's signature on the flyleaf of Sophocles, [*Oedipus Tyrannus, Oedipus Coloneus and Antigone*], translated and explained by John Swinnerton Phillimore, London: George Allen, 1902. Classics and Archaeology Library, Centre for Classics and Archaeology, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne.

Below: Title page of Oskar Seyffert, *A dictionary of classical antiquities: Mythology, religion, literature and art*, London: Swan Sonnenschein; New York: Macmillan, 1891. Classics and Archaeology Library, Centre for Classics and Archaeology, School of Historical Studies, University of Melbourne.

pasted into a volume of Juvenal from 1930 belonging to a Mary Johnston.

Some books feature more than a name. Those that have been annotated help to shed light on the research interests and scholarly preoccupations of individual staff members, as well as highlighting more general academic trends. An edition of Homer's *Iliad, Odyssey* and the fragments of the Epic cycle, published in Paris in 1837, has an article from *The Daily Telegraph* pasted inside its front cover. Dated 1857, it recounts the military situation in Lucknow, northern India, and lists the British casualties of the siege. The circumstances in which each man died are described in graphic detail: Lieutenant L.A. Arthur died after being shot through the head on 28 September. The article reports that he had 'previously recovered from a very severe burn which disfigured his face and hands'. The placement of this article implicitly associates Homer's stories of the Trojan War with the First War of Indian Independence, also known as the Indian Mutiny.² Evidently, whoever cut it out and pasted it into their copy of Homer was preoccupied with the theme of the universality of war. With its tragic and futile loss of life, war spans mythological and historical contexts.



In these sorts of ways the Classics and Archaeology Library is much more than just books. Room 136 of the Old Quadrangle, where the Library has been located since 2002 (formerly the staff library of the Law Faculty, and close to the site of the original University Library) has a certain scholarly air about it which the users of the Library seem to find particularly conducive for their study. As the collection continues to grow with the generous support of an anonymous benefactor, a larger space

is being sought. But even in a new location, the atmosphere of the Library, so rich in memories, stories, and the history of the department, will remain a constant.

Miriam Riverlea completed her MA in the Centre for Classics and Archaeology at the University of Melbourne in 2007. She is now undertaking a PhD at Monash University. She balances her doctoral research into the representation of classical mythology in contemporary children's literature with archival work at the Star of the Sea College in Gardenvale.

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Notes

- 1 Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth, *Significance: A guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, Canberra: Commonwealth of Australia on behalf of the Heritage Collections Council, 2001.
- 2 For another text owned by the University and associated with this conflict, see Daria Fedewytsch-Dickson, 'The provenance of a historic Koran: Artefact as participant in the events of the Indian Mutiny of 1857', *University of Melbourne Collections*, issue 2, July 2008, pp. 40–43.