

How the search for an atlas began a library

Emma Russell, April 2021



"It was Angus Shaw longing for some sort of reference library which started me going"
Mrs Gunn wrote in 1955 to her friend Cec Wellington. She had been horrified to hear Angus had gone all the way into Melbourne, from Monbulk in the Dandenong Ranges, to find an atlas and show his son the places he'd been to in the war.

There was no one better to establish such a library. Jeanne Gunn had an enormous love of books and very strong opinions on what was good literature. She was the celebrated author of two successful novels herself about life in the northern Australian outback: "The Little Black Princess: A True Tale Of Life In The Never-Never Land" [1905] about an Aboriginal child called Bett-Bett, and "We Of The Never-Never" [1908], 'a fresh, affectionate and minutely observed account of tropical outback life'. She was awarded the OBE in 1939 for her contributions to literature and to community.

There was also no one better to establish such a library in Monbulk. Monbulk was her favourite place and, as a patriot, Monbulk's returned servicemen and their families some of her favourite people. She had known them since first visiting Monbulk with her father in the 1900s and had returned time and again to support this community during both World Wars and all the in-between years. As an energetic community worker, she leapt at the challenge of providing a library of 'essential' reading material for them.

She worked her contacts in the book world mercilessly. She corresponded with fellow authors, book sellers, Australian publishers, lending libraries, and her publishers in London and America. This was a community that knew their books and she managed to secure over 900 volumes of poetry, history, art, art interpretation, military history, geography, biography, travel, anthropology, religion, philosophy and fiction. Military history made up a significant third of the collection (this was for an RSL community and the last world war was recent enough to have been a lived experience for everyone in Monbulk). But she was intent on securing a wide range of subjects and good fiction. She 'rejected all but the essential'. [Local news reports and some of her correspondence indicate the library was successful and popular, although it would be nice to have more tangible evidence for this.]

Her enthusiasm for the project spilled over into the annotations and notes she attached to many of the books:

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In Ernest Scott's, Australian Discovery. Vol 1 By Sea, published in 1929, she wrote 'Australian Discovery – Sir Ernest Scott Prof. (a) This book is very scarce indeed but has at last come to light in a library in Sale (you have already Vol 2) ...'

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F C Green's, The Fortieth. A record of the 40th Battalion, published in 1922 had a note declaring 'I have waited three years to get this. JG'

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In Karl Gjellerup's The Pilgrim Kamanita, published in 1911: 'This is I think the best book of its kind in existence on The Lord Buddha and makes all so clear to even dullards... JG'

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In a 1956 edition of Aesop’s Fables, she wrote: ‘We have waited a long while for this edition of ‘Aesop’s Fables’ but it has proved very worthwhile waiting for. Not only for the many so excellent illustrations but especially for the fine Introduction, so full of helpful teachings from G A Chesterton. It has just come to hand. Best wishes to everyone big and small. Jeannie Gunn’

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It is a fascinating time capsule of ‘essential’ reading for a curious reading public in the mid-20th century. It is also an example of what can be managed when a passionate and knowledgeable community of booklovers contribute to its gathering. In its day this library represented the relationship Mrs Gunn had with the Monbulk community, but also with her book community.

Angus Shaw’s longing for a reference library has unwittingly both fed and created a community of book lovers. Some 70 years later the library that was established at his provocation remains intact in glass fronted cabinets in the Monbulk RSL Sub-branch clubhouse hoping for a second wind to give it life again.

While recently conducting a significance assessment of this library it was clear that Jeannie Gunn’s book community was still thriving (despite kindles, etc). All those I spoke or emailed with were keenly interested in this library; some in the annotations, others in the military collection, while others thought it’s breadth and association with Mrs Gunn was particularly significant. I detected a hunger to see, feel and appreciate these books. Today’s book aficionados are as keen as Mrs Gunn’s cohort were in the 1950s. I feel hopeful that the Mrs Aeneas Gunn Memorial Library could come alive again not only for book aficionados, but also for researchers of literature, library studies, history etc who are happy to travel out to the lovely wilds of Monbulk.



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I'm an advocate for history's capacity to provide the sense of place, identity and connections we all need for a shared, positive future.