

INTERVIEW WITH MARY BARRETT (nee DETTMANN)¹

21 April, 2010

(Interviewer: Neil Radford)

Mary, how did you come to join the Library staff?

Well, when I left school I knew I would like to become a librarian, and so first of all I had an interview with Miss Leeson at the – it was called the Public Library in those days, now the State Library – but I didn't think I'd be appointed there, we didn't seem to get on with each other. But then soon after, I can't remember answering an application, but I don't think I'd have had the temerity to go up and present myself to Mr Green and say have you got a job, but anyway I had an interview with him and I was quite hopeful that I perhaps would get a job there, and sure enough in about a week or two I started.

Do you remember anything about the interview? Was it a very detailed searching sort of interview, or was it just a casual one?

I had a very good reference from my Headmistress – it was really good, it didn't even sound like me – but it was very appropriate to give to Mr Green. Another plus was that Mr Green's daughter, Nora I think her name was, was a friend of my cousin Denise Dettmann, and Denise Dettmann was a very brilliant Latin and Greek scholar, so probably Mr Green thought that I had a few marbles, so it was interesting that I was appointed. I really didn't think it would be as quick as that, you know, I thought I'd probably have to wait months before there was a vacancy.

When was this?

I had the interview with Mr Green at the beginning of March

Of what year?

1937, and I started there probably towards the end of March. Now one of the stipulations on being employed by the University, in the Fisher Library, was that you had to be a graduate or an undergraduate working towards a degree. I had no intention of doing a university course, but then I had to choose between Arts and Economics, they were the only two courses that were available in the evenings. So I chose Arts and started. And I loved everything from the word go. It was wonderful, it really was, so I was so glad that I had been directed into these lines.

Let's talk about the first job that you did, the first work that you did.

¹ The interview has been edited to improve clarity and readability by removing unnecessary pauses and repetitions, and by bringing together disconnected comments on particular topics.

The first job that I did in the Library was in the Reading Room. The Reading Room was a large room which is now the MacLaurin Room at the University. Miss Wines was in charge of the Reading Room, and she was a lovely person. I mean she and I got on very well together. She wasn't my pre-conception of a librarian – she was dramatic and she was very outgoing and she had three girls under her who worked in the Reading Room.

Of whom you were one, or three plus you?

I was one

You were one of the three

Yes.

So the total staff of the Reading Room was Miss Wines plus three junior girls.

Yes, just four. So now, you want to know what I did I suppose. The Reading Room was used mainly by students who were studying. It was a quiet place, I can never remember it being overcrowded or noisy. I know there's been many reports that it was very overcrowded and noisy but it wasn't when I first went there in 1937. I enjoyed the intercourse between students, certain members of staff came to consult or borrow the books. So my job was really to give them the books they wanted. Sometimes they read them in the Reading Room and sometimes they wanted to borrow them, so they had to fill in borrowing cards with their name and address so that we could recall all the overdue books, and that was basically what I did. Of course they had the card system of cataloguing the books behind the counter desk, and I can remember the Deputy Librarian, Mr Steel, versing me in all the ins and outs of the catalogue and the Dewey system. He was an interesting man. He had a very steady gaze, so he would sort of transfix me with his eyes and I could never even blink, you know, it was a most extraordinary situation. But I learned a lot from him, and I think he came down several times during my first weeks there probably, so I really enjoyed that. Then, lectures usually began at 6 at night as far as I can remember, so we'd finish working at 5, or sometimes I'd work longer, sometimes pop down to Manning House for a meal, then go to lectures in the evening. I enjoyed the lectures very much. It's amazing, because I had no intention of further studies, yet I'll always be grateful that I was made to, you know.

Did you find that working in the Library assisted you in getting material for essays, for exams and things?

Oh it did. It was wonderful for that, yes, and even material that wasn't on the reading lists for certain topics, it was good.

What other work was done in the Reading Room? You mentioned lending books to people, fetching books for people, helping people with the catalogue I assume. What else did you do?

Staff often came in and sometimes they were allowed into the bookstack - I think there must have been about 5 or 6 floors of bookstack, and they were all glass and steel. Sometimes they were allowed in but very often they didn't know how to find things and in many ways we

really had to help them. I can't think that we did much else. Oh, there was all the borrowing of books by students and the recalling of books, that was difficult sometimes because they wanted to hang onto them, you know. I don't think we had enough copies of texts that were referred to in their reading lists because there was always a line up, you know, of the next one on the list to borrow a certain book. I don't know that we did much else. That's about all, I think.

How long were you in the Reading Room under Miss Wines?

I think I must have been there for about three years. I can't really remember.

And what did you do after that?

After that I went into the Accessions Department, and Mr Lewis was in charge of that. It was a tiny little room and it had a double-sided desk with a panel up the middle and we used to work there. But he was a worried little man. I don't think I ever saw him smile. He must have been twice my age but I always felt motherly towards him, I felt he needed some sort of emotional support. But I mean we got on well. That was where the books were ordered.

How many people were in the Accessions Section?

There was only Mr Lewis and one other, me, at that stage. I think I was only in there for about a year, and then I was moved on to the Periodicals Room, and Mr Burrow was in charge of the Periodicals Room. He was a very different man from Mr Lewis. He was very easy-going, just an easy sort of person to get on with and talk to, and I was the only one in there apart from him, it was a very small outfit in those days. I can't remember being very busy there, as a matter of fact I can remember sometimes when librarians in the Reading Room went on leave or had a day off or something I often went down there relieving, so it wasn't a very busy place. We housed the periodicals down there.

That was in the room on the other side of the main landing, up the stairs.

Yes, the doors were opposite to the Reading Room doors. They were all journals – I think they call them serials now – they were published either quarterly or monthly, and we had to put them in the relevant piles on the shelves. Then when we had a full volume or maybe two – if they were thick we might have two in one year – we sent them to the binders. The binder's name was Mr Wagner and he came every Thursday and collected the books that we wanted bound. When he came, we had to take the books down to the basement. The only way down to the basement that I remember – though there must have been access from the Quad I think – was in the lift, a rickety old lift that went from behind the counter in the Reading Room.

That's the lift that went up to the various levels of the bookstacks?

I can't remember any lifts going up to the bookstacks. All I can remember is going up and down the stairs in the bookstacks. I don't think we ever used the lifts, from memory.

You would have had to carry books up to the top, and so forth.

Oh yes, we were strong in those days. Even if we had to make several trips. It probably occupied a lot of our time.

So there was just you and Mr Burrow in the Periodicals Department and you had to help the readers to find the periodicals they wanted and so forth, and you had to get things ready to go to the binders.

Yes. And we had to enter each issue of the periodicals that came out in these large books that were called Kalamazoos, which I believe is named after a town in America somewhere. So it was easy work.

Just for two of you? It sounds like a lot for two.

Well, I suppose so, but we never seemed to be over-worked.

And you got on well with Mr Burrow?

I got on very well with Mr Burrow. He also developed a photostating department. That was down in the basement too, and he used to photostat articles from journals and then he'd develop them. He had a developing – however you used to develop photos in those days. I remember he had a solution that he'd put these black mica-looking sheets in from the photos because a lot of staff wanted articles that they wanted to take away, and we weren't very keen on lending articles from particularly current periodicals. So I believe that was a first, somebody told me, the first to be done in libraries.

Did you photograph the articles and then Mr Burrow developed them?

No, he did everything. He did the whole lot. So he was often down in the basement.

Leaving you by yourself in the Periodicals Room?

Yes. It wasn't hard.

In about 1942 I think you transferred from Periodicals to the Medical Library. Is that right?

Yes, I started in '37, and I was probably in the Reading Room until the end of '39 or '40 – some way through '40 – and I was only a few months in the Accessions, I think, and then probably about 18 months in the Periodicals Room. I don't know why I was sent over to the Medical Branch Library. I was hoping I'd graduate to the Cataloguing Room. There were four cataloguers, and they were the same ones all the time I was there.

Do you remember who they were?

Oh yes I do. Mr Steel was the Chief Cataloguer, then there was a Miss Thompson and a Miss Dinley and a Miss Stanley. There was also a Mr Taylor, he was a retired librarian and he came in from time to time and worked in there too. But it was a place that you, what shall I say, it was a very serious atmosphere in there. All the cataloguers seemed to be concentrating all the time, but they were lovely. We weren't on first names with any of the seniors, it was always Miss, Mr., so there was quite a formal atmosphere.

But you never worked in the Cataloguing Department?

No.

So instead you went from Periodicals to the Medical Branch Library. Can you tell us about the Medical Branch?

It was the only branch library at that time. Other departments had their own private libraries – I can remember the Geography Department had a very good selection of books, and Engineering, Vet Science, they all had their own private collection of books, so we didn't see a great number of students from those departments. They'd come up occasionally but not very often.

Who used the Medical Library?

It was for the last two years of the medical students - Years 5 and 6 of their course – but very few of them seemed to use the library. There would never be more than four or five in the library at one time. It was very quiet. I've been trying to recall the seating accommodation, and I think there were quite a few small tables with chairs around them scattered throughout the library. It wasn't very formal, it seemed to be a rounded sort of room and when you went in it didn't look as if it had rows and rows of books, it was quite an interesting place really. Apart from students we had quite a few lecturers and professors from the Faculty of Medicine. There was Professor Dew, he was in Surgery, Professor Lambie was Medicine and I think there was a Mr Maze in Obstetrics & Gynaecology, and they'd send their secretaries down for references that they wanted to get. I spent a lot of time looking them up. Quite often you only got the topic that they wanted, like cardiology, and you had to find the material that we had in the library. So that was interesting. I learned quite a bit of medical knowledge from there.

Were you trained at all in looking up medical terminology and medical references? Did the library give you training in this?

No they didn't train me.

They just said 'Go to the Medical Library'

Yes. As a matter of fact there weren't any library courses as such, formal library courses, in those days. You were instructed on the job, so to speak, by the senior librarians, which was good in a way I suppose. It was a sort of cadetship.

Were you the only staff member in the Medical Branch?

I was.

And so they just let you loose in it without making sure that you even knew what cardiology was?

Yes, but it seemed to work out all right. When the War started there must have been an air force unit over at Prince Alfred Hospital. I might mention the library was situated in the New Medical School which was right next door to Prince Alfred Hospital, and we used to get a lot of air force personnel come over to use the library. I don't remember why they were stationed there, but they were there. I think the librarians back at the Fisher thought I'd be very lonely over there so they used to come over for lunch, but I wasn't a bit lonely. I can remember a Mr Goldsworthy who was in the Bacteriology Department, and we had a large kitchen with a jug and a toaster and he always seemed to arrive about 11 o'clock in the morning, and I must have offered him a cup of tea once, and that set him off, he used to come at 11 o'clock and so we used to have a cup of tea together. There was time to do that, you know, it wasn't so busy that I couldn't leave my post. I became friendly with quite a few of the secretaries. There must have been a University Oval, I can't quite picture where it was, but we'd take our lunch out into the sun and sit on benches at the side of the oval.

Yes, it's just next to the Medical School building

So I enjoyed my time there. As a matter of fact I enjoyed all my library life.

How long were you in the Medical Library?

I think I was there for about 3 years. [remembers dates of WW2 etc to work out where she was when]

It always amazed me that so few medical students from Years 5 and 6 used the library. The various departments probably had their own books and references, but we had very few coming in to the library.

Perhaps they used hospital libraries?

They could have, quite easily.

So it was not a heavily used library at all.

No it wasn't heavily used at all.

Which is why they only needed one staff member I suppose.

I suppose so, yes.

Who did you report to when you were in the Medical Library? Who was your boss?

Oh, that's a good question.

Perhaps Miss Wines?

Oh golly.

Who would you take problems to if something came up?

I'd probably take it to the Cataloguing staff I think, because they'd probably be problems about the cataloguing of books or ... I didn't do any cataloguing there, they were done in the Cataloguing Room at the Fisher Library and sent over when they were completed, but probably Mr Steel. It was never Mr Green as far as I can remember.

I believe you got married while you were in the Medical Library.

Yes, in 1943, and I didn't know at the time but apparently the University didn't employ married women in those days. I think probably they were old-fashioned enough to believe that once you got married you had your family and, you know, you couldn't possibly work in the library. So Mr Green very kindly made special dispensation to the powers that be, I've forgotten who it was, that he could employ a married woman, and he got his request, which was very fortunate for me, and from then on many married women became employed, so I felt I was sort of a trail-blazer.

What was the reason he gave, do you know, for wanting to keep you on the staff?

The reason was I'd married a serviceman and he was overseas most of the time anyway, so we weren't contemplating starting a family, and, well, I would have been at a loose end without my library work.

So he received permission to continue your employment in the Medical Library.

He did, yes.

And during that time did you graduate in Arts?

Yes, I graduated in the beginning of 1941 I think. I know it took me four years.

And then after the War your husband came back and you decided to leave employment, is that correct?

Yes.

And when was that?

Well, I didn't leave until I think it was the end of 1946, and actually it was the same time as Mr Green retired from the chief librarianship. [describes husband's work in the War and after]

Can we go back to Mr Steel briefly? You never worked for Mr Steel, he was the Head Cataloguer and the Deputy Librarian.

Yes

What was he like? He later succeeded Mr Green as Head Librarian.

He was very different from Mr Green. Mr Green was very impatient and impulsive, and Mr Steel was very sort of level-headed, he never seemed to be perturbed about anything. He was an ex-serviceman from the First World War. He was very interested in the Rose Bay RSL I

remember, because he lived at Rose Bay I think. Every Friday afternoon he could be seen striding – and he did stride – striding down to the hotel on the corner of Glebe Rd. We knew why he went there, probably to meet up with old diggers from the First World War. I believe Mr Burrow did the same thing, but I was never aware of Mr Burrow going down there. I think he went in the lunch hour perhaps. He was a more frequent visitor than Mr Steel, I mean.

Mr Steel taught you how to use the catalogue, how to look up the catalogue.

Yes, and he was so logical. You need to be logical to learn the Dewey system and how to use catalogues and whatnot. There's not much else I can tell you. He had a desk in the Cataloguing Room because he was the Chief Cataloguer, but I think he had his finger on many of the departments.

Let's talk about Mr Green. You said he was very impulsive.

Oh yes, terribly impulsive. One had to be very careful when dealing with him because anything could set him off onto an anger episode. He had a secretary who worked up in the attic, and the attic was accessed by a flight of stairs that went up from the first landing opposite Mr Green's room. Miss Lois Carter was the secretary. Everybody used to feel rather sorry for her, being Mr Green's secretary, because I think with his impatience and whatnot she had rather a bad time. She was up there, and also in the attic – it was a large room – there was a curtained-off area where there was a large couch, and Mr Green used to pop up there quite often after lunch for a siesta, not to be disturbed. That was one of his little habits.

Did you have much to do with Mr Green? He was the Librarian but it was a very small group of people.

Not a great deal.

So he didn't come into the Reading Room very often, or the Periodicals Room?

No, only if he wanted something specific. I mean you never felt he was keeping his eye on you to see that you were working well. There was one interesting episode. Just inside the Reading Room was a sort of circular desk on a sort of podium, I think it was raised a little by one step above the floor, and there was always one of the Reading Room staff stationed there to answer enquiries that people might make, particularly newcomers to the library, and I can remember one day quite an important man – I can't think who he was but he was quite important – he came in and said he'd like to see Mr Green. There was an intercom system between this desk and Mr Green's office so I rang through and told Mr Green that Mr So-and-so was there to see him, and he shouted into the phone "Oh blast the man!" The man could hear every word. "Send him in." So it wasn't a very warm welcome that he got. I don't know that he was always like that. It was probably when he was a bit overwhelmed with work or something I think.

Did he ever visit the Medical Branch Library while you were there?

Never. No, I never saw him. And I didn't see Mr Steel.

World War II

During World War II I believe that some of the library staff were rostered on duty at night for air raid duty. Can you tell us about that?

Yes. They had a system called air raid duty I think it was called and it had its headquarters down in the city. In case of an air raid we were connected by phone to the headquarters and our job was to stay in the library in Mr Green's office on stretchers – there were always two of us at a time – right through the night. They had buckets of sand at strategic points, and in case of a shelling or spot fires we had to put sand on. It sounds very primitive but it never happened. Only once did the air raid sirens go, and then apparently it wasn't heard at the University, and that was when the Japanese submarines came into the Harbour [describes this incident].

So you and a colleague slept the night in Mr Green's office.

Yes, on stretchers.

And you were looking out for fires which would be caused by bombing.

Yes

And did you patrol around the Reading Room or around the quadrangle looking for fires, or were you just lying on the stretcher in the office?

I can't remember. I think we were waiting for the phone to ring, to be alerted that there was an imminent shelling going to take place, but I can't remember wandering around.

And what would have happened if the phone had rung? What were your instructions if the phone rang and they said the bombers...

Well, we'd answer it and they'd tell us, you know, what the danger was, I suppose, and to be on the alert, so we didn't get any more sleep. I assume that's what they'd do, but they never had to do it while we were on duty.

Did you get training for this?

Yes we did, and we had to swear allegiance to the King. We were very British in those days. King and country and whatnot, you know. So it was quite an organisation. It was throughout all the suburbs.

Was it in other parts of the University? Were other buildings also protected by staff members sleeping?

I thought so, but an article I read [refers to item on p.21 of the Fisher Library Centenary book] said that Mr Green's office seemed to be the headquarters for the people that were guarding the University. I suppose they were in other buildings, it never occurred to me.

So it wasn't just library staff sleeping in Mr Green's room. It was other people too.

Apparently, yes. And we used to go over to the Union for breakfast in the morning.

Were you paid extra for this night duty?

I don't think so. But we quite enjoyed it. I mean, when you're young you enjoy those things. But we never anticipated an air raid, you know.

And then, at the end of your night shift did you go home or did you go back to the Reading Room and do some more work?

We'd go back to the Reading Room, because we'd slept overnight.

Did this continue while you were in the Medical Branch Library?

No. Well, it might have continued but I wasn't on duty

And was there a similar arrangement in the New Medical School?

Not that I can recall. There was probably an arrangement. I don't know what arrangement they had in Prince Alfred Hospital.

But it didn't involve you, as the librarian.

No, I don't think so.

Women's Land Army.

During the War there was an organisation called the Women's Land Army. I don't think we had any training for it. A couple of librarians joined. We used to go away at weekends to the University farm which was out Camden way somewhere and we had really rough work to do. I remember we had to clean out pigsties, they're messy animals, tremendous creatures they were and the only way we could move them was with a crowbar, if you can imagine. We used to pitch hay or dried wheat or oats or something onto lorries. I loved the outdoors, so it was quite an ideal occupation for me, and at the same time you felt you were doing something towards the war effort.

This was weekends?

Yes. Not every weekend but maybe once a month or something like that.

How many people went out to the farm at Camden?

Oh, I wouldn't know that, but it was primarily for the Vets

The Vet Science and Agriculture...

Yes.

But when your group went out on a weekend, how many people were in the group?

There'd be about half a dozen of us. They weren't all from the Library though. They were from the University staff

From other sections of the University.

Yes.

First Aid courses

We had First Aid courses on Saturday afternoons.

Was this during the War?

During the War, yes.

Were these compulsory for staff?

No, voluntary.

Professor Anderson.

He was Professor of Philosophy, John Anderson. He was a figure who was always stalking around the quad. He always wore his gown. He was tall and he was slightly bent, and he was very controversial I think among university staff. To begin with he was an atheist, in an age when people were very traditional, they were all Christian I think, or most of them. The sexes were segregated inasmuch as the undergraduate males belonged to the Union and the females belonged to Manning House which was another building, and each had a dining room. Men weren't allowed into the dining room of Manning House, but I can remember Prof Anderson stalking - he used to stalk - stalking through the dining room, it was just a protest of his, I feel certain, he probably thought the rules were rather antiquated. So he was quite a character around the university. I think he was very good. He was almost revered even though he was an atheist.

Did he use the Library much?

No, not very much. He used to send his secretary over if he needed anything. Of course the Philosophy Department had quite a sizeable library of their own, a private library.

Was it typical that the professors tended to send their secretaries rather than come to the Library themselves?

Yes. I got to know all the professors' signatures because they had to send a card over with their signature on it if they wanted to borrow anything.

So professors did not often use the library. They sent the secretary instead. What about the more junior staff like lecturers and so forth? Did they come?

We saw more of them I think, yes, but not a great deal. And all the Arts Faculty, all their lecture rooms had access to the quadrangle whereas Engineering, Vet Science, were all rather remote in place from the actual library.

But they had their own libraries didn't they?

Yes. They used to rely on us to dig up articles in certain periodicals, but I felt I knew all their signatures much better than the people themselves.

Student social life.

Early on, certainly, I'm not certain about during the War years, but when I first went there, there were quite a number of clubs, I suppose they existed through the War, too, to which you could belong. I didn't belong to any clubs because there really wasn't time, but there was SUDS – the University Dramatic Society – and Miss Wines was a member of that and I remember she used to go to rehearsals, and I can remember seeing her in a play once. She was good, too. A lot of university undergraduates belonged to that. There were sporting clubs, there were religious clubs, there was the SCM (Student Christian Movement), and EU (Evangelical Union). The one thing that I did do, apart from the library, was join the University Choir, and that was quite inspirational because we had all our practices in the Great Hall. Mr Faunce Allman was the choir master and we used to practice during the lunch hour, not every day but once a week or something like that, so it was at a convenient time and I could go to it. I can't remember performing outside the university, perhaps we did, but we certainly performed at ceremonial occasions like graduation day and various places like that. The choir was wonderful. I'd always liked singing – never solo singing – but I think I was in the school choir, and of course the University Choir was really a full-bodied choir because they had sopranos and altos in the women and tenors and bass and baritones in the men, and it was a wonderful all-together production when we were in full swing. I can remember doing Handel's Messiah, the Hallelujah Chorus, and that was really wonderful. Other things we did were choruses from operas, we did delightful little things like Brahms' Gypsy Love Songs, we did madrigals, there was quite a good scope of musical pieces. I was rather sorry to have to leave it. I think I gave it away when I went over to the Medical Branch, but I was there for about four years.

The Carillon.

There was a John Gordon who used to play the Carillon. It was beautiful. He would practice very often during lunch hours and that gave the place a rather sanctified feeling, too

Was the University a good place to work in those days?

Well, I didn't have experience of working anywhere else, but I could imagine what it would be like in a city office – I don't think that would have appealed to me at all. My second preference had been to do a kindergarten training course which you had to do at the Kindergarten Training College to be a kindergarten teacher, but I knew my parents couldn't afford it, I think the fees were quite expensive to be trained there. I knew they couldn't afford that so I scrapped that early on, and I fell into the position of librarian, I think.

And you never looked back.

I never looked back, No. And now when I think of it there was a song at the time, or it might have been an anthem, and the first lines were 'Within these sacred portals revenge is never known'. I was always reminded of that when I walked through the Reading Room doors. It was the Gothic architecture and the windows. There was a sanctity about the place, you know. I don't know that I would have been as happy in a modern building. We were very English. Everything was modelled on English universities – architecture and what not – it was good. It suited me, let's say.

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