History in Practice: Dr Sarah Brown, Battye Historian, State Library of Western Australia

Dr Sarah Brown received her PhD in History from the University of Western Australia in 2008. Here she answers some frequently asked questions about her unique position as the first Battye Historian.

Two years ago, towards the end of your PhD, you successfully applied for the position of Battye Historian. I understand you are the ‘first’ Battye Historian. What is the Battye Historian? What does the role entail?

The Battye Historian’s prime purpose is to ensure the State Library’s West Australian heritage collection is developed to meet the needs of all Western Australians. This is done by leading policy and research in the heritage area, building partnerships with external organisations and helping to extend knowledge of the heritage area across all parts of the State Library.

Day-to-day I spend a great deal of my time looking at ways in which to help promote the State Library’s West Australian collections and ways in which to build collaborative partnerships. My colleagues and I are focused on developing a greater online presence; we are working on a program to digitise as much of our collections as possible, so to better enhance access; we have developed an exciting exhibitions program to showcase our own collections and to engage with various small collecting institutions and individuals to help showcase their collections and materials; and then there’s the advice and higher-reference assistance we provide to those undertaking Western Australian historical research.

Why is the Battye Library important to Western Australia?

The J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, a part of the State Library of Western Australia, seeks to collect and preserve published and original materials of relevance to Western Australia. It holds the most comprehensive collection of Western Australian documentary heritage materials in the world and is therefore integral to the research and writing of Western Australian history.

James Sykes Battye was born 20 November 1871. In 1894, at the age of 23, he was appointed as head of the Library – then known as the Victoria Public Library and renamed the Public Library of Western Australia in 1904 – and set about developing it into a unique and prestigious institution. In addition to his role as Chief Librarian, Battye was also an historian who wrote and compiled several books on the history of Western Australia, including *The Cyclopedia of Western Australia* (1912) and *The History of the north west of Australia* (1915). He was also an avid collector of Western Australian historical material, and sought to ensure that both archival and printed materials were acquired by the Library and preserved.

From 1912 until his death in 1954 Battye helped to build the fantastic collection of Western Australia materials we hold today. For this reason in December 1956, following a reorganisation of the State Library into subject areas, the then State Librarian, Francis Aubie (Ali) Sharr, named the Western Australian collection, the J.S. Battye Library of Western Australia.

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Australian History and State Archives (prior to the passing of the State Records Act in 2000 the State Archives were a part of the State Library).

Today, the J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History provides not only access to a vast collection of published and archival materials, but also high level specialist reference services pertaining to Western Australian history and heritage. In line with priority area one of the State Library’s Strategic Directions – to capture and preserve the Western Australian Story\(^2\) - the Battye Library continues to build its collections and to provide access to all West Australians and the world.

What were your considerations in deciding upon a career outside the University? Was this a result of the limited availability of academic positions?

I have long believed that history has a large part to play in shaping the way we think about the present and the future. Historians in particular are well placed to offer informed, engaging and interesting insight into where we have been and where we should be heading. So for me, stepping outside of academia was not something I thought too long and hard about – that is to say, throughout the PhD I kept a very open mind as to where I might end up once the thesis was complete. I think gaining a PhD in any area of the Arts provides an invaluable experience in research and writing, and learning to think critically. The academic job market might be limited – and this is something you can’t deny, or ignore when undertaking a PhD – but there are many other jobs for which an Historian would be well placed.

With that in mind, I started looking at possible job opportunities in both the academic and museum sectors (museums had always been an area of personal interest), as well as government more generally, a few months prior to submitting my thesis. It was during this time that the State Library advertised the Battye Historian position. For anyone interested in West Australian history the opportunity to work for a leading cultural institution responsible for collecting, preserving and providing access to West Australian documentary materials, is one not to be missed. Indeed as already indicated, this is the first time an ongoing, full time position as an Historian has been offered by the State Library.

The challenging and exciting aspect of this job is not so much the researching and writing of history, but rather looking at new ways to excite the public about our past through our collections, and thinking about what we should be collecting today to serve the type of history we may be writing in the future.

What is the relationship between the Battye Historian and the public?

This role to me entails collaborative partnerships with different sections of the history and heritage community within Western Australia. For the State Library’s West Australian heritage collections to meet the needs of Western Australian people, collaboration with a number of groups and institutions\(^3\) is a must. We need to identify the needs of both the history and heritage sector and those individuals that utilise our resources day-in day-out.

First and foremost then, the Battye Historian’s role is to engage with the public and to help SLWA build collaborative partnerships and to promote the State Library to various sections of the public. This promotion can be done through developing a greater online presence, through public lectures and exhibitions, and through general conversation. But by working in partnership with various community groups and individuals we can better develop our


\(^3\) Including the Western Australian Historical Society, the Heritage Council of Western Australia, the West Australian Museum, the Friends of Battye Library and WA’s academic institutions etc.
Western Australian collections to help meet the needs of the WA community both now and in the future.

What are your thoughts on the role of libraries in public history?

I think libraries can and do make a major contribution to public history. If we take the term ‘public history’ to refer to ‘a ... methodology, and approach that promotes the collaborative study and practice of history’, and makes history useful and accessible by the broader public,\(^4\) then libraries can go some way to facilitating that end. Libraries today are constantly seeking new methods to make their collections more accessible and to engage the public in new and exciting ways. This is done through exhibitions, increasing our online presence, facilitating and promoting internal and external public lectures and engaging with the Web 2.0 environment. Some of this work is undertaken by library staff alone, and some is based on collaborative partnerships with various public and private organisations and key individuals.

If you look at the website SA Memory for example, you can see the way in which the State Library of South Australia has developed an online gateway to profile the State’s history and heritage. Using digitised items from its collection, and encouraging the public to contribute their own stories (or “memories”) this site attempts to make the history of South Australia exciting and accessible by all. Similarly at the State Library of Western Australia, the State Library’s foundation\(^5\) has launched Our Page in History which is premised on a similar idea, seeking to build a history of every town in Western Australia through the people who live or have lived in that town. Again, this project seeks to engage the West Australian community in a way that previously we haven’t had the opportunity to do.

Along similar lines, the State Library has just launched a new project entitled “That Reminds Me of a Story”, in which digital imagery technology and digital items from the Library’s Battye collection will be brought together to produce a range of multi-dimensional stories about various events in WA history or in various Western Australians lives. Each digital story will connect users not only to Library holdings, but also to local, State and National history. By employing digital storytelling technology we will create an alternative means of presenting collection materials and encouraging community created content. Not only will the Library use its own collections to present historical accounts of events in Western Australia’s past and key events in individual Western Australians lives, but through the development of a digital storytelling training package, it will encourage an ecology of community participation, allowing users to contribute their own stories and recollections.

State Libraries and National Libraries are also well placed to help promote history and to facilitate engagement with history through exhibitions. Like museums, libraries often have spaces in which to showcase their own materials, and also have the opportunity to work with other collecting agencies, or individuals, to exhibit their collections and in doing so to tell a story about a particular moment in history, or a particular individual or family. Just recently the State Library, in partnership with the Royal Flying Doctor Service, put together an exhibition showcasing the history of the RFDS and the amazing job they do. This exhibition draws on materials held by the State Library, and also on materials lent to us by RFDS WA and RFDS Victoria. An exhibition such as this requires much research and time to capture the story and to make it accessible in exhibition format.

How did your postgraduate experiences prepare you for this position?


\(^5\) The State Library of Western Australia Foundation was established in 2009, and seeks to enrich the lives of Western Australians by increasing access to information resources while collecting and preserving our social heritage for current and future generations. The Foundations seeks to foster partnerships to create support for the work of the State Library. See [www.statelibraryfoundation.org](http://www.statelibraryfoundation.org)
I think the postgraduate experience has instilled in me practicality and the capacity to think critically and innovatively. When you are doing the PhD you get very stuck in the detail; you work tirelessly towards one end – the submission of your thesis, but at the same time you develop a range of expertise that are practical in both academic and non-academic work environments.

For me personally, aside from the obvious analytical skills and the writing and presentation skills that I gained, I also developed skills in designing research projects, organising time and prioritising between different tasks. Most importantly, however, I think the interpersonal skills that I honed throughout my postgraduate years are of most benefit. No matter which sector one ends up working in, interpersonal skills are incredibly important, and this is particularly the case in mine, where much of my time is spent talking with and working alongside many different people from a variety of fields. Importantly, however, I think it is worth noting that you don't gain interpersonal skills from hammering away at the thesis night upon night, but rather from interacting with other postgraduates and academics, attending conferences and having the opportunity to be involved in journals such as Limina. It is through networking and talking with various people that doors open and opportunities arise.

Have you continued your interest in suburban history after the completion of your studies?

I think my interest in suburban history will continue for a long time to come. As with many large historical studies, you can never include every idea or every angle, but I’m sure that at some point in time the opportunity will arise to come back to these ideas and explore them in more detail. That said, I have found continuing my own studies in the area of suburban environmental history the most difficult part of stepping out of the academic milieu. When I took the job with the State Library I had every intention to spend my nights and weekends working on publishing parts of my thesis and developing a couple of ideas that emerged throughout the thesis. Unfortunately, I have found this harder than I imagined. After eight years at the University of Western Australia, and at least the last three of those subsumed by the thesis, I am enjoying working in a different but related field and having my evenings and weekends to myself. Nevertheless, I do try to keep up with the literature in the field, and have been working on a couple of articles – all of which SLWA is very supportive of. I am also starting to put together ideas for an exhibition on Perth's planning history, which will utilise the State Library's vast map and archival collections.

What is your vision for the Battye?

The Battye Library collection is home to the largest and most comprehensive collection of published and non-published materials pertaining to Western Australia, I don’t see this changing anytime soon and indeed I hope this remains the case for a long time to come. If anything I would like to see greater efforts in the area of digitisation. This applies not only to the Battye collection, but across the State Library. The Library already has quite an extensive digitised pictorial collection, but I think by digitizing more and more of our materials then we can provide greater access and service a broader public.

I would also like to see greater collaboration across all sectors of the history and heritage community. Collaborative partnerships are the key to ensuring effective outcomes, particularly when working with scarce resources.

What advice do you have for postgraduate students?

Finish the PhD. Enjoy the time you spend researching and writing. Talk to as many people as possible, both within academia and within other related fields. And keep an open mind. The PhD can open doors to a variety of work environments; academia is just one of these.