



## **The Great Classification Battle of 1910: A Tale of 'Blunders and Bizzareries' at the Melbourne Public Library**

**Dr Mary Carroll and Dr Sue Reynolds**

In 1901 the independent colonies of Australia came together, after almost a decade of inter-colonial debate, as a federation of autonomous dependencies known as the Commonwealth of Australia. The formation of the Commonwealth had been preceded by an intense period of nationalistic growth typified by the assertion of a uniquely Australian character, the flowering of an Australian perspective in literature and the arts and the promotion of a cohesive national identity. The capital of the new Commonwealth was to be (at least temporarily) located in 'Marvellous Melbourne'. Melbourne was the premier city of the former Colony of Victoria and in the 1880s had been fuelled by gold to become the most affluent city in the world. This affluence endowed the city with a rich intellectual and cultural legacy which included the Melbourne Public Library. In the 1890s such affluence was severely dented by depression and there was a consequent rise in social unrest which provided fertile ground for the emergence of new international perspectives and radical social and political movements. These international influences ran concomitantly with the emergent nationalism resulting in the establishment of new fealties and the restating of old loyalties. Thus a dichotomy in the cultural paradigm saw the new nation looking both intensely inward to establish its national identity, and optimistically outward as it attempted to assert its presence on the world stage. Perhaps surprisingly, such tensions were reflected in a battle over the method used for cataloguing and classification in the Melbourne Public Library, between the scholarly and philosophical Australian process and the modern, international Dewey Decimal Classification system. This combination of factors means Melbourne, and its library, can be a useful archetype for examining the broader intellectual, social, cultural and political concerns occurring both nationally and internationally.

This paper will explore the ideas which provoked the argument at the Melbourne Public Library in 1910, between the traditional and idealistic cataloguers Amos Brazier and E. Morris Miller, and the utilitarian Chief Librarian, Edmund La Touche Armstrong. Armstrong wished to introduce Dewey into his new reading room, a modern engineering marvel, but Brazier, in his own words 'a mere librarian', advocated the "Manuel" produced by The International Institute of Bibliography. The events, reported as the "disaffection in the Library", exemplify conflicts occurring on the other side of the world in the same period of time but in a new country with its own particular character.

### **Biographies**

Mary Carroll is a teacher in the Library and Cultural Studies Unit of Victoria University and a lecturer in the School of Business IT and logistics at RMIT University in Melbourne. In 2008 she completed a doctoral thesis at Charles Sturt University on the comparative education of library technicians and librarians in Australia. This research investigated the forces which have shaped education for the library industry in Australia. Research interests include the relationship between library development and educational reform, the history of education for librarianship, the impact of philanthropy on Australian librarianship and cross-sectoral issues associated with contemporary education in Australia.

Sue Reynolds is an academic in Information Management at RMIT University, Melbourne. Sue commenced her professional career as a teacher-librarian with the Department of Education, Victoria before moving to California to complete a Masters degree in Library Science at San Jose State University, where she was also a graduate assistant teaching cataloguing. She has also worked as an editor for the Victorian Education Department's Library Branch, as a library technician educator and has taught cataloguing in Vietnam at Can Tho and Thai Nguyen Universities. Sue's main academic interests are the history of libraries, information organisation and the development of online delivery of courses in information management. Sue's doctoral thesis was on the nineteenth-century history of the Library of the Supreme Court of Victoria.