

Kooris at the Mitchell Library

Margy Burn, Mitchell Librarian, explains how two Koori staff are making the SLNSW collections more accessible to Aboriginal people



One of the great strengths of the Australian Research Collections at the State Library of NSW is material which documents the Aboriginal cultural heritage of Australia. The Mitchell and Dixon Libraries include material of great variety: the earliest records of the interaction between Aboriginal and European peoples documented in manuscripts, pictures and early publications; extensive collections for the mission period and, increasingly, publications, photographs, archives and manuscripts produced by Aboriginal people themselves.

Since late 1991 the Library has employed two Koori staff, Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson, to make its collections and services more accessible to Aboriginal people. Ronald, originally from Moree, and Melissa, of Sydney, both have tertiary qualifications in education and are studying for professional qualifications in librarianship.

Melissa and Ronald provide special user education programs for groups of Aboriginal people who use the Library, often in the course of formal studies. The groups include tertiary students in courses like health studies and education, TAFE courses in genealogy and local history, schools with large numbers of Kooris among their students and Aboriginal community organisations such as Tranby College, Naamoro Cooperative and the Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre. Last year more than 200 Aboriginal people came to the Library to work with Ronald and Melissa.

Ronald explains, 'We usually begin with a brief history and run-down of the Library showing the catalogues and other reference resources available. There is so much to do'

'We try to teach people the research skills they need to find things out for themselves', adds Melissa. 'Black librarians are better able to understand black readers. We know how it feels to be on the other side of the desk feeling insecure. When

Kooris and encourage the employment of Koori staff. They have visited rural and metropolitan libraries with Aboriginal authors and storytellers and provided advice on subjects ranging from literacy to oral history.



(from right) Ronald Briggs and Melissa Jackson with Jennifer Newman, Course Coordinator of Health Studies at Sydney University, and three students.

we first entered the Mitchell Reading Room we were totally awestruck! Just our being here makes changes.'

Ronald and Melissa also work with individual Aborigines who need assistance to use the Library, such as a postgraduate student mapping the spread of European diseases in the early contact period and a father and son who called in to seek information on the explorers who had travelled through their tribal territory. They have assisted an Aboriginal cruise operator to locate pictures of Sydney harbour in 1788 for use on tours and supplied names of Dreamtime women to the international authority which is naming the features of the planet Venus after goddesses and women of achievement.

Melissa and Ronald are also working with NSW public libraries to develop appropriate programs for

Ronald and Melissa also work with exhibition teams to ensure that the Library's exhibitions include appropriate material about Aboriginal people. Later this year they will present a display for IYWIP which shows the Library's extensive collections of Aboriginal heritage material and how it is being used by Aboriginal people to find missing family members, support land claims and reinterpret the past from an Aboriginal perspective.

The Library is also working to extend its collection of Aboriginal material to represent the contemporary Koori experience in NSW. More needs to be done, but by acquiring the work of Aboriginal artists and photographers, seeking records from individuals and community organisations, assisting oral history projects and documenting important community events a start has been made. ■