A Collecting Legacy
State Library of New South Wales
The famous Mitchell Library in Sydney, which is credited with having the greatest collection of historical records in the world, is anxious to buy the diaries of Australian and New Zealand soldiers who fought in the war. Good prices will be paid for suitable material, which will be preserved in the State archives, and communications on the subject should be sent to Mr. H. N. Southwell, c/o The British-Australasian, who represents the Library in England. Some priceless information may be unearthed from these documents, especially if they are left uncensored. “The Digger,” as we know him, should be a picturesque historian, and certainly a vigorous one. Both the Australian and New Zealand armies have produced a great deal of unsuspected literary talent, but probably this will be by no means one of the essential qualities of the diaries selected to live in Australasian history. The authorities will have to make a nice choice between the writers who have too much imagination and those who have none at all.
... for the personal feelings, doings and relationships of the men, their thoughts and actions, the diaries or journals kept by the men themselves will be of the greatest value.

*The Register*, 21 December 1918, p. 10, Adelaide, South Australia
‘The value of such diaries must be judged from the extent of the period covered ... the fullness of the entries, the value of the entries to future historians ... The record from a psychological view is of some importance as is also the record from a sentimental point of view ... whilst a diarist might not have been in a position to obtain information of any value to historians from strategic or tactical points of view, yet the daily and intimate records of individual men, their hopes and fears and feelings generally, their expressions of opinions concerning their officers, their mention of other men by name ... all these things must be taken into consideration in estimating value.’

Library correspondence between Ifould and Southwell
... Quite apart from the historical value of these things and the importance of bringing them together in one great collection ... it is a high honour for soldiers and the relatives of soldiers, and ... for their descendants ... to be able to refer to their soldier boys' diaries permanently preserved in the archives of the State of New South Wales...

The Queenslander, 28 June 1919, p. 3
Build a relationship with a diarist and be able to understand more about WWI, to learn unknown aspects of WWI.

There was little interest in military history, military strategy or battle formations.

People wanted to form an emotional connection with the diarists.

‘See the world through their eyes.’

‘The libraries role is not to make them heroes but to make them REAL.’

‘I have a feeling this is about the people, not the war’

‘These are people from 100 years ago. I need some form of connection to them.’
I was surprised by how moving the entire experience was. It was definitely a different look at the war, from a perspective not often, if ever heard from, that of the actual heroes. The wall of journals/diaries is a sight I will hold in mind forever. Truly heartbreaking.

The diaries made the exhibition incredibly personal. Like I was a close friend of every soldier. In saying that, the respect I gained from this is indescribable.

So moving, almost lost for words. How brave…You can feel their souls in each. I can only hope they know how they are missed and appreciated. Our love and hearts go out to them always in our prayers...

It touched me deeply, to tears a number of times.
What is the most interesting section of the exhibition?

*The most interesting part of the World War I exhibition for me was the confronting realities of the diaries. The journal entries in which the soldiers had written gave me greater detail into their experiences at war, the surroundings, fighting conditions and things that you wouldn't normally hear about. Whilst these stories were extremely informative and confronting, I found that the letters from the mother to their child before departure for the war was extremely sad and touching and I found it interesting as we normally only feel great sorrow for the individual soldiers, but what about their family and the mothers that lose their sons and potentially their husbands as well?*
Our War Stories

The State Library of New South Wales holds a rich collection of resources on the Great War including diaries, letters, maps, photographs, artworks, posters and newspapers.

Browse and search this selection of content, explore our stories and join us in commemorating the Australian experiences of the War.

View the Collection
Become part of providing world wide access to our vast collections

Help us transcribe and share our diaries, letters, manuscripts and records.

You can:

- Transcribe digitised diaries, letters and other manuscripts
- Edit and correct transcriptions near completion
- Search finished transcriptions.

As manuscript collections are digitised they will be made available to transcribe, correct and search. Your contribution will help make our collections more accessible and available to all.

Get involved, and register to get started today, explore one of the projects below.

Projects

- World War I Diaries
- Rediscovering Indigenous Languages

 Projects showing a lock are not open for public transcription but can be viewed.
curse of those who have been doing their share, but I will let them go. They are a crawling lot of Back Street Sergeants and Corporals with a sprinkling of stars amongst them. When out on Furlough I was in London for a couple of days but did not see much of the city. I was on my own all the time, as none of my mates that I was with in France and Egypt are here. I met a couple of Boys I knew in London, one was on his way to Scotland, on Furlough and the other had only just arrived in London. I left London on Saturday night just as the Zeppos were getting busy. I did not see any of the Searchlights, or hear the guns, but I saw a few people nearly running mad in their hurry to leave London and escape. The Zeppos—one woman charged down the Platform and got into a Manchester carriage. Then out of that, when told where it was going, declaring that she would go somewhere. She would not stay in London to be blown up. When the train arrived at Brum, I had a look out. It was about 3 A.M. and cold and foggy so I stayed where I was at Stafford. It was supposed to change trains.
Thank you