



The O'Donovan Collection

Established in May 1860, the Queensland Parliamentary Library's purpose is to support the Queensland Parliament and its Members through the provision of an independent, non-partisan research, education and information service.

However, its acquisitions over the last one hundred and forty-three years have resulted in a collection which is noteworthy from a historical viewpoint, particularly the original library collection assembled between 1860 and 1908. This collection, known as the O'Donovan Collection, is housed separately to the rest of the Parliamentary Library's holdings, in its original location in the George Street wing of Parliament House. The O'Donovan room has immense aesthetic appeal with impressive cedar shelving lining the walls from floor to ceiling which provide an elegant setting for the largely original furnishings. Together they contribute to an air of quiet dignity and leisured acquisition of knowledge reminiscent of gentlemen's clubs of the colonial period.

Between 1874 and 1902, Denis O'Donovan, who was the Queensland Parliamentary Librarian at the time, substantially added to the existing library collection. In addition, he created a catalogue of the library's contents, which contained biographical notes on authors, and notations for many subject headings which enhanced its usefulness to most readers. This 'encyclopaedic' dictionary catalogue, first published in 1883, but which by 1900 had been expanded to three sizeable volumes, was universally applauded as a scholarly work ranking with the best in the world. Its unique arrangement anticipated the card-catalogue principally used by libraries throughout the twentieth century.

Praise for the catalogue emanated from the then greats of the library world. Commentators included the custodians of the British Museum, the Bibliotheque State (Paris), the Library of the House of Commons, and the Bodleian Librarian, Oxford University. Accolades were also received from other leading European, Empire and Australian persons, journals and newspapers. All were unstinting in their praise. For example:

The Parliamentary Library in Brisbane is one of the best of its size I have ever seen, with a catalogue which is the model Catalogue of all Catalogues.

A.J. Duffield, *Recollections of Travel Abroad*, London: Remington, 1889.

The O'Donovan Collection covers wide-ranging subjects from travel, geography, biography, science, history, to political science, theology, law, art and philosophy. Overseas and regional newspapers as well as British Colonial Parliamentary Papers form a valuable part of the collection.

Highlights of the collection include:

- A large number of Australian explorers' journals such as the journals of Captain James Cook's various voyages 1768-1780, as well as those of other early Australian sea and land expeditions by Darwin, Mitchell, Flinders, Oxley, Leichhardt, Jardine and La Perouse;
- One of the library's oldest holding is a Spanish English Dictionary published in 1599;
- Other very early publications include *The Anatomy of melancholy: what it is*, published in London in 1652;
- Of contemporary relevance, the collection contains the *History of the war in Afghanistan* published in 1851;
- 19th century International Exhibition Catalogues, the precursor to Expo 88;
- The first issue of the *Moreton Bay Courier* in 1846, the precursor to the state's major newspaper the *Courier Mail*;
- *Complete Works of Voltaire* (70 volumes, 1784);
- Matthews, G.M. *Birds of Australia* (1910-1928);
- The famous Diggles, S. *Ornithology of Australia* (1866-70) which contains original watercolour plates.

The Queensland Parliamentary Library's O'Donovan Collection contains many items which are not only noteworthy from a historical viewpoint, but are also valuable and unique. In many cases, the Queensland Parliamentary Library's collection holds the only extant copy in the State, or even, for some, in Australia.

In 1997-1998, the Queensland Government officially acknowledged the O'Donovan Collection as being an irreplaceable heritage asset. Its value lies not only with individual items in the collection, but also that the collection is still largely intact as a working parliamentary collection.