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26 July 2007

Letter writers, collectors and surveyors provide a unique insight into early New South Wales

The lost art of letter writing, collecting Australiana and the contribution of Aborigines to the economic development of early NSW all feature in a new book to be launched this weekend. Titled 'Limits of location: creating a colony', the book uses personal stories and family papers to illustrate the colony's early history.

"The "limits" referred to were set by Governor Darling in 1826 to constrain where land grants could be sought," says co-editor Gretchen Poiner.

"It was largely an attempt to reduce the incidence of brutal and lawless behaviour happening out in the bush. Regardless of these lines on a map, people continued to travel widely in eastern Australia and settle where they found good land and water."

In the book Eleanor, second wife of Sir Alfred Stephen, the third Chief Justice of New South Wales, is brought to life through the letters, diaries and photographs preserved in the Mitchell Library. "Her life as mistress of a large household is revealed through snippets from the volumes of diaries and letters to her brothers and relations," Poiner said.

"In light of recent debates about the economic situation of contemporary indigenous Australians, the chapter on Aboriginal workers' contributions to the colony's early economic development makes a particularly interesting read.

"Shown through diaries and personal records, the chronic shortage of labour, especially in dealing with the harshness of the landscape, had pastoralists turning to Aborigines for skilled and reliable labour. "

Other chapters cover connection with the landscape through surveying and mapping, scientific and artistic illustration, and travel writing. The rise of institutions such as the Benevolent Society of NSW and Christian missions show how organised activity contributed to the development of a social conscience as the colony itself developed.

This beautifully printed and illustrated book includes early illustrations, sketches and even poetry about the flora. The stories and images were made possible by David Scott Mitchell, whose bequest to the State Library of NSW – made 100 years ago this week – meant that these materials are available to scholars today.

To celebrate the centenary of the Mitchell bequest, four of the authors will talk about how they found and unfolded their 'stories' at a seminar on Saturday afternoon at the State Library, preceding the book's launch. The book will be launched by Her Excellency Professor Marie Bashir, Governor of NSW and Chancellor of the University of Sydney.

Limits of Location: Creating a Colony, edited by Gretchen Poiner and Sybil Jack
Publisher: Sydney University Press
ISBN: 978-1920898-53-3
RRP: \$49.95 plus postage

Afternoon seminar

When: Saturday 28 July, 2.15 pm – 5 pm
Where: Dixson room, Mitchell Wing
Cost: \$22, \$20 (seniors) \$15 (Friends, ISAA members and students), includes afternoon tea

Book launch

When: Saturday 28 July, 5.30 pm
Where: Dixson room, Mitchell Wing
Cost: free
Bookings: 9273 1770

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<http://www.sup.usyd.edu.au/>

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Editor's note

Authors and editors are available for comment and interview.

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