

Parliament of Victoria

‘Unidentified female librarian’: The women of Victoria’s Parliamentary Library

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Heritage Note

Victorian Parliamentary Library

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Introduction

2026 marks the 175th anniversary of the founding of the Victorian Parliamentary Library and 100 years since the Joint Committee of the Parliamentary Library decided to advertise roles specifically for women. One hundred years later—despite the many ‘unidentified female librarians’ in old photographs in the catalogue—the current staff of the Parliamentary Library, including all those in leadership positions, are predominantly women. This paper will provide a history of female staff in Australian libraries and the legal and societal changes which occurred over the past hundred years. These changes have contributed to the workforce moving from a male to female dominated industry. It will also cover the stories of some of the ‘firsts’ for the Victorian Parliamentary Library, including the first female staff, Flora Brennan and Mary (Mollie) Clark and first female Parliamentary Librarian, Josephine McGovern. Finally, it will chart the history of women in parliamentary libraries across Australia, including when the first female staff were hired and the first female Parliamentary Librarian was appointed.

1 | A history of women in libraries

Brennan, Clark and McGovern’s stories should be viewed in the wider context of parliamentary libraries as largely male-dominated workplaces, as with most libraries in Australia in the mid-20th century. This section looks at data on the library as a gendered workplace and examines how its workforce has shifted over the 100 years since Brennan and Clark started working at Victoria’s Parliament House, becoming largely dominated by women.

Methods and definitions

Acknowledging the broad range of staff who work in parliamentary libraries today, this paper takes an expansive and inclusive definition of ‘librarian’ to include anyone working in a parliamentary library. We therefore don’t distinguish between those with professional qualifications or training, for example, nor between managers and client liaisons, librarians and library technicians, researchers and cataloguers, and so on. Such a view reflects the broader context of women entering and occupying parliamentary libraries as a *workplace*, rather than interrogating the complex and intersecting issues around defining librarian as an occupation, a profession, or an identity.

Defining Australia’s library workforce is difficult, before even attempting to define a parliamentary library workforce or to analyse it by gender. Several extant surveys and studies of Australia’s library workforce have examined gender.¹ Other broader studies of parliamentary libraries exist, but not comprehensive data of parliamentary library staff. We have therefore relied primarily on Census data, which has its own limitations and shortcomings around defining parliamentary library staff, as well as on staffing lists from the Victorian Parliamentary Library for more specific data on the library workforce.

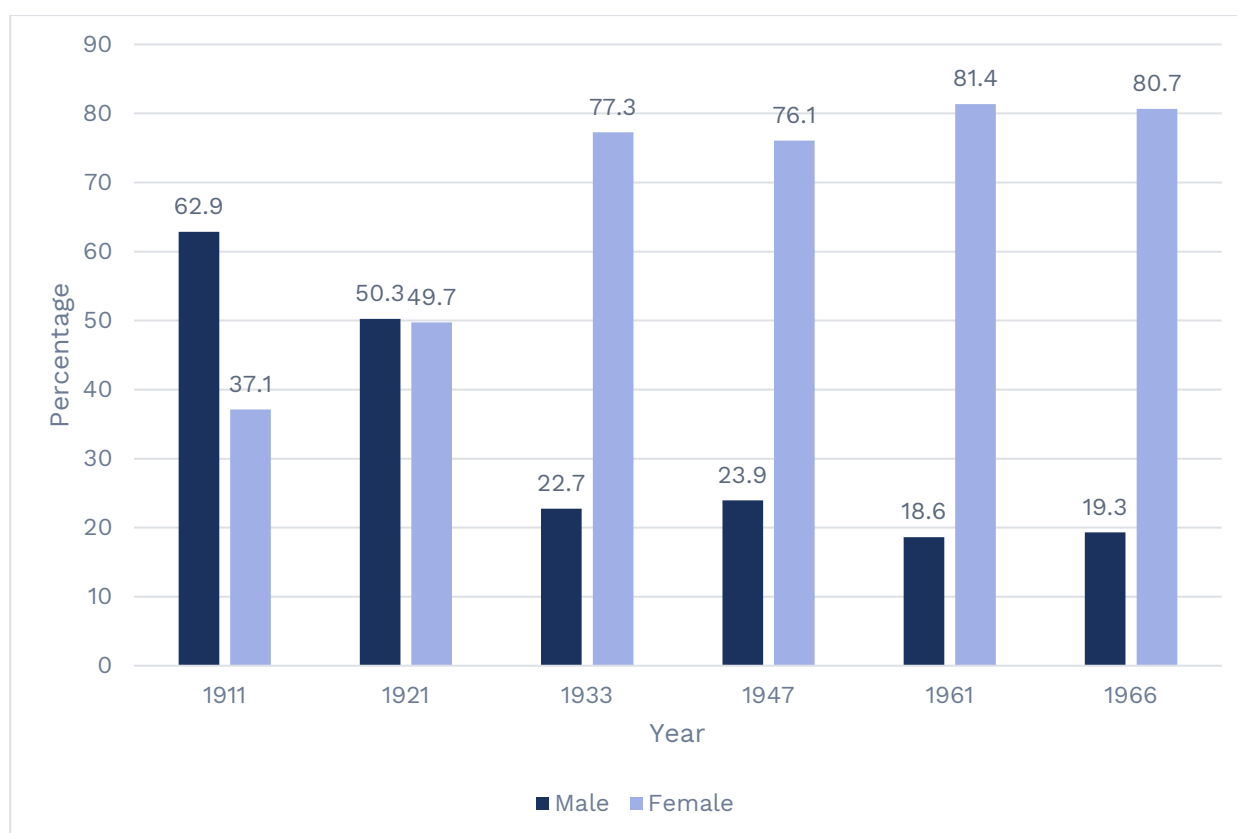
Each state and territory library, as well as the federal Australian and New Zealand parliamentary libraries, was contacted for information on the gender breakdown of former and current staff, again taking an inclusive definition of both gender and ‘Library staff’. The data and information provided are included below and compared and summarised where possible. However, it should by no means be considered comprehensive and is more of an overall indication of the gendered nature of Parliamentary libraries.

¹ J. Simon (1997) ‘Women’s status within libraries 1950s to 1980s’, *The Australian Library Journal*, 46(3), pp. 270–287; Australian Library and Information Association (2019) *Workforce Diversity Trend Report 2019*, Canberra, Australian Library and Information Association; S. Encel et al. (1972) *Librarians: a survey*, New South Wales University Press Sydney; M. Carroll (2024) “‘A Start Must Be Made’: An Evaluation of the Published History of Women in Australian Libraries”, *Library Trends*, 72(3), pp. 495–524.

Gender and Australian libraries

If we use the term ‘librarian’, Census data from 1911 to 1966 shows a gradual increase in the representation of women in librarianship as an *occupation*. Figure 1 shows the percentage of women who listed their occupation as ‘libraries and reading rooms’ in Censuses of the early and mid-20th century. A marked jump can be seen between the 1911 and 1933 Censuses, which covers not only Brennan and Clark’s entry into the Parliamentary Library but also the entry of many now-notable women in Australia’s public and institutional libraries.² This reflects several legislative, cultural and educational changes that occurred in Australia at the time (see ‘Historical incidents’ section) that women moved into more workplaces than ever before.

Figure 1: Percentage of gender of people listing ‘libraries and reading rooms’ as their occupation in the Census



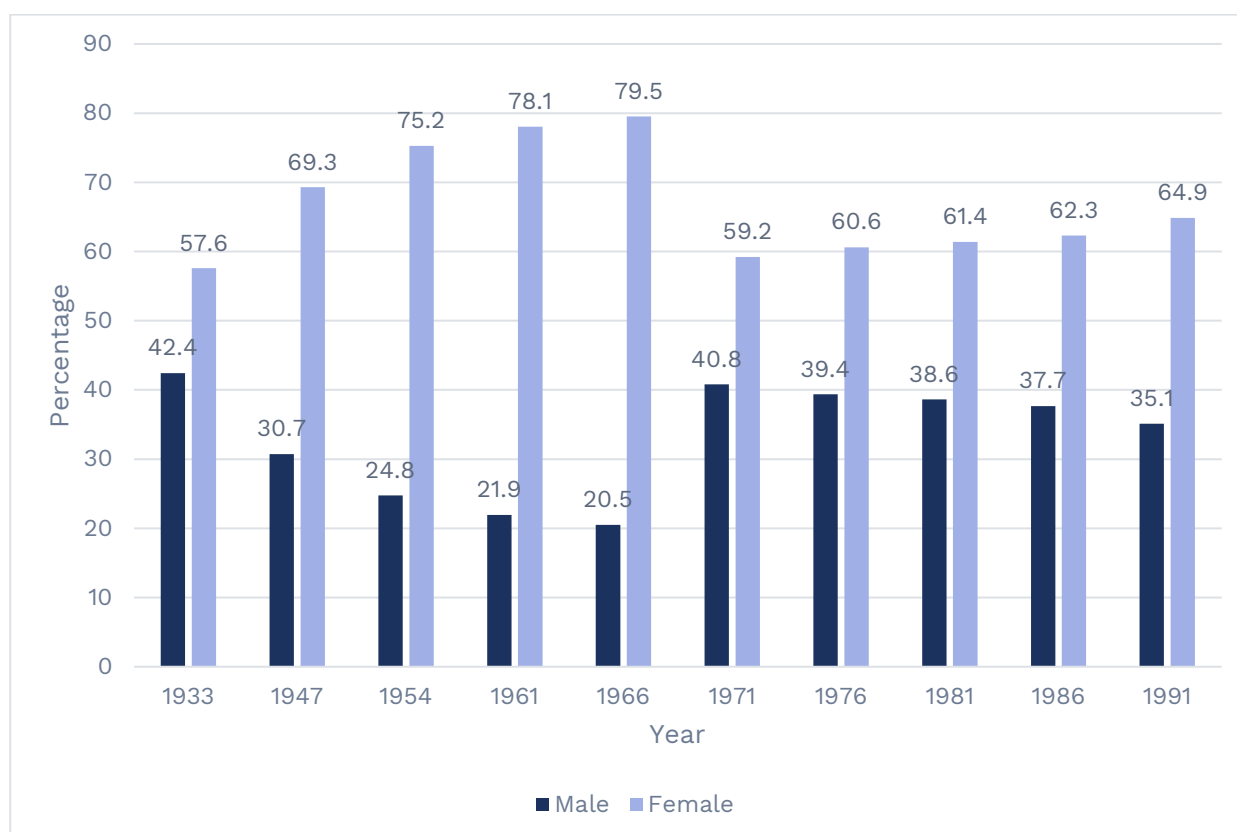
Source: Census data on occupation, 1911-1966³

The occupational data tends to focus on those who identify their occupation as ‘a librarian’. Figure 1 suggests that women have been the dominant gender in libraries as an occupation almost since the 1930s, and indeed were likely moving *en masse* into the industry before Brennan and Clark began work at the Victorian Parliamentary Library. However, if we include anyone working *in* a library, industry data is more helpful. Figure 2 shows the proportion of women who were identified as working in the library *industry*.

² Carroll (2024) op. cit.

³ Census data sources from 1911 to 2021 can be found in the reference list.

Figure 2: Percentage of men and women employed in a library related industry in Australia



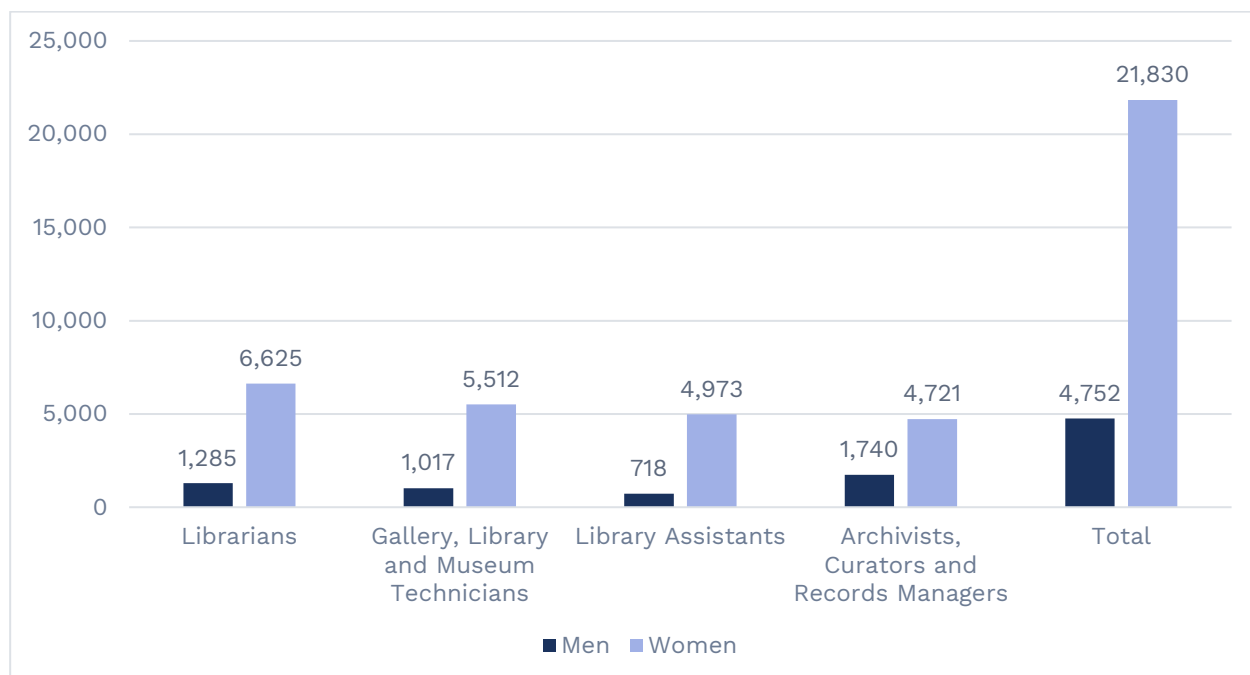
Source: Census data on industry, 1933-1991⁴

Today libraries are more focused on diversity and inclusion than ever but remain a workforce that is largely made up of women. In their Workforce Diversity Trend Report from 2019, the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) similarly used Census occupation data from 2006 to 2016 to track the gender make-up of the workforce in more recent years. When combining the Level 3 Occupations of 'Librarians, Gallery, Library and Museum Technicians', 'Library Assistant', and 'Archivists', Curators and Records Managers', ALIA found that in 2016, between 87 and 71 per cent of librarians were women, compared to 47 per cent of the general Australian labour force.⁵ Figure 3 shows the gender breakdown of this sector by occupation from the 2021 Census.

⁴ Census data sources from 1911 to 2021 can be found in the reference list. From 1933-1966 the appropriate ABS industry category was 'libraries and reading rooms'. From 1971-1976 the most appropriate industry category changed to: 'education, libraries, museums and art galleries'. From 1981 - 1991, the most appropriate industry category changed again to: 'education, museum and library services'.

⁵ Australian Library and Information Association (2019) op. cit.

Figure 3: Count of Australians in library-related occupations in the 2021 Census by sex



Source: Australian Census 2021, 4-digit level OCCP occupation data⁶

‘Historical incidents’

Mary Carroll writes that any study of women’s representation in the library sector must be viewed in the context of the ‘historical incidents’ that both prevented and allowed women’s participation in the workforce, their voting rights, and the development of equal pay legislation:

These distinct ‘historical incidents’ include the receptiveness or not, of influential individuals to women working in the library, economic events such as depressions and war, and the introduction of legislative restrictions on women’s employment in the public sector.⁷

Carroll tracks several of these incidents across Australia, providing a ‘comparative chronology’ of women in librarianship across the United States, the United Kingdom, France and Australia, as well as a similar timeline of major legislative developments in Australia that influenced women’s employment. Table 1 adapts several tables from Carroll to track major legislative milestones and key dates relating to women in librarianship, equal pay and suffrage in Australia and Victoria.

⁶ Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *2021 Census of Population and Housing*, Canberra, ABS.

⁷ Carroll (2024) op. cit., p. 501.

Table 1: Key legislative and other milestones relating to women in librarianship in Australia⁸

Year	Jurisdiction	Milestone	Legislation/Case
1857	Victoria	Non-Indigenous male suffrage	<i>Victoria Constitution Act 1855 (UK)</i>
1890	Victoria	‘Marriage bar’ introduced: ‘no married woman shall be eligible for appointment to any office in the public service’. ⁹	<i>Public Service Act 1890</i>
1899	Australia	Nita Kibble appointed at NSW State Library, the first woman in a public library in Australia	
1902	Australia	Non-Indigenous male and female suffrage	<i>Commonwealth Franchise Act 1902</i>
1908	Victoria	Non-Indigenous female suffrage	<i>Adult Suffrage Act 1908</i>
1919	Australia	Women’s minimum wage set at 54 per cent of men’s wages	Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration (CCAC) Clothing Trades case
1926	Victoria	Women no longer able to be disqualified from employment on account of their sex	<i>Women’s Qualifications Act 1926</i>
1933	Australia	Census data shows more women than men are working as librarians	
1950	Australia	CCAC sets women’s minimum wage at 75 per cent of men’s wages	Basic Wage case
1956	Victoria	Marriage bar lifted for women teachers	<i>Teaching Service (Married Women) Act 1956</i>
1969	Australia	CCAC grants equal pay for men and women in Commonwealth employment	Equal Pay case
1974	Australia	CCAC extends minimum wage to include women workers	Equal Pay case
1977	Victoria	Discrimination based on marital status and gender outlawed in education, employment, and other areas	<i>Equal Opportunity Act 1977</i>

Carroll marks 1919–30 as the period when women went from being excluded from the library industry to comprising the majority of its workforce. The Census data explored above supports this interpretation. However, significant barriers to full workforce participation remained well into the latter half of the 20th century.

Most historians accept the first woman to work in a public library in Australia was Nita Kibble, appointed to the New South Wales State Library in 1899.¹⁰ Victoria’s first female employee at the State Library was Isabella Fraser in 1908.¹¹

However, parliamentary libraries were a little slower to employ more women. The Commonwealth Parliamentary Library appointed its first female staff member in 1915, Grace Hendy-Pooley.¹² Victoria’s first two female parliamentary librarians began in 1927, a year after Melbourne’s public library had employed its first four female employees and the first women began working at the New Zealand Parliamentary Library.¹³

Brennan and Clark’s appointments closely followed the passing of the *Women’s Qualifications Act* in Victoria in 1926, which made it illegal to bar women from employment on the basis of their sex, making women’s employment far more widespread across the state. Furthermore, a 1912 law had set women’s wages at 54 per cent of the male wage, rendering women a cheap and available workforce.¹⁴ However, several barriers to full participation in the workforce remained, including the ‘marriage bar’, which required women to resign if they married, which remained in place until 1956.¹⁵

This meant that across the 20th century, libraries followed the trend of being populated by what has been identified as ‘the disadvantaged majority’—workforces that were predominantly female but in which women were largely confined to low-paying clerical roles, while higher-paying manager roles were occupied by men.¹⁶ By 1972, a report commissioned by the Library Association of Australia—the somewhat controversial at the time ‘Encel Report’—found that despite women making up 80 per cent of the library workforce, ‘sex segregation patterns’ remained in libraries: ‘Prestige, pay and authority accrue[d] to men’.¹⁷ Such trends often lay behind the designation of library work as a ‘women’s profession’, with the label intending to denigrate.¹⁸

2 | Victorian firsts

While the meeting notes of the Parliament of Victoria’s Joint Library Committee (the Committee) don’t explicitly mention that the changes brought in by the Women’s Qualification Act inspired their decision to advertise roles specifically for women, it is still interesting to note the timing of the resolution made at a meeting on 30 November 1926:

It was resolved on the motion of the Hon. The Speaker, seconded by the Hon J Beggs that if recommended to his excellency the Governor in Council that two positions of Junior assistants, Class E sub div 4 at a commencing salary of £156 be created and that, in the first instance applications be called for from women graduates of recognized universities and that they be appointed on probation for 6 months.¹⁹

⁸ *ibid.*

⁹ *Public Service Act 1890*, s 43.

¹⁰ J. F. Arnot (2006) ‘[Nita Bernice Kibble \(1878–1962\)](#)’, Australian Dictionary of Biography website.

¹¹ A.-M. Traian (2023) ‘[Isabella Fraser, a library pioneer](#)’, State Library of Victoria Blog.

¹² C. Griffin (2024) ‘[Grace Hendy-Pooley \(1864–1947\): Early HSV member, civil servant, historian, artist](#)’, Royal Historical Society Victoria website.

¹³ Carroll (2024) *op. cit.*

¹⁴ *ibid.*

¹⁵ *ibid.*

¹⁶ *ibid.*, p. 508.

¹⁷ Simon (1997) *op. cit.*; D. J. Jones (2013) ‘Raw nerves: John Metcalfe and the Encel survey of librarians in New South Wales’, *The Australian Library Journal*, 62(2), pp. 111–124; Encel et al. (1972) *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Carroll (2024) *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Joint Library Committee (1942) ‘Minutes of the meeting 30 November 1926’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee*, Parliamentary Library archives.

At a subsequent meeting on 14 December 1926, it was confirmed that ‘the sub-committee of cabinet had approved the appointment of two Junior Assistants in the Library’.²⁰

Job advertisements for the new roles appeared in Victorian newspapers that same week calling for ‘applications for the position of junior librarian from women graduates of the University [of Melbourne]’ and stating that the work ‘should provide a congenial occupation for girls’.²¹

The job description as advertised in the *Victorian Government Gazette* asked:

The selection will be made by the Library Committee early in 1927. The successful applicants will be appointed on six months’ probation to Class E, Subdivision 4, as in the Professional Division of the Public Service of Victoria, at a commencing salary of £156, with the usual increments.

Applicants must hold a B.A., or equivalent degree of some recognized University. Value will be attached to a knowledge of the Dewey system of Library classification, Library cataloging and administration methods. Character should be supported by letters of teacher, clergymen, doctors, and others knowing the applicants personally.

Applicants should not be more than 25 years of age.²²

After the roles were advertised, an article appeared in *The Herald*, in which the author stated they had been ‘surprised’ at how low the pay was for the proposed roles.²³ James Booth, in a letter to the editor published in *The Argus* on 17 December proposed that the wage be increased to at least £4 a week, as currently it was hardly more than what housemaids or waitresses receive and didn’t account for the years of study required.²⁴ The ‘Looker On’ column in *The Advocate* also addressed the perceived low pay, with the author highlighting the ‘joke’ that members of the Committee had recently advocated for higher pay for themselves but advertised such low pay for these new roles.²⁵

The advertisements apparently aroused ‘the greatest interest’ at the University.²⁶ The author of Vesta, a column in the *Argus*, wrote that ‘It has been felt for many years by University women that the work of a librarian is one for which they are peculiarly fitted’²⁷ and expressed hope that the decision would encourage other libraries to hire female staff.²⁸ She reported that Sir Frank Clarke, President of the Legislative Council and co-chair of the Committee, ‘says that he sees no reason why, eventually, the library should not be staffed entirely with women.’²⁹

At a Committee meeting on 16 February 1927, it was reported that 31 applications were received.³⁰ The Parliamentary Librarian, Eric Frazer, narrowed it down to 16 applicants to initially interview with Sir John Bowser, Speaker of the Legislative Assembly and co-chair of the Joint Library Committee. Frazer wrote that he encountered ‘great difficulty in discriminating even to this extent’ and noted that the two had:

... spent the best part of two days at this work and found it extremely perplexing since nearly every girl as she left seemed to be exactly what we were hoping to find.³¹

²⁰ Joint Library Committee (1942) ‘Minutes of the meeting 14 December 1926’, op. cit.

²¹ (1926) ‘Girl Librarians’, *The Herald*, 11 December, p. 20, accessed via Trove archive.

²² Victorian Government (1926) *Victoria Government Gazette*, no. 202, p. 4802.

²³ (1926) ‘£3 a week for Bachelor of Arts’, *The Herald*, 16 December, p. 1, accessed via Trove archive.

²⁴ (1926) ‘Women as librarians’, *The Argus*, 17 December, p. 22, accessed via Trove archive.

²⁵ (1926) ‘B.A.s at £3 a week’, *Advocate*, 23 December, p. 24, accessed via Trove archive.

²⁶ Vesta (1926) ‘Women as Librarians’, *The Argus*, 15 December, p. 8, accessed via Trove archive.

²⁷ *ibid.*

²⁸ *ibid.*

²⁹ *ibid.*

³⁰ Joint Library Committee (1942) ‘Minutes of the meeting 16 February 1927’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee 1878–1942*, Parliamentary Library archives.

³¹ E. Frazer, personal notes on applicants for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

A final six applicants were asked to meet the Committee before a final decision was made. These six were all described as ‘admirably qualified for the position’ and Frazer expressed that no other country would have such a high level of applicants, but as few of them could type or knew shorthand this might be detrimental to their progressing further in business.³² *The Argus* quotes Frazer as saying: ‘I cannot help adding what an impression these woman graduates ... left upon our minds; capable, steadfast girls, with fine character and health’.³³

The Parliamentary Library archives hold many of the 31 original applications, along with notes made by Frazer. He left small notes, such as ‘rather bright’ or ‘rather good’, on many of the applicants’ letters.³⁴ Many of the applicants spoke several languages and had multiple degrees, however, some did not meet the age qualification or were not deemed to be in good enough health.³⁵ What Frazer meant by his jotting down on one application that ‘I do not think she is very robust’ is lost to history.³⁶ On another who was asked to call into the library as part of the original 16 interviewees, Frazer had written ‘pity she is not younger’.³⁷ She was 42.

After a vote by the Committee, the two first female appointees to the Parliamentary Library were chosen as Flora Brennan and Mary (Mollie) Clark.

Flora Brennan

Flora Brennan was born on 22 March 1907 to Henry Philip Brennan and Mary Theresa Cecilia, (née McIntosh).³⁸ Brennan attended Catholic Ladies College, East Melbourne, before commencing at the University of Melbourne, where she studied English and French language and literature, psychology, logic, and ethics.³⁹ She took her final exams in the week after her appointment.⁴⁰ She was awarded a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) in 1927 and a Master of Arts in 1928.⁴¹ One of her references stated:

This flair for books, together with her efficient and attractive personality, should give her an excellent start in librarian’s work.⁴²

In her application Brennan wrote that she has ‘devoted most of my spare time to reading the best literature’ and that she has ‘knowledge of the elementary principles of the Dewey System of cataloguing and classification’ but has not yet had any formal training.⁴³

Brennan came from a very well-connected political family, although she did not mention this in her applications.⁴⁴ Allan McLean, her great-uncle on her mother’s side, who represented Gippsland North and North Gippsland (1880–1901) in the Legislative Assembly and was

³² *ibid.*

³³ (1927) ‘Parliamentary Library: Two Women Selected’, *The Age*, 18 February, p. 14, accessed via Trove archive.

³⁴ M. Camm, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 14 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives; M. Castell, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 12 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

³⁵ B. Milne, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 19 December 1926, Parliamentary Library archives.

³⁶ S. Slattery, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 9 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

³⁷ M. Baker, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 12 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

³⁸ Brennan, 7 January 1927; (1907) ‘Births’, *The Argus*, 8 April, p. 1, accessed via Trove archive.

³⁹ (1924) ‘University courses: List of “free” places’, *The Argus*, 19 February, p. 11, accessed via Trove archive.

⁴⁰ (1927) ‘Parliamentary Library: Woman assistants approved’, *The Argus*, 18 February, p. 13, accessed via Trove archive.

⁴¹ (1927) ‘University Commencement’, *The Argus*, 11 April, p. 12, accessed via Trove archive; (1928) ‘University of Melbourne: Final examinations’, *The Argus*, 7 April, p. 24, accessed via Trove archive.

⁴² B. Sutherland, reference for Flora Brennan, 5 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

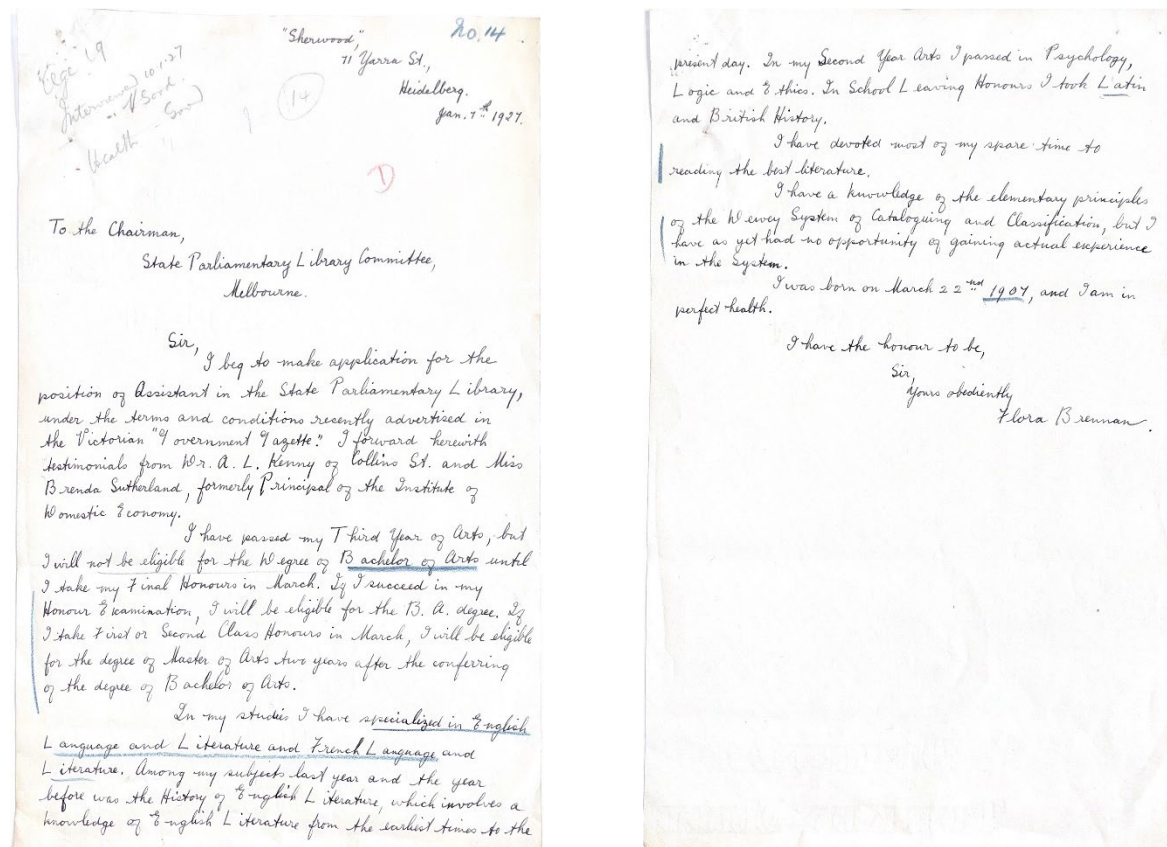
⁴³ Brennan, 7 January 1927.

⁴⁴ *ibid.*

Premier of Victoria from 5 December 1899 to 19 November 1900.⁴⁵ McLean then entered the federal House of Representatives as the Member for Gippsland, serving from 1901 to 1906.⁴⁶

Brennan's father, Henry, was one of 13 children, many of whom had distinguished careers. He and his brother William were journalists with *The Argus*.⁴⁷ Two other brothers, Frank and Thomas, represented Victoria in the House of Representatives and Senate respectively.⁴⁸ Finally, her aunt Anna was the second woman to graduate from law and be called to the bar in Victoria and the first woman barrister to argue a case in a Victorian court.⁴⁹ Brennan herself had three brothers, including Keith, a diplomat whose postings included being ambassador to Ireland and Switzerland and representing the Australian delegation many times at United Nations conferences.⁵⁰

Image 1: Flora Brennan's job application



Source: F. Brennan, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 7 January 1927. The blue underlining was made by the selection panel.

⁴⁵ Parliament of Victoria (date unknown) 'Allan McLean', PoV website; (1936) 'Obituary', *The Argus*, 16 March, p. 10, accessed via Trove archive.

⁴⁶ The Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia (date unknown) 'the Hon. Allan McLean', Parliamentary Handbook website.

⁴⁷ (1936) 'Funeral of Mr. H. P. Brennan', *The Argus*, 18 February, p. 8, accessed via Trove archive;

⁴⁸ The Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia (date unknown) 'the Hon. Thomas Cornelius Brennan', Parliamentary Handbook website; The Parliamentary Handbook of the Commonwealth of Australia (date unknown) 'the Hon. Frank Brennan', Parliamentary Handbook website.

⁴⁹ (1911) 'A lady barrister: successful Melbourne lady', *The Brisbane Courier*, 2 August, p. 5, accessed via Trove archive; (1909) 'Personal items', *The Ballarat Star*, 25 December, p. 4, accessed via Trove archive; R. Campbell & M. Morgen (1979) 'Anna Teresa Brennan (1879–1962)', Australian Dictionary of Biography website.

⁵⁰ P. G. F. Henderson (2007) 'Keith Gabriel Brennan', Australian Dictionary of Biography website.

Mary Clark

Mary (Mollie) Clark was born in Castlemaine on 29 October 1904 to George Henry Clark and Mary (née Odger). She attended St Catherine's College and Castlemaine High School, where she was awarded Dux of English.⁵¹ She moved into Janet Clarke Hall, Trinity College, in 1921 and graduated with a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the University of Melbourne in 1926.⁵² She was close to completing her Diploma of Education when she applied for the role.⁵³ She was also part of the Melbourne women's B-grade hockey team. Unfortunately, while the Parliamentary Library archives contains many of the women's applications, Mollie's is not among them.

Image 2: Mary (Mollie) Clark



Source: *Parliamentary Library archives*

⁵¹ (1919) 'St. Catherine's Girls College', *The Argus*, 31 December, p. 4, accessed via Trove archive; Frazer, 1927.

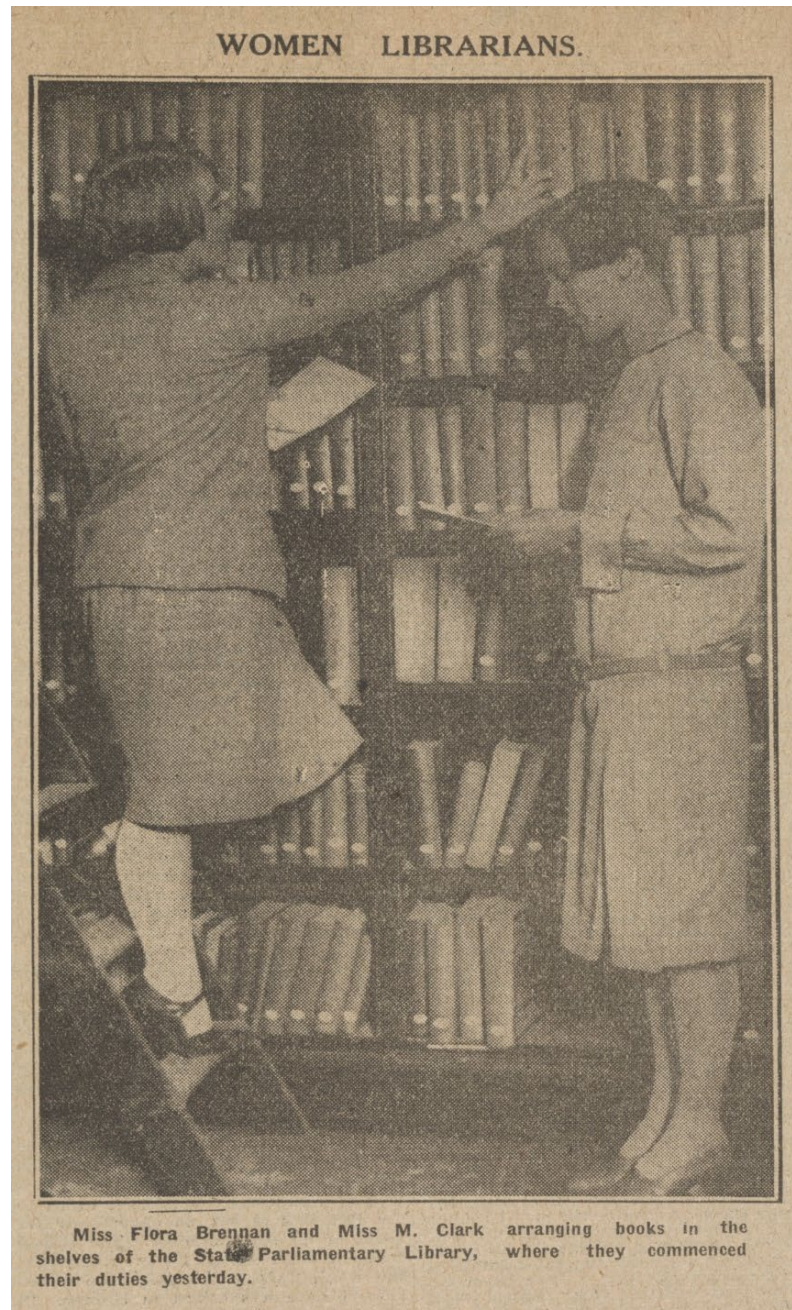
⁵² Frazer, 1927.

⁵³ *ibid.*

First women

Brennan and Clark began working in the Library in March 1927, which was described in *The Age* as, 'a tardy recognition of the suitability of women for the position of librarians'.⁵⁴ The appointments were of such interest to the community that multiple stories about their appointment and a picture of them on their first day were published in *The Argus*.⁵⁵

Image 3: Clark and Brennan on their first day



Source: (1927) *The Argus*, 15 March, p. 9.

⁵⁴ (1927) 'Woman library assistants', *The Age*, 22 February, p. 5, accessed via Trove archive.

⁵⁵ (1927) 'Parliamentary Library: Woman assistants approved', op. cit.; (1927) 'Women Librarians', *The Argus*, 15 March, p. 8, accessed via Trove archive; F. Brennan, job application for Junior Assistant Librarian role, 7 January 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

Unfortunately, their time working together was short—Clark fell ill in October 1927 and passed away on 8 December 1927.⁵⁶ When her death was reported to the Committee, they resolved again to advertise for a junior female assistant.⁵⁷ However, by mid-1928, due to budget constraints, it was reported that:

... while the committee regretted that the government could not approve of the appointment of a permanent jr assistant, it urged that approval be given to the appointment of a temporary junior assistant for at least 12 months.⁵⁸

It took until 1929 for the position to finally be filled, with the successful applicant, Leslie Herman, being appointed in April 1929. The budget, however, did not allow for her to be retained for long, and she was terminated in April 1930, owing to financial stringency.⁵⁹

Brennan worked as the only female library staff member for much of her time employed at Parliament. She spent time in the early 1930s working for the Public Library before returning to Spring Street and resigning in 1938.⁶⁰ In a reference written by Eric Frazer for her in 1941, she was described as someone ‘possessed of a keen intellect and capacity for hard work’.⁶¹ Following her departure, the role of junior female assistant was ‘after prolonged consideration and with some hesitancy’, abolished.⁶²

These three women played a role in one of the Library’s biggest projects. The move back to the Parliamentary Library in Spring Street, after 26 years in the Royal Exhibition Building, required a total reorganisation and reclassification of the collection. In 1954, Frazer wrote, ‘With the help of the Assistant Librarian and two female officers, I spent ten years (including overtime) re-cataloguing and re-classifying about 90,000 volumes of the present Library’.⁶³

Eric Frazer and his views of female colleagues

While Eric Frazer, Victoria’s longest-serving Parliamentary Librarian (1929–1957, as well as Acting Librarian 1926–1929), oversaw the hiring of the first women, he did not champion the practice. In fact, he expressed reservations about hiring more. In a 1942 letter, regarding staff shortages caused in part by the World War 2, Frazer wrote:

I am trying to have a meeting of the Joint Committee to consider women-power; but I am doubtful whether girls could do some of the work.⁶⁴

His concern was whether a woman could successfully lift the newspaper volumes, clean the windows, and complete other ‘muscular jobs’.⁶⁵ Frazer seems to have forgotten that at this time, thousands of women were enlisted in the services working ‘muscular jobs’ to assist with the war effort.⁶⁶

⁵⁶ E. Frazer, letter for Under Secretary regarding Mary Clark’s death, 9 December 1927, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁵⁷ Joint Library Committee (1942) ‘Minutes of meeting 13 December 1927’, op. cit.

⁵⁸ Joint Library Committee (1942) ‘Minutes of the meeting 28 August 1928’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee 1878–1942*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁵⁹ E. Frazer, letter to the Under Secretary regarding the termination of officers, 4 August 1932, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶⁰ T. Fleming Cooke, letter to Eric Frazer from the Chief Librarian, Public Library, 13 June 1934, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶¹ E. Frazer, reference for Flora Brennan, 28 February 1941, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶² W. J. Jungwirth, letter to Chairman of the Library Committee, 5 August 1938, Parliamentary Library archives; T. Tunnecliffe, letter to the Premier from the Speaker and Chairman of the Joint Library Committee, 20 July 1938, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶³ E. Frazer (1954) ‘Report on the history and functions, together with recommendations for the future development, of the Parliament Library’, report prepared for the Joint Library Committee, Melbourne, p. 16.

⁶⁴ E. Frazer, letter to Mr. Wilson, 11 September 1942, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶⁵ Frazer, letter to Mr. Wilson, 11 September 1942, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁶⁶ Florence, E. & A. Wright (2025) *‘We just did our best’: Victorian women during World War II*, Victorian Parliamentary Library, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria.

In a history of the Library written in 1954, Frazer reflected on the female staff he had employed. When discussing why he chose not to employ a typist, he wrote:

... in the past, with one or two notable exceptions, the employment of women in the Library has not been a success ... The appointment of one female officer always raises the question of the appointment of another for morale.⁶⁷

Frazer had employed female typists and junior assistants during the war, but by 1953 the staff was back to being fully male. This was not to last long, as Josephine McGovern, who would go on to be the first female Victorian Parliamentary Librarian, was hired as an assistant librarian in 1958.

Josephine McGovern, the first Parliamentary Librarian

When McGovern was hired in 1958, she entered into what has been described as ‘an extremely masculine environment’ and ‘a man’s world with almost no room for women’.⁶⁸ The role she applied for was not one that was specifically advertised for women, but it did differentiate the wage that would apply to a successful male or female applicant.⁶⁹ The Committee were looking for someone who had ‘sound knowledge of cataloguing and Dewey system of classification essential’.⁷⁰ The Committee ended up interviewing only women for the role, with McGovern as the successful applicant.⁷¹

McGovern was born in Camperdown in 1924 to Frank and Anna McGovern and grew up in Leslie Manor. She studied at St. Ann’s College in Warrnambool, before moving to Melbourne to complete primary teacher training at the Teacher’s College at the University of Melbourne.⁷² After a time spent teaching in Camperdown, Cobden and Swan Hill, she returned to the University of Melbourne where she was awarded a Bachelor of Arts in 1949.⁷³ She then worked in Terang for several years and completed her Diploma of Education by correspondence.⁷⁴ In 1953, McGovern moved to London, where she studied Library science (she later finished her training through classes at the Public Library of Victoria).⁷⁵ Whilst overseas, she and four friends purchased an old black taxi they named *Elegance* and drove around Europe for 14 weeks.⁷⁶

⁶⁷ Frazer (1954) ‘Report on the history and functions, together with recommendations for the future development, of the Parliament Library’, op. cit., p. 21.

⁶⁸ P. Gregory (2001) *Speaking volumes: the Victorian Parliamentary Library 1851–2001*, Melbourne, Victorian Parliamentary Library, p. 131; B. Davidson (2001) ‘Obituary: Josephine McGovern’, in *Cite: News magazine of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 22(6), p. 28.

⁶⁹ Victorian Government (1957) *Victoria Government Gazette*, no. 255, p. 3569.

⁷⁰ *ibid.*

⁷¹ Joint Library Committee (1967) ‘Minutes of the meeting 11 December 1957’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee, 1943–1967*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁷² Davidson (2001) op. cit.

⁷³ (1949) ‘Melbourne University Graduate’, *Camperdown Chronicle*, 25 April, p. 1, accessed via Trove archive.

⁷⁴ Davidson (2001) op. cit.

⁷⁵ (1970) ‘Lady of the Library’, *The Herald*, 22 January, p. 19.

⁷⁶ (1954) ‘Victorians in Paris at Easter’, *The Argus*, 17 April, p. 13, accessed via Trove archive; Davidson (2001) op. cit.

Image 4: Josephine McGovern and friends (McGovern is hanging out of the window)



Source: *Josephine McGovern and friends (1953)*, photographer unknown, Josephine McGovern collection, Parliamentary Library archives.

McGovern applied for the role of Parliamentary Librarian after Harry Bell's retirement in 1961. Although she was unsuccessful, the Committee had carried that 'of the lady applicants, first preference be given to Miss McGovern'.⁷⁷ The Committee minutes do not list her as an applicant for the role again in 1965, after the death of Harry Bell's replacement Frank Perry, however she was promoted to Assistant Librarian (effectively the Deputy Librarian) in 1965. Laurie Parkes was appointed Librarian in 1965, however his tenure was marked by extended periods on sick leave requiring McGovern to act as Parliamentary Librarian, for which the Committee paid her higher duties.⁷⁸

⁷⁷ Joint Library Committee (1967) 'Minutes of the meeting 28 November 1961', *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee, 1943–1967*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁷⁸ Joint Library Committee (1973) 'Minutes of the meeting 24 September 1969', *Minutes of the Library Committee: 44th to 45th Parliaments 1967–1973*, Parliamentary Library archives.

Image 5: Josephine McGovern in the North Library



Source: Josephine McGovern, 1969, photographer unknown, Josephine McGovern collection, Parliamentary Library archives.

After Parkes’ death in December 1969, the Committee decided not to advertise for a new Parliamentary Librarian and instead appointed McGovern to the role in January 1970.⁷⁹ When she accepted the role, McGovern made the point to the Committee that ‘there could be difficulties for a woman appointed to the position and such an appointment would create a precedent’.⁸⁰ In letters to her colleagues in other parliamentary libraries, she recognised that she had not been appointed in the traditional fashion, but was ‘fully aware of the great responsibility that has been passed onto me, in somewhat unexpected circumstances’⁸¹ and that she would ‘have to cope with the situation of having set a precedent in being the first woman appointed’.⁸² She seemed ready for the challenge of her new role, telling *The Herald* at the time of her appointment: ‘I really love this work. It’s challenging and stimulating’.⁸³ When McGovern was first employed in the Library there were no female MPs; by 1970, that number had increased to one.⁸⁴

⁷⁹ Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 131.

⁸⁰ Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 16 December 1969’, op. cit.

⁸¹ J. McGovern, letter to A. P. Fleming, Parliamentary Library, Parliament of the Commonwealth, 6 March 1970, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁸² J. McGovern, letter to Sir Harold White, National Librarian, 6 March 1970, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁸³ (1970) ‘Lady of the Library’ op. cit.

⁸⁴ A. Wright (2024) *Surely it would be a good thing’: Women in the Victorian Parliament*, Victorian Parliamentary Library, Melbourne, Parliament of Victoria, p. 16.

When advertising for a deputy for McGovern, the original job title was for a ‘Deputy Librarian (Male)’.⁸⁵ Gregory suggests this was in order to retain the gender balance of senior leadership.⁸⁶ However, as they struggled to fill the position, at a later Committee meeting it was decided to omit the word ‘male’ from the advertisement.⁸⁷

McGovern held the role of Parliamentary Librarian until her retirement in 1986, having ‘overseen some of the most significant changes in the Library’s goals and activities in its entire history’.⁸⁸ One of these significant changes was the introduction of a research service for the Library, noted in Committee minutes as a ‘major change in emphasis in the Library services provided to M.P.s’.⁸⁹ Bernice Donellan had been appointed as a Reference Officer in 1965, and the research service was established in October 1983.⁹⁰ This ‘represented a milestone in the development of the Library from a collection-oriented institution to one geared towards information services and research’.⁹¹ McGovern continued the Library’s publishing and public education activities with a facsimile edition of the Library’s most valuable work, William Strutt’s *Victoria the Golden*, in 1980, the *Biographic Register of the Victorian Parliament, 1900–1984* in 1985 and Australia’s first Parliamentary Education Kit in 1986.⁹²

McGovern developed the first acquisition policy, placing greater emphasis on periodicals.⁹³ However, as her predecessors had found, McGovern also had to confront the lack of storage space within the library, while also continuing to purchase new items.⁹⁴ In a memo to the President of the Legislative Council, in his role as co-chair of the Joint Library Committee, she wrote: ‘[the] space problem of the Library grows daily worse and urgent forward planning is imperative’.⁹⁵ She also wrote: ‘We have crucial space problems and these impede the provision of up to date information services’.⁹⁶ After a study tour to visit the parliamentary libraries in Sydney and Canberra, she wrote to New South Wales Parliamentary Librarian R. L. Cope: ‘I have come back bursting with ideas but now face the problems of translating them into action’.⁹⁷

Upon her retirement, the Committee recognised:

... her contribution in the development of the Library from a collection of books to a resource centre and in prompting the use of information technology for the services of members of Parliament.⁹⁸

McGovern continued to travel widely and maintained her involvement in many professional organisations until her death in 2001.⁹⁹

⁸⁵ Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 24 February 1970’, *Minutes of the Library Committee: 44th to 45th Parliaments 1967–1973*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁸⁶ Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 132.

⁸⁷ J. McGovern, letter to Mrs Loudan regarding her application for Deputy Librarian, 6 July 1970, Parliamentary Library archives; Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 24 February 1970’ op. cit.

⁸⁸ Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 142.

⁸⁹ Joint Library Committee (1999) ‘Sub-committee on Library resources 1983: Report to the Library Committee’, *Minutes of the Library Committee: 48th to 53rd Parliaments, 1979–1999*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁹⁰ Gregory (2001) op. cit., pp. 132–153.

⁹¹ *ibid.*, p. 143.

⁹² *ibid.*, p. 145.

⁹³ *ibid.*, p. 134.

⁹⁴ *ibid.*, p. 135.

⁹⁵ J. McGovern, memo for the President as Chairman of the Library Committee, 19 May 1977, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁹⁶ J. McGovern, letter to Mr McLean, Chief Librarian, General Assembly Library, Wellington New Zealand, 19 April 1977, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁹⁷ J. McGovern, letter to R. L. Cope, Librarian, Library of Parliament, N.S.W., 25 August 1970, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁹⁸ Joint Library Committee (1999) ‘Minutes of the meeting 31 October 1985’, *Minutes of the Library Committee: 48th to 53rd Parliaments, 1979–1999*, Parliamentary Library archives.

⁹⁹ Davidson (2001) op. cit.

Gendered expectations

Since McGovern’s appointment, the number of women in the Parliamentary Library has only grown. Bernice Donnellan was appointed as the ‘first formally designated Reference Officer’ in 1965 marking the beginning of a slow move towards developing a more formalized research service for the Library.¹⁰⁰ Both Donnellan and Mary Lloyd, who was employed in 1966, were interviewed by the Committee and were both asked by the all-male committee whether they were anticipating getting married in the near future.¹⁰¹ Women’s marital status was obviously a continual concern when sorting through job applications. When listing prospective applicants for the Deputy Librarian role in 1970, it was noted next to a female applicant that she was ‘Married, no children’.¹⁰² Neither of the male applicants had any similar notations. While the roles women and men worked were very similar, one difference related to working late nights.

While Brennan was not required to work Library overtime, by the mid-1960s McGovern and other female professional staff were working longer hours.¹⁰³ For McGovern this included staffing the Library when the Houses sat into the late evening or early morning. The Committee discussed providing female staff who worked late hours with transport home in 1966 but ‘deferred action’ apart from allowing the Librarian to make arrangements, if necessary.¹⁰⁴ In 1970 after the Public Service Board issued a circular on the issue, it was carried:

That Treasury approval be requested for finance to cover costs of transport home for female officers who of necessity worked evening rosters until at least 9 p.m.¹⁰⁵

Also of interest to the committee was how female staff were dressed. At a March 1972 committee meeting, the issue of ‘Dress for female staff in the Library’ was placed on the agenda. It was decided:

That the question of appropriate dress for female staff members in the Library be left to the discretion of the Librarian.¹⁰⁶

Former staff recall discussions around women being allowed to wear pants in the workplace, with the eventual decision being that they would be allowed to wear ‘suit slacks’.¹⁰⁷

¹⁰⁰ Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 130.

¹⁰¹ *ibid.*, p. 131.

¹⁰² Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 1 July 1970’ op. cit.

¹⁰³ Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 103.

¹⁰⁴ Joint Library Committee (1967) ‘Minutes of the meeting 16 November 1966’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee, 1943–1967*, Parliamentary Library archives.

¹⁰⁵ Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 14 July 1970’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee, 1967–1973*, Parliamentary Library archives.

¹⁰⁶ Joint Library Committee (1973) ‘Minutes of the meeting 1 March 1972’, *Minutes and proceedings of the Joint Library Committee, 1967–1973*, Parliamentary Library archives.

¹⁰⁷ M. Lloyd, personal communication with the author, 24 June 2026, Parliamentary Library archives.

3 | Women in parliamentary libraries

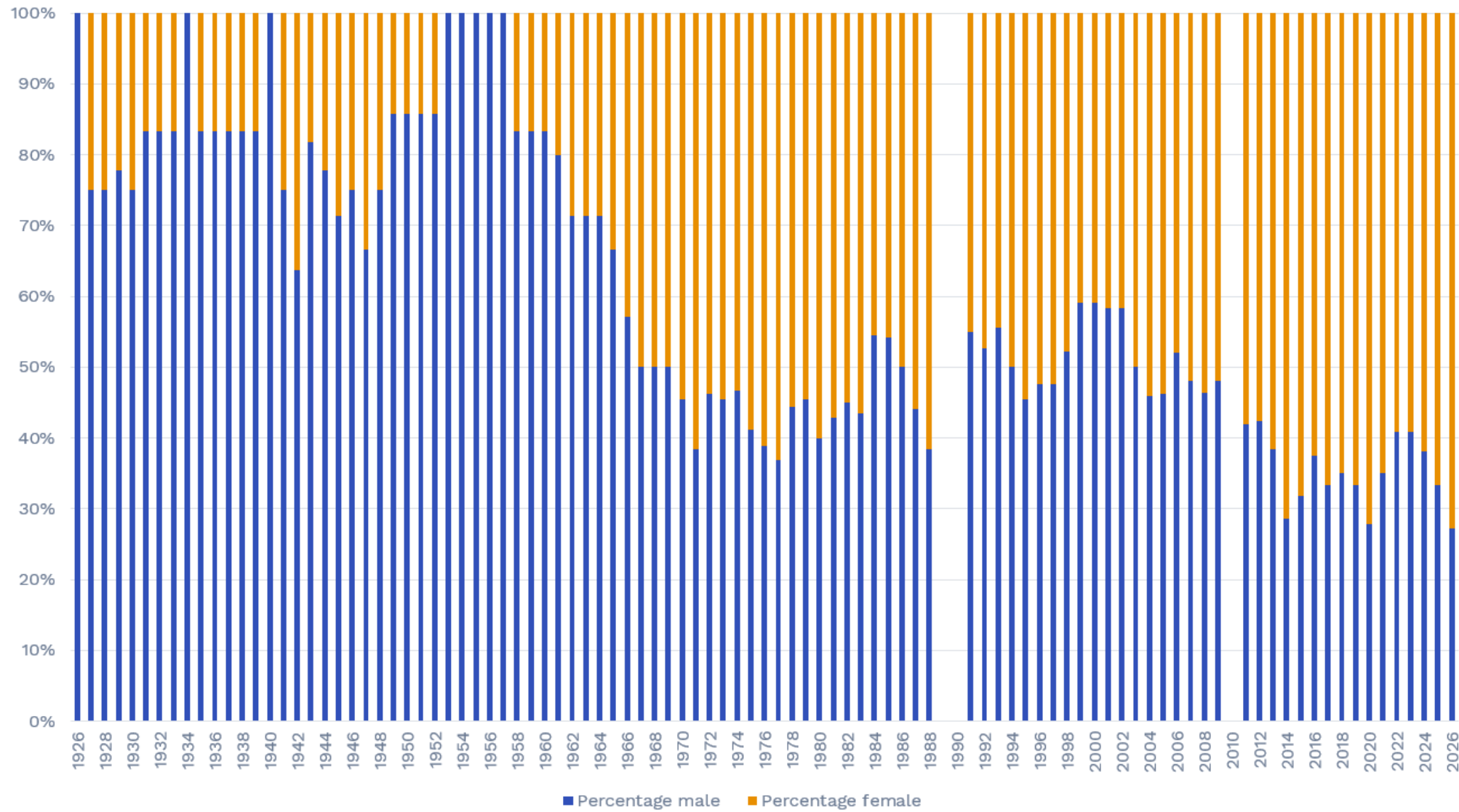
Women in Victoria’s library

The first 75 years of the Victorian Parliamentary Library were staffed exclusively by men, and even after Brennan and Clark were hired in 1927 it took some time for the gender balance to reflect the wider gender makeup of the Australian library workforce and to tip in women’s favour. Figure 4 draws on staff lists and wage books to show the gender split of the Victorian Library’s workforce since 1926, and very much confirms the library took a long time to stop being Gregory’s ‘extremely masculine environment’.¹⁰⁸ It shows that it was not until the 1970s—the same time, perhaps not by complete coincidence, that McGovern became Parliamentary Librarian—that the staff became majority female. Readers can click the graph to find the counts of male and female staff each year via an interactive version of the graph.

From 1966 women continuously made up more than 40 per cent of the library’s staff, and for the 18 years between 1966 and 1984 (McGovern was head librarian 1970–86), they were at least equal, if not the majority. The library’s staff have been majority women from 2005 to the present.

¹⁰⁸ Victorian Parliamentary Library (1988) *Register of Wages, Salaries, and Allowances – 1926–1988*. Parliamentary Library archives; Gregory (2001) op. cit., p. 131.

Figure 4: Percentage of female and male staff in the Victorian Parliamentary Library, 1926-2026



Source: Victorian Parliamentary Library archives and annual reports. Counts of male and female staff each year can be found via the interactive linked to the graph.

First female staff in parliamentary libraries

While women moved into the wider library workforce quickly across the 1920s and 30s, it took a little longer for similar ground to be broken in Australian and New Zealand parliamentary libraries (Table 2). As far as we can ascertain the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library was the first in Australia and New Zealand to employ a woman when it hired Grace Hendy-Pooley as a clerk in 1915. Victoria may ‘claim’ Hendy-Pooley somewhat, because federal parliament, at the time, occupied Victorian Parliament House on Spring Street in Melbourne, while the Australian Parliament House was being constructed in Canberra. Hendy-Pooley might therefore be considered the first woman to physically work *in* the Parliamentary Library in Victoria, if not the first woman to work for Victoria’s Parliamentary Library.

Twelve years after Hendy-Pooley was appointed to the Commonwealth Parliamentary Library, New Zealand Parliamentary Library employed its first female staffer, and Victoria was the first Australian state to employ women in 1927. While we weren’t able to confirm the first women to work at the libraries of the two territories, it wasn’t until 1974, when Mrs B. K. Murray was hired as a librarian in Adelaide, that all Australia’s state parliamentary libraries in Australia employed women. This perhaps reflects a general tendency of parliamentary workplaces to move a little more slowly towards equality than the wider Australian society.

Table 2: Dates and names of first female staff employed in Australian and New Zealand parliamentary libraries¹⁰⁹

	Year	Name	Position/role
Commonwealth	1915	Grace Hendy-Pooley	Clerk, Office of Historical Records, Parliamentary Library
New Zealand	1926	Quinice B. Cowles	Cataloguer and typist
Victoria	1927	Flora Brennan & Mary Clark	Junior Assistant Librarians
Tasmania	1943	E. M. Tatterstall	Research and information
New South Wales	1946	Miss P. Abbott	Library Amanuensis
Queensland	1958 ¹¹⁰	Miss W. R. Richardson	Librarian
Western Australia	1966	Jocelyn Coyte Bartlett	Clerk Assistant, Legislative Assembly and Librarian
South Australia	1974	Mrs. B. K. Murray	Librarian

¹⁰⁹ Research services of the parliamentary libraries of Western Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Australia and New Zealand, personal communication with the author, 1 April – 7 July 2026, Parliamentary Library archives. Given the multiple governance arrangements the Australian Capital Library have had since self-government in 1967, the authors weren’t able to determine the first women to work in the Legislative Assembly Library, nor were we able to gather data for the Northern Territory.

¹¹⁰ Only Miss Richardson’s date of retirement was able to be determined, and she likely started much earlier than this.

First female head parliamentary librarians

When Josephine McGovern became head librarian of the Victorian Parliamentary Library she was also the first to do so in all Australian or New Zealand parliaments. She and Western Australia’s Mrs L. Heitman would also remain the only women to have served in these roles for several decades. Table 3 shows that the decade following the turn of the 21st century saw the majority of parliamentary libraries appoint women as their heads, although it should be noted that many libraries had women as deputy heads or as leaders of research services and other senior roles.

Table 3: Dates and names of first female Head Librarians in Australian and New Zealand parliamentary libraries¹¹¹

	Year	Name
Victoria	1970	Josephine McGovern
Western Australia	1976	Mrs L Heitman
New Zealand	2000	Moirra Fraser
Queensland	2002	Mary Seefried
Tasmania	2001	Juliet Scaife (later Webster)
Commonwealth	2005	Roxanne Missingham OAM
South Australia	2007	Dr Coral Stanley
New South Wales	2012	Annette McNicol

¹¹¹ Research services of the parliamentary libraries of Western Australia, New South Wales, Tasmania, Australian Capital Territory, Queensland, South Australia, Australia and New Zealand, personal communication with the author, 1 April – 7 July 2026, Parliamentary Library archives.

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