

The Margaret Lawrie Collection of the Torres Strait Island Material in the John Oxley Library, State Library of Queensland

Jorn Harbeck

I'd like to start by acknowledging the traditional owners of the land we are meeting on today.

I will be talking about the Margaret Lawrie Collection of the Torres Strait Island Material in the John Oxley Library, the Queensland History Library of the State Library of Queensland. By way of background, I will also be talking about Margaret Lawrie as a person, about how her collection was formed, what it contains and how and where to access it. Sadly, Margaret Lawrie passed away on 7 March this year. I spoke to her daughter Edith Lawrie recently and she is pleased that her mother's collection can be introduced at this Forum today.

Margaret Lawrie was born in country NSW in 1917. After completing school she studied English and Music. As a talented musician she entertained the idea of becoming a concert pianist, but became a music teacher instead. When she married, Queensland Senator Alexander Lawrie, she did not want to be reduced to a role of a Canberra politician's housewife. Instead Margaret Lawrie preferred to stay at the Lawrie's property 'Evergreen' outside of Rockhampton.

Her journey as an advocate of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people began when she was invited by the Queensland government to travel with Oodgeroo Noonuckal and a social worker from the Health Department to Cape York and Torres Strait Island Communities to report on children's health and other issues in these Communities. She returned to the Torres Strait each year in January from 1964 to 1970 to conduct training seminars for Torres Strait Islands teachers.

On these visits Margaret Lawrie made friends with many Torres Strait Island families and was approached by them to record their stories, as they feared that these stories might otherwise be lost. Equipped with a grant and a tape recorder for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, as it was called then, now AIATSIS, she recorded many stories from all the island groups. The stories were recorded in the Torres Strait Island languages and then translated into English by Torres Strait Islanders. This work culminated in the publication of the acclaimed book *Myths and Legends of the Torres Straits* in 1970 and the children's book *Tales from Torres Straits* in 1972.

These books, as Margaret Lawrie always said, are not her books; they belong to the people of the Torres Straits. The Torres Straits, its people and culture remained an enduring interest for Margaret Lawrie, and so her collection contains much more than the recorded stories. It also contains the genealogy of many Torres Strait Islander families compiled by her, hundreds of photographs of the islands, of story places, of people, of plants. It also contains her research notes on children's games, songs, vocabularies etc. as well as many drawings and paintings done by herself and Torres Strait Islanders. Many of these artworks were used as illustrations in the books.

Margaret Lawrie interests also extended to historical research on the Torres Straits, on the London Missionary Society and the white settlements of nearby Somerset and Cape York. An unpublished typescript on the history of Thursday Island since the arrival of white missionaries in 1870 also forms part of the collection.

Over the last couple of months I have been compiling an item list of the collection and have re-established the original order of hundreds of slides and photographs in the collection. I have arranged the photos by island groups, islands and have put them in chronological

order. I recently spoke to Edith Lawrie, Margaret Lawrie's daughter, and will be visiting her next Tuesday to go through research material still kept at her house. I will hopefully be able to add some more original research material to the collection.

Elizabeth Fa'Aoso, the Torres Strait Islander Research Officer here at the State Library is the contact person for inquiries about this collection. Elizabeth and some of the volunteers of the Indigenous Library Services Unit have been indexing the genealogies and photos of the collection by island groups, name of island, town groups, names, sex, informant's name, the date the genealogy was recorded and any additional notes. They were helped in this by Mrs Lawrie's detailed descriptions on almost all of the slides and photographs.

Access to the genealogies and some research notes are restricted to Torres Strait Islanders only, but otherwise the collection is on open access. The item list I compiled will also at some future date be available on the State Library's website.

Thank you.