



*Royal Geographical Society
of South Australia*

Celebrating 140 years of the Royal Geographical Society of South Australia

Presentation for GeoNight 2025

<https://rgssa.org.au/heritage/treasures>

This presentation includes;

- Brief overview of the Society and its 140-year history,
- An introduction to our diverse collection of “Treasures”, and
- Information about one of the ways we support current geographers - through grants to support research.

Brief Overview of RGSSA

The RGSSA is a voluntary, not-for profit organisation for advancing geographical science and promoting public awareness and enjoyment of Geography and related topics. **This year marks its 140th anniversary.**

As well as presenting a dynamic series of lectures and events, and publishing a range of materials, the Society is custodian of a library of over 250,000 volumes which is one of the most significant collections of rare geographical books and manuscripts in Australia.

Note: The information presented has been prepared by volunteers of the RGSSA and is subject to revision as more research on the treasures is undertaken.

A few key achievements over 140 years

*Royal Geographical
Society of South
Australia (RGSSA)*



- **1885** – RGSSA founded in Adelaide as a branch of the “Geographical Society of Australasia”.
- **1891** – Elder Scientific Exploration Expedition supported (Adelaide to Geraldton).
- **1896** – Calvert Scientific Exploration Expedition supported (Western Australia).
- **1905** – purchased York Gate Library (a major private collection amassed by a London merchant relating to geography, exploration and colonization) and gained a permanent home in State Library of South Australia (SLSA).
- **1947** – instigated a series of undergraduate and post graduate awards, which have been added to over the years to include recognition of noteworthy geographical achievements and exception service to the Society.
- **1960** – mounted an exhibition for the first Festival of Arts.
- **1985** – published a centenary history “The Branch without a Tree”.
- **2018** – worked with Geography Teachers Association SA to establish fieldwork awards to encourage school students to engage with geographical issues.
- **2023** – Library Research Fellowships created to support researchers using the Society’s library.
- **2025** – major refurbishment of Society’s Library in the Mortlock Wing of SLSA.

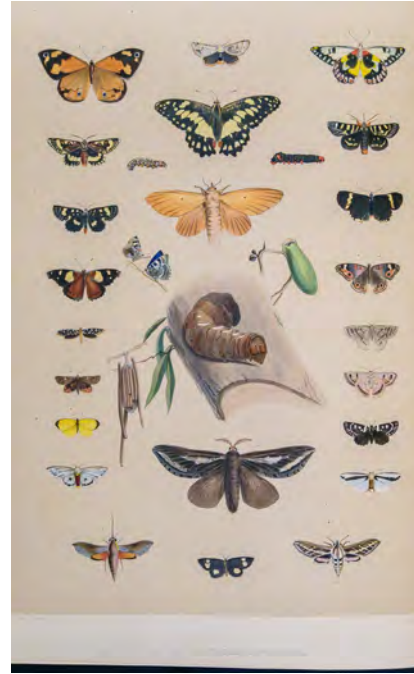
What is the RGSSA Treasures Collection?

The RGSSA has developed an online "Treasures" collection, which serves as a digital showcase of some of the Society's most valuable and significant holdings. The aim is to share the Society's unique perspective with a wider audience in the digital age. Key aspects of the Treasures collection include:

- **Diverse Geographic Artefacts** - A range of over 100 items selected from the Society's vast collection, including rare books, antique maps, historical photographs, and other relics.
- **Accessibility** - The online platform provides access to these treasures, making them available to researchers and the public. This allows people to explore the rich geographical history that the RGSSA has preserved.
- **Purpose** - The project highlights the importance of the RGSSA to geographical science and historical preservation and allows the Society to illustrate the breadth of its collection.

The RGSSA's online Treasures collection is a digital museum, offering a glimpse into the Society's extensive and valuable historical archives. The following slides provide a few examples of its "Treasures".

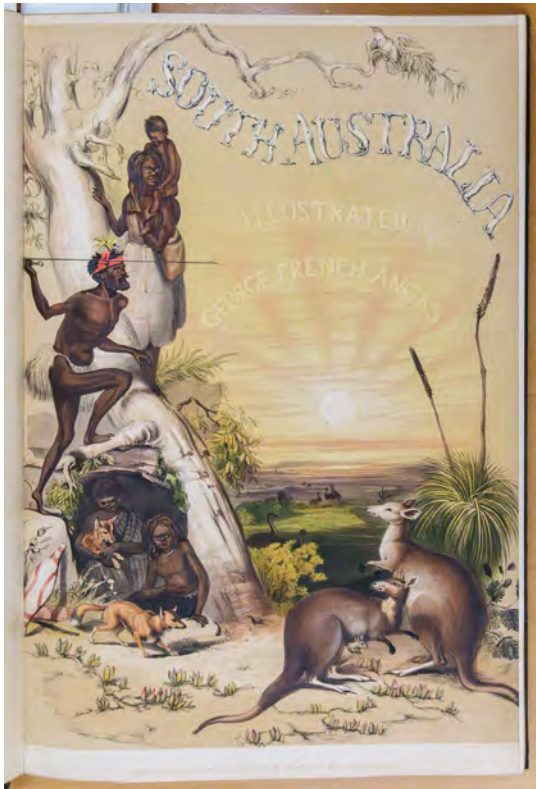
***South Australia Illustrated* by George French Angas, 1847**



George French Angas (1822-1886) was the eldest son of George Fife Angas, Chair of the South Australia Company which established the colony of South Australia. Gifted as a watercolour artist and naturalist, George French spent more than 18 months in Australia and New Zealand from 1844-1845, sketching and collecting specimens. His accurate record of Aboriginal portraiture and material culture, together with South Australian landscapes and natural history (all on the verge of rapid change) is unequalled.

***South Australia Illustrated* by George French Angas, 1847**

South Australia Illustrated featured 60 chromo-lithographs of the highest quality, together with detailed descriptions. The images were lithographed from Angas's finely drawn watercolours, depicting South Australia's scenery, its natural history, and portraits and artefacts of the Aboriginal people whom Angas encountered.



Elder expedition, 1891

The Elder Expedition looms large in the early history of the RGSSA, having been financed by Sir Thomas Elder, but managed by the Society (then known as the South Australian Branch of the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia). Sent out to explore many areas of inland Australia relatively unknown to Europeans, the expedition ended in the Murchison district of Western Australia after the scientific staff lost confidence in the leader and resigned.



7. ARKARINGA CREEK—LOOKING WEST.



50. MOSES CREEK, SKIRMISH HILL ; GUM TREE MARKED BY GOSSE, FORREST, MILLS, & E.E.E.

Elder expedition, 1891



3. CARAVAN STARTING FROM COOTANOOORINA.

Regarded at the time as one of the strongest and best equipped of all Australian inland expeditions, the party left Warrina on the Central Australian Railway southeast of Oodnadatta on 2 May 1891.

Surveyor and explorer David Lindsay led the 14 man party which consisted of three officers, three scientists, a cook, three European assistants and four Afghan camel handlers to manage a string of 44 camels.

By mid-July the expedition had moved through the Musgrave, Mann and Tomkinson Ranges into Western Australia. From this point travelling conditions deteriorated, with a lack of feed and water for the camels slowing progress.

Elder expedition, 1891

Attempts to travel further west were abandoned and the party was forced on to recuperate at Fraser Range Station. Travelling on to the Murchison district in severe drought conditions the party broke up on 31 December 1891 with the leader David Lindsay being recalled to Adelaide and the remainder arriving back in June 1892.

Some critics called the expedition a failure, however scientifically it was a success and a number of discoveries were made. Also, 165 dry glass photographic plates were exposed recording the expedition - the first time this had been done in Australia. It is remarkable that the plates were preserved in spite of being carried on the backs of camels. The RGSSA has 55 of these plates in its possession and these have been preserved and digitised.



10. CAMP No. 13, ARCOELLINA WELL—LOG HUT BUILT BY MR. CHAMBERS.

Views in Australia or New South Wales and Van Diemen's Land by Joseph Lycett, 1825

Joseph Lycett was an artist who was transported to Australia in 1811 for forgery.

His fifty aquatint engravings of landscape views are considered to be Australia's finest of the time and Lycett to be the outstanding artist of his period in Australia.



[Read more ...](#)

Treasures of the RGSSA - <https://rgssa.org.au/heritage/treasures>

John Lewin's *Birds of New Holland*, 1808

Birds of New Holland was published in London in 1808 only five years after Captain Mathew Flinders' *Voyage to Terra Australis*. It used copper plates prepared by the author in Sydney several years before.

The title page reads as follows "Birds of New Holland with Their Natural History, Collected, Engraved and Faithfully Painted after Nature by John William Lewin, of Paramatta, New South Wales, A. L. S."



John Lewin's *Birds of New Holland*, 1808



The book includes 18 beautiful hand-coloured etched plates of birds, and the text or letterpress is thought to have been written by his brother Thomas Lewin.

In addition, bound in the rear, are six plates from Lewin's Natural history of lepidopterous insects of New South Wales.



John Gould's - *Synopsis of Birds of Australia*, 1837

A Synopsis of the Birds of Australia was published between January 1837 and April 1838. It was issued in 4 Parts with 73 plates and shows the heads of nearly 170 birds many from specimens sent by Elizabeth Gould's brothers Stephen and Charles Coxen who had settled in Australia.



John Gould's - *Synopsis of Birds of Australia*, 1837



The artwork, lithography and hand colouring are by Elizabeth Gould.

In his Prospectus, Gould states "he... contemplates visiting Australia, New Zealand etc. for the space of two years, in order to investigate and study the natural history of those countries."

This gives early advice of John Gould's intention to visit Australia and as promotion for the subsequent publication of *The Birds of Australia*.



Space exploration poster and fragment of Stuart's tree which travelled into space

These items represent a connection of exploration of both land and space by South Australians as the wood fragment (below) was taken on the Endeavour voyage by Dr. Andrew Thomas (Australia's only astronaut) as one of his personal mementos.



A fragment of wood from a tree blazed by renown explorer John McDouall Stuart

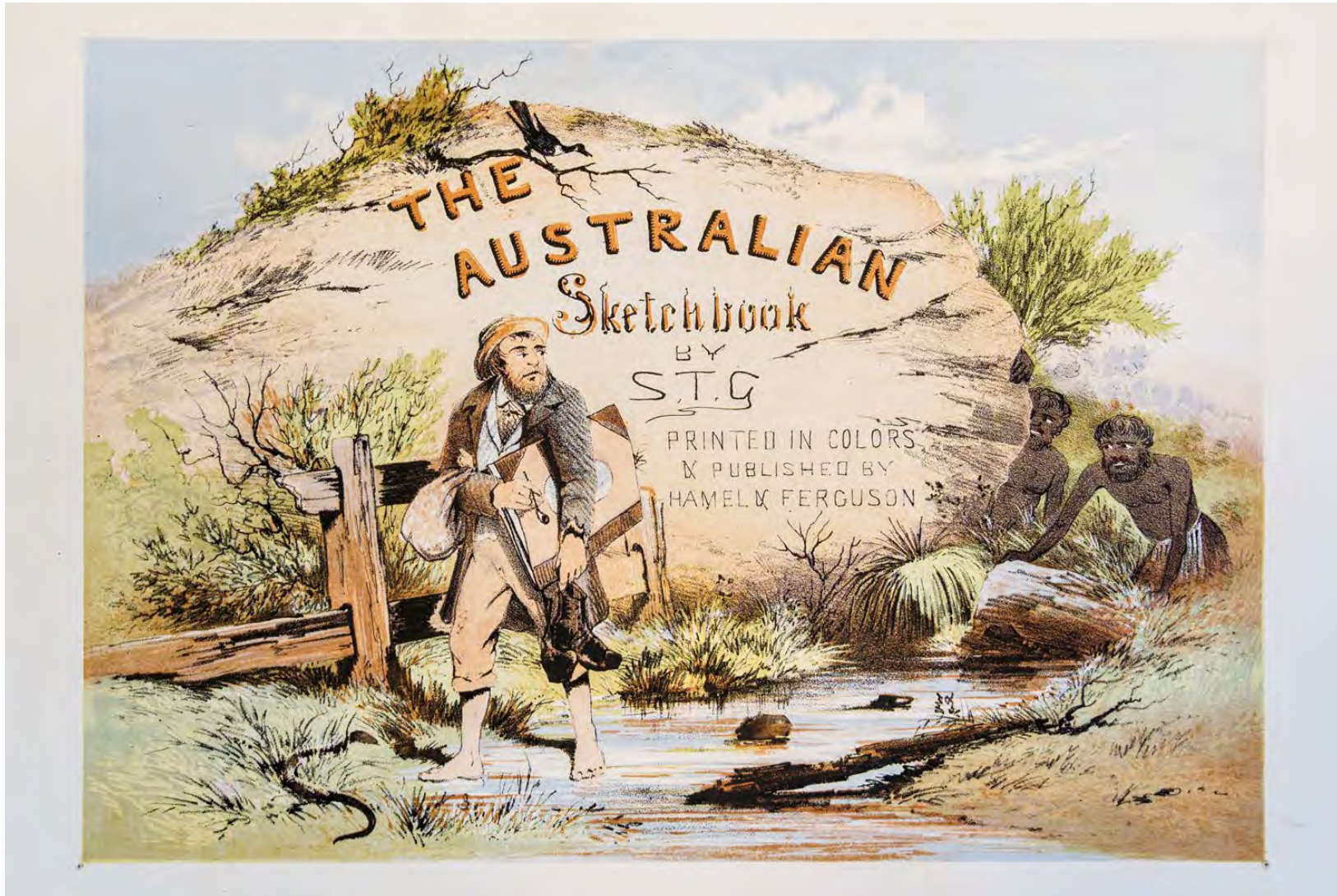


A framed collage of NASA's 1996 Space Shuttle Endeavour mission (Andy Thomas is on the left in the front row).

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Treasures of the RGSSA - <https://rgssa.org.au/heritage/treasures>

ST Gill Sketchbook -images of early life in Australia 1864



These images show scenes from early colonial life on the Victorian goldfields and include bushrangers, a corroboree, a bush funeral, overlanders, prospectors and diggers heading for the gold fields.

They are chromolithographs (original prints (with mats)).

ST Gill Sketchbook -images of early life in Australia 1864

Samuel Thomas Gill (1818-1880) arrived in Adelaide in December 1839 on the *Caroline* with his parents and brother and sister. The following year he opened a studio in Gawler Place offering to prepare portraits of people, horses or dogs and to make sketches of houses or landscapes. In 1846 he joined the expedition to the north led by J A Horrocks as an unpaid draftsman. They got as far as the head of Spencer Gulf and discovered Gill Lake (Lake Dutton) where Horrocks had a fatal gun accident.



ST Gill Sketchbook -images of early life in Australia 1864



On his return to Adelaide Gill sold his pictures of the expedition and some of these are in the Art Gallery of South Australia. In 1852 Gill went to the Victorian gold diggings where he completed his well-known pictures of everyday life in *Victoria Gold Diggings* and *Diggers As They Are*. He also went to New South Wales where he published lithographs of scenes in 1856 and 1861. In 1864 he returned to Melbourne and published *The Australian Sketchbook* showing rural and aboriginal life and scenes from the Victorian goldfields.

Peron's account of Baudin's voyage with maps by Freycinet



This treasure consists of three volumes written by Francois Peron and a collection of magnificent maps by Louis de Freycinet, recording the journey of exploration to the "south seas" under Capt. Nicholas Baudin between 1800 and 1804, which included the south coast of Australia.

Among the maps is the first published map of the whole of the coastline of Australia.

It was during this voyage that Baudin's and Mathew Flinders' paths crossed at Encounter Bay, South Australia in May 1802.

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Treasures of the RGSSA - <https://rgssa.org.au/heritage/treasures>

A Voyage to Terra Australis 1814, by Matthew Flinders

"A voyage to Terra Australis; undertaken for the purpose of completing the discovery of that vast country, and prosecuted in the years 1801, 1802, and 1803 in His Majesty's ship the Investigator, and subsequently in the armed vessel Porpoise and Cumberland, schooner.

With an account of the shipwreck of the Porpoise, arrival of the Cumberland at Mauritius, and imprisonment of the commander during six years and a half in that island."

By Matthew Flinders (1774-1814), commander of the Investigator.

Flinders was the first to circumnavigate Australia and chart its entire coastline.

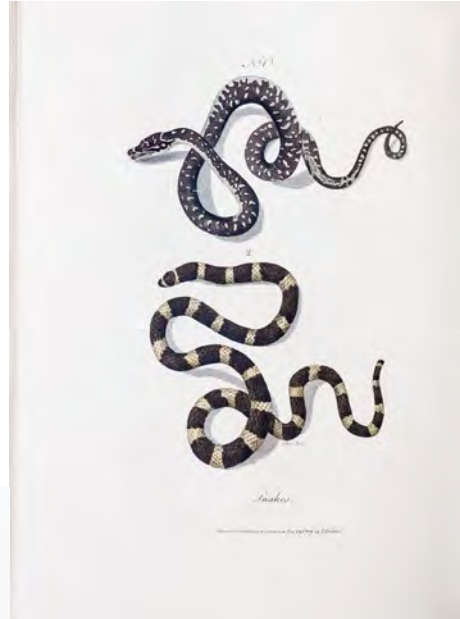


Journal of a voyage to New South Wales in 1788 by John White

John White sailed with the First Fleet and was appointed Surgeon General to the convict colony established under Governor Philip at Sydney Cove in 1788.

His journal was published in 1790 and represents one of the earliest and most important first-hand accounts of Australian colonial history.

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The journal includes many colour plates of a wide variety of animals, insects, fish and plants.

Mammals of Australia by John Gould

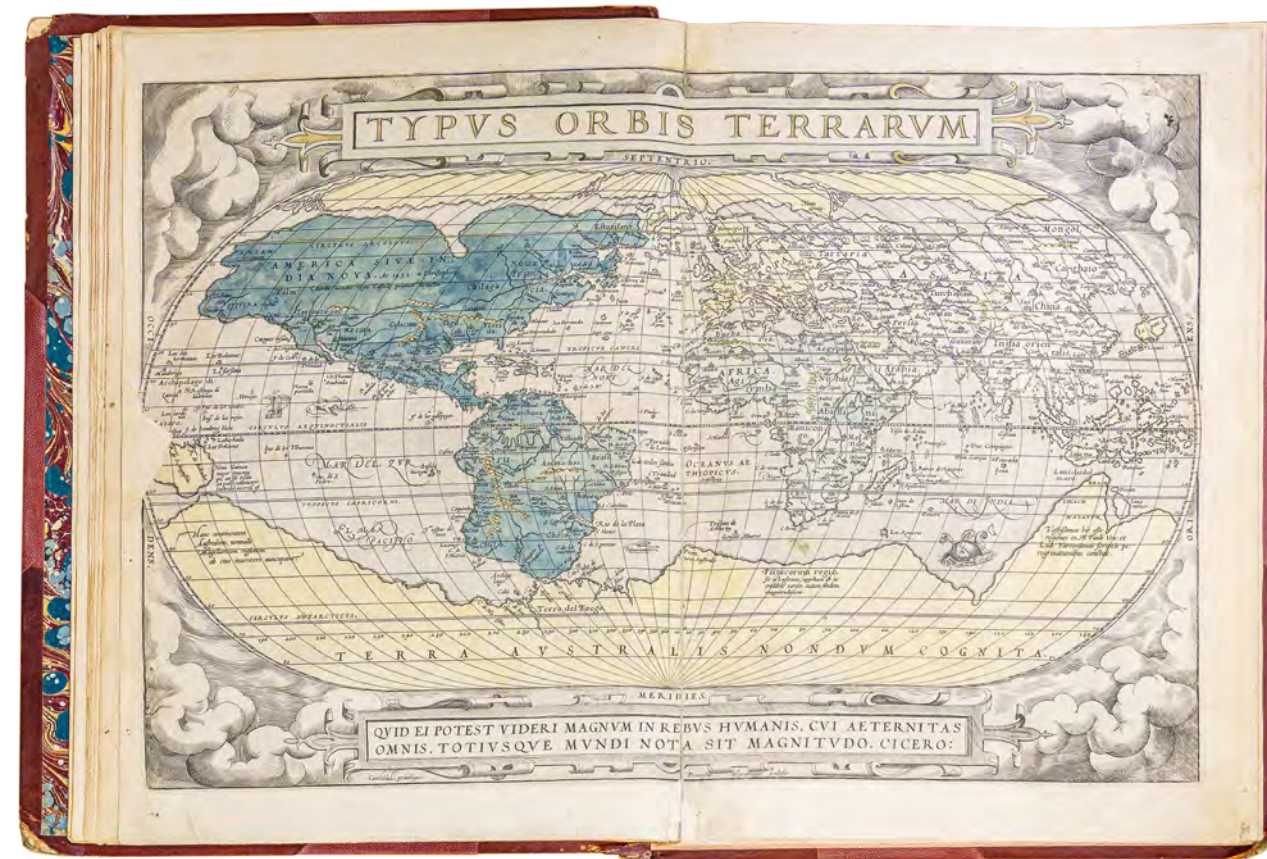


John Gould is usually thought of as the "bird man" but following his trip to Australia between May 1838 and August 1839, he published *Mammals of Australia* in three volumes with 182 beautifully hand-coloured lithographic plates.

[Read more ...](#)

Theatrum Orbis Terrarum (Atlas of the Whole World) by Abraham Ortelius, 1571

This was a landmark in cartography and is known as the first modern atlas containing a comprehensive collection of the best available maps of the time.



First published in Latin in 1570, this edition is one of 275 printed in 1571 in Dutch, Ortelius's own language.

[Read more ...](#)

***Wildflowers of South Australia* by Fanny de Mole, 1861**



Fanny de Mole wrote and illustrated the first book on wildflowers in South Australia

There were an estimated 100 copies made of the original edition.

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Map of Adelaide 1838 by Henry Nixon



This very early map of Adelaide was drawn by Lieut. Henry Nixon who was a member of Colonel William Light's survey party.

It was drawn in 1838, only two years after the city was established by Colonel Light and shows interesting detail of Adelaide in its very early days.

[Read more ...](#)



*Royal Geographical Society
of South Australia (RGSSA)*

The preceding slides have introduced the large and diverse collection of treasures held by the RGSSA, especially those that relate to the early years of its 140-year history.

The following slide gives some information about one of the ways the RGSSA supports current geographers through grants to support research.

<https://rgssa.org.au/>

Research Grants

- Dorothy Pyatt Postgraduate Research Grants provide financial support to high-achieving postgraduate research students specialising in Geography. The Grants support research work for two successful candidates each year - one annual award for research to be conducted within Australia, and one annual award for research to be conducted outside Australia.
- Library Research Fellowship program was created in 2023 to give scholars from around the world an opportunity to pursue their work in proximity to a distinguished collection of primary sources. Up to three fellowships are awarded each year for periods of time usually ranging from two to four weeks. Fellowships are open to Australian and international researchers.