Andrew Gosling surveys the life and work of American Otley Beyer, dubbed the Philippines' greatest anthropologist, whose extensive library now occupies an important place in the National Library's Asian Collections.

When Otley Beyer turned 82, former President of the United Nations General Assembly, Dr Carlos P. Romulo, praised him as 'the greatest anthropologist that we ever had in the Philippines'. Henry Otley Beyer (1883–1966) was an American scholar, teacher and collector who spent most of his adult life in the Philippines. Much of his extensive library of Filipiniana and sources on ethnography and cultural history were acquired by the National Library of Australia six years after his death.

Beyer was born in Edgewood, Iowa, on 13 July 1883 to a pioneer family of Bavarian origin. His interest in the Philippines is said to have been sparked by a visit to the Philippine exhibit at the Louisiana Purchase Centennial Exhibition in St Louis, Missouri, in 1904. The following year he graduated with a Master's degree in chemistry from Denver University and volunteered to teach in the Philippines. This was not long after the Spanish–American War of 1898, during which the United States had assisted the Philippine independence movement against Spanish rule but had then taken control of the country after suppressing the new republic in 1899–1901.

His first years in the Philippines were spent as a supervising teacher in the mountains of northern Luzon. There he studied the culture of the Ifugao people. After further anthropological studies, including at Harvard, he was appointed ethnologist in the Philippine Bureau of Science and part-time head of the Philippine Museum. He became instructor in anthropology at the University of the Philippines in 1914 and was made its first professor and head of department in 1925. During four decades teaching and carrying out research with the department he inspired many young Filipinos with an interest in their cultural heritage.

In a letter to Dr Romulo dated 7 August 1965, Beyer talked of 'trying to serve the University [of the Philippines] and to procure and conserve for the People of the Philippines the evidence of their abundant ancient culture'. He received a number of decorations, honours and awards for his 60 years of scholarship. In 1965 an H. Otley Beyer Symposium was held at the University of the Philippines. Studies in Philippine Anthropology (In Honor of H. Otley Beyer) was published two years later to mark his achievements.

The National Library's substantial Southeast Asian holdings owe much to the collecting efforts of three great scholars: a Frenchman, an Englishman and American Otley Beyer. The Frenchman was Georges Cœdès (1886–1969), whose collection on Indochina was purchased by the National Library in 1970. The Englishman, Gordon

The three had much in common. Born in the same decade, at the height of the European colonial era, all moved to Southeast Asia as young men and spent long careers there devoted to the study of the societies in which they lived. They all married locally. Coedès' wife was Cambodian; Luce's wife, Daw Tee Tee, was the sister of a Burmese academic colleague; while Beyer married the daughter of an Ifugao village chief from the northern Philippines.

Their lives were disrupted by the Second World War and its aftermath. Luce managed to escape the Japanese forces invading Burma, but the vast library he left in Rangoon did not survive the war. The Japanese occupying the Philippines initially allowed Beyer to continue his studies, but he was later interned. And just as Luce had, Beyer lost much of his library. Both men had to rebuild their collections, though much was irreplaceable. In the turbulent post-war period, Coedès left Vietnam and returned to Paris in 1946. Luce was expelled from Burma by the military regime in 1964. Beyer, a widely revered figure, was able to end his days in the Philippines.

Beyer's scholarly interests and extensive writings are reflected in his collecting. In the 1965 letter to Dr Romulo, Beyer described his collection as consisting of five categories. First, there was his library on cultural history, archaeology, ethnography, linguistics and folklore of the Philippines and neighbouring countries, supplemented by manuscripts, photographs, pamphlets, maps and other illustrative material. Beyer pointed out that he had
assembled the library at his own expense without recourse to public funds.

The second category consisted of numerous archaeological and ethnographic specimens gathered during field work carried out in the Philippines. The third was a tektite collection, possibly the largest in the world. Tektites are glassy objects, believed to originate from outer space. They are much prized in many cultures, including those of the Philippines and Aboriginal Australia. The fourth category was an extensive collection of Philippine pottery and glazed wares from China and Southeast Asia. Finally, there was a section of literary material consisting in part of newspaper clippings and extracts from other publications.

The suggestion that the National Library of Australia acquire the library component of Beyer's collection came in 1971 from Dr Helmut Loofs-Wissowa, then Reader in Asian Civilizations at the Australian National University. The previous year Loofs-Wissowa had been the first to recommend that the Library purchase the Credes Collection. He wrote to the Library on 25 February 1971 about Beyer's 'extremely rich and valuable library'. Loofs-Wissowa went on to say, 'I have myself on several occasions—during Professor Beyer's lifetime as well as after his death—been allowed to work with this collection and can attest to its inestimable scholarly value'.

Following this recommendation, the Library arranged for Austin Coates, the author of several works on Southeast Asia, including the Philippines, to inspect Beyer's library in Manila. Coates found that considering the humid climate it was generally in a fair state of preservation, though in considerable disorder.

Coates identified the core of the collection as 'undeniably important, unpublished and unique'. This included the bound volumes of typescript manuscripts—indexed and mostly unpublished—known as the Philippine Ethnographic Series. This is considered Beyer's major work. It was compiled by Beyer and his assistants mainly between 1906 and 1918, with other items added as late as the 1930s. It covers the ethnography of the Philippines province by province, providing a record of early twentieth-century Philippine life before American influences had spread to the rural areas.

The carbon copies acquired by the Library (now at MS 4877) form the only surviving complete set of the series. The originals were destroyed in 1945 during the street fighting in Manila as the Japanese retreated. The Library has since had the 160 bound volumes published on 663 microfiche, enabling Philippine libraries and others to have copies of this valuable resource.

This series is complemented by a collection of photographs, today held in the Library's Pictorial Collection. These show Philippine ethnic groups, costumes, houses, weapons, agriculture, religious and art objects, and domestic life. They also date from the period 1906 to 1918, with many taken by Beyer himself. They are now badly faded, but have been copied onto microfiche for preservation.

In addition to the bound volumes, Beyer's loose papers are housed in 98 boxes in the Manuscript Collection, and have been copied onto over 2000 microfiche. They include many letters to and from fellow scholars. For example, there is correspondence from the 1930s with Dr Charles Fenner of the University of Adelaide on the topic of Australian and Philippine tektites, which led to an exchange of these objects. Beyer's letters show his lifelong enthusiasm for his subject. In March 1955 he wrote to a colleague, Larry Wilson:

Archaeological work is like a fascinating mystery story, with the specimens and site data serving as vital clues—and everything is of most importance while both the specimens and your memory of how and where they were found is still quite fresh, and unconfused by later activities elsewhere.

Coates reported that the collection contained a wide selection of Filipiniana—much of it rare—including first editions of the works of patriot and author Jose Rizal; novels and poetry by Pedro Alejandrino Paterno; rare works by Isabelo de los Reyes and Pardo de Tavera; and a collection of literature in Tagalog and other Philippine languages from the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. There were also numerous books, pamphlets and reports from the late Spanish and early American periods.

Beyer's library reflects his interest in ceramics and tektites. It includes a photographic record of his extensive collection of Chinese porcelain and Philippine pottery. These photographs, too, are now in the Library's Pictorial Collection. There is also what Coates described as one of the largest groups of publications on tektites ever assembled.

Coates was able to view only part of Beyer's collection, as much of it was locked away or inaccessible during his visit. One interesting section on which he did not comment was the Japanese language material from the time of the occupation of the Philippines. This material is now housed in the Library's Asian Collections stacks. Coates did, however, mention the rare and extensive collection of writings and speeches by Jose Laurel, President of the Philippines under the Japanese.

After Coates recommended purchase, the Library wrote to Otley Beyer's son and heir, William, who as sole owner of the collection agreed to its acquisition. An Australian scholar, Dr Dennis Shoesmith, who was then in the Philippines, was engaged to make a preliminary list of the material and to supervise its packing. He described it as being housed in a clutter of cabinets and boxes crowded into the top floor of Beyer's house in Manila. When finally packed, it filled 384 cartons. After fumigation, the most important and valuable materials were dispatched to Australia by air, and the remainder by sea.

As Loofs-Wissowa wrote in 1971: 'The H. Otley Beyer Collection—not unlike that of his contemporary Professor Georges Cœdès which has been acquired by the National Library recently—is the result of more than half a century of collecting and scholarship in a field which is of increasing interest to Australia.' In the 1990s Southeast Asia continues to be one of the Library's priority areas for acquisitions, and the Otley Beyer Collection remains a cornerstone of holdings from that region.

ANDREW GOSLING is Chief Librarian, Asian Collections, at the National Library

NATIONAL Library of Australia News