

GETTING TO KNOW YOU

Chrissy Knight, Congregation Archivist,
Sisters of Mercy, New Zealand.



1. *What is your name and what do you do?*

My name is Chrissy Knight, and I am currently the Congregation Archivist at the Sisters of Mercy, New Zealand. This role is a good fit for me, as I like the variation of a sole archivist role. It includes the management of both the archival collection and a mini museum of objects.

2. *Can you tell us a little bit about the path that led to your current role?*

My first career was in fashion design and tailoring with a specialty in kiltmaking, so when I was initially transitioning into a heritage career, I was dreaming of curating a fabulous textile collection. However, my path has happily led me into other areas that I did not anticipate. I spent ten years in a University Library, servicing research enquiries and working with the special collections. I loved the research environment and the students' energy there. Following

this, I had two years working on the Digitisation Programme at Archives New Zealand. This was a very rare opportunity for me to work in a state-of-the-art facility that was digitising on a major scale. After this, I became the Congregation Archivist for the Sisters of Mercy New Zealand, and this is where I still work.

3. *What is your biggest challenge in your current role?*

Responding to requests for information relating to out of home care – mainly from people asking for the records we hold of their time in care with the Sisters of Mercy. This is sensitive and sometimes emotionally painful work. There is no room for mistakes. However, it is also very significant work.

4. *What is your favourite archive or collection you have seen or would like to see?*

The Victoria and Albert (V&A) Museum's online textile collections (see <https://www.vam.ac.uk/collections/textiles>). I have used this for remote research. The site is so easy to use, with so many beautiful quality images available for download (with copyright permissions clearly explained).

The NZ Fashion Museum (online at <https://nzfashionmuseum.org.nz/>) is another inspiration and a wonderful hub showcasing our own cloth creatives.

My favourite physical objects would be the chemical samples of plastics in the Alan MacDiarmid collection in the JC Beaglehole Room at the Victoria University of Wellington. For chemists, colour is an indication of a dramatic reaction - it shows stuff is happening. MacDiarmid said, "colour continued to be one of the driving forces in my future career in chemistry. I love colour".¹ I quote this, as I, too, have always loved colour. This chemist's perspective gave words to the thrill I feel when I see dramatic colour combinations.

5. *What do you most enjoy about the work you do?*

I enjoy having to be on top of all aspects of a collecting archive that is connected to a living community. I take a very systematic process-based approach to the heritage collections. I like to be strategic and consistent in my methods. But on the flip side, I also love storytelling and creative communication. I use both approaches in my role. My archiving and collection management is very systematic but my creation of exhibitions and displays requires an artistic bent. 2025 will be a big year of Sisters of Mercy anniversaries which we are planning for with different celebratory events.

6. *Do you have any recent notable acquisitions or taonga that you'd like to highlight to ARANZ members?*

I have discovered some unexpected items in the collections which have required research and appraisal to determine the merits of their continued presence in the Sisters of Mercy collections.

One example of this was a collection of rocks containing samples of gold ore. I was puzzled by their presence until I found an entry in the Annals from the Hokitika Convent which said:

"31 October 1878

Mr [John] Dowling presented [to the Sisters] a very fine crayon portrait of Most Rev. Dr Redwood, handsomely framed, also some fine specimens of quartz rock containing veins of gold".

The full picture became clear as I learned it was common practice in the late 19th and early 20th centuries for members of the community to support the ministry of the Sisters by giving them items of value that the Sisters could hold onto for re-sale in lean times.

Once I had the context and the provenance, the value of these rocks rose in my eyes. This was a lovely instance of the relationship that can exist between objects and records.

We kept the rocks.

ENDNOTES

1. The Nobel Prize, 'Alan MacDiarmid', 2000, available at <https://www.nobelprize.org/prizes/chemistry/2000/macdiarmid/biographical/>, accessed 8 July 2024.