

# Lives lived in silence: records and recordkeeping in Albert Camus's *The First Man*\*

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*Many writers have wondered why people, and people within organisations, create and keep records in the ways that they do. The factors that condition the recordkeeping behaviour of individuals have been examined, and the question has also been asked: how does the act of records creation condition a life? But what happens in developed societies when people and communities have limited capacity to create and keep records? Abundance of records is a well-known phenomenon. Absence of records – records never created in the first place – has received less attention. My focus in this article is on lives lived without records, in silence. Analysing silence is not easy. Where does one look for evidence? A novel by the French–Algerian writer Albert Camus offers, I suggest, some useful insights.*

## **Introduction: big ideas**

In light of the recent critical writing on 'the archive' from outside the profession, archivists must give some serious consideration to the rich and growing literature which explores the nature of history and evidence; of collective memory and identity formation; the relationship between representation and reality; the organisational and personal

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needs that influence the creation and maintenance of records; the psychological need to collect and preserve archives; and the impact of our knowledge of the past on our perceptions of the present, and vice versa.<sup>1</sup>

This call for broad-based enquiry in archives scholarship was made by Canadian archivists Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook in 2002. Archivists had lagged behind scholars in the social sciences and humanities, they said, in exploring these themes. Two issues of *Archival Science* under their editorship were designed to correct this imbalance. Their hope was for no less than an enquiry 'into the function of archives in society'.<sup>2</sup>

The editors of an Australian book, *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, have articulated a similar theme: that there is no area of human activity that is not shaped by archives and recordkeeping.<sup>3</sup> In seeking to demonstrate this, the book's authors draw on scholarship that in some instances easily pre-dates Schwartz and Cook's 2002 agenda. In particular, 'the organisational and personal needs that influence the creation and maintenance of records', and 'the psychological need to collect and preserve archives' (Schwartz and Cook) are not new questions. Particularly influential has been Sue McKemmish's article, published in 1996, 'Evidence of me ...'.<sup>4</sup> In that piece, McKemmish explores the nature of personal recordkeeping which, at one level, she says, has a role in 'evidencing and memorialising a life'. More broadly, it 'constitutes part of society's collective memory and cultural identity'.<sup>5</sup>

McKemmish and others have asked why people create and keep (and destroy) records the way they do. Why do some people keep and file everything, from birth certificates to bus tickets, and others not? How do we account for the diary-keeping urge? Why do some people keep all their letters, while others do not? How might all this be changing in the digital age? More fundamentally, they reflect upon what records *mean* in people's lives. How can we understand the relationship between recordkeeping, and personal and social identity; and between recordkeeping, and personal and collective memory?<sup>6</sup> How can we know about these things?

What is especially distinctive about McKemmish's work is that she threads into her argument the work not just of philosophers and sociologists, but novelists and biographers. From sociologist Anthony

Giddens she suggests that personal records can contribute to a sense of a 'narrative of the self'. Although this may never be written down, she says – quoting Giddens – it may be a way of “keeping a particular narrative going”. Tacitly ignoring the boundaries between fiction and non-fiction, she says that works of creative and reflective writing ‘address fundamental issues about the nature and role of records as “evidence of me” – why make records, why keep records, why burn them? – and explore personal recordkeeping behavior.’<sup>7</sup>

The work of British novelist Graham Swift features prominently. A character in his novel *Ever After* gives McKemmish the title for her article. Matthew Pearce sails for Australia leaving a large set of notebooks with his ex-wife: “Keep them, burn them – they are evidence of *me*.”<sup>8</sup> Referring to Swift’s work, McKemmish says that ‘the fundamental urge to tell the story, the instinct to account for ourselves, defines what it is to be human.’<sup>9</sup> A character in Swift’s novel *Waterland*, Tom Crick, says:

Children, only animals live entirely in the Here and Now. Only nature knows neither memory nor history. But man – let me offer you a definition – is the story-telling animal. Wherever he goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories, he has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right.<sup>10</sup>

Man is a ‘story-telling animal’, it seems. But is he? asks Michael Piggott. He notes that the story-telling thesis has many supporters in different disciplines but adds that ‘there seem to be equally eminent people who think they are wrong.’ Supporters of this thesis, he suggests, explain the creation and keeping of records in terms of grand generalisations (like McKemmish’s) which, he feels, leave a feeling of unease. At the other end of the scale one could undertake narrow case studies of recordkeeping behaviour by individuals or groups, behaviour so varied that the task would never end. So is the creation of personal records something we are ‘hardwired’ to do, something that is part of our make-up as human beings? Not necessarily. Archivists need to explain ‘why some people story-tell through records, others choose other modes, while others again seem happy to go through life in silence.’<sup>11</sup>

Is there a middle way between grand generalisations and narrow case studies? Exploring the idea of 'silence' might offer such a way. Jeannette Bastian and other writers have explored the concept of silence in records and have discussed the need to read records in ways that allow the voices of colonised people to be heard. All societies have a relationship with the act of recording in some form or format, Bastian believes, but her book on recordkeeping, archives and memory in the Virgin Islands (in the Caribbean) is a study of what happens when poverty, brutality and upheaval in various forms leaves that relationship deeply fractured. She notes the work of Caribbean authors who have found only meaninglessness, even 'historylessness', in the colonial past.<sup>12</sup>

Any source that throws some light on this state of silence, of 'historylessness', is useful – including life-writing and fiction. My intention here is to devote the rest of this article to an analysis of a single literary source, *The First Man*, the unfinished last novel of Albert Camus. The novel is worthy of this sustained attention because it is entirely about the relationship between records, personal and collective memory, and history: things that matter to us in the historical and recordkeeping professions. My intention is to offer a counterpoint to the notion that man is a 'story-telling animal'; to muddy that assumption somewhat by drawing out of the novel a series of perspectives on how life can be for people bereft of story-telling in any form.

Set in early twentieth-century French colonial Algeria, the novel's characters come from a poor, European, predominantly French-speaking community in the capital, Algiers. It was a community that, at least as it is presented to us by Camus, lacked not just written records, but also monuments, rituals and oral traditions as well – those other carriers of memory and identity that often take the place of written records in many societies. The work is based on Camus's own memories of growing up in poverty in a poor sector of Algiers and so we must consider the relationship between two lives, one real and one fictional, and keep in mind also the notion that the 'truth' is to be understood within the world that the writer creates. Whether or not the experience Camus describes can be accurately measured against the 'reality' of that place at that time, is not important. What matters is that the novel allows us imaginative entry into a world without the 'comforting marker-buoys

and trail-signs of stories' of which Graham Swift's character Tom Crick speaks. Crick thinks that man does not leave 'an empty space', and most of us would like to agree. Archivists, librarians, curators and historians are – usually – accustomed to abundance of material, not lack of it.<sup>13</sup> So what of the people who create and leave few or no records, who *do* leave an empty space, who live their lives in silence?

### **Albert Camus and *The First Man***

Novelist, playwright, journalist, philosopher, Albert Camus was born in 1913. The work we know as *The First Man* was discovered as an unfinished draft in a mud-caked briefcase at the scene of the car accident in France which killed Camus in January 1960. It was published in 1994 in France as *Le Premier Homme* and appeared in English translation in 1995 as *The First Man*.<sup>14</sup> The novel tells of Jacques Cormery, an Algerian-born Frenchman like Camus who grew up in poverty in Algiers, also like Camus. The community is that of colonial European working-class people known as *petit colon* ('small colonials').<sup>15</sup> In the novel's present, Cormery lives in France (Camus moved there in 1940) but he visits Algeria to try to learn about his father who, yet again like Camus's father Lucien, was killed in 1914 in the early stages of World War I. It was an experience almost identical to Camus's own. Friends, teachers and members of Camus's family appear as characters in the book, often depicted almost exactly to life (as far as we know). It was a wretchedly poor childhood but abundant in things that come for free: sky, stars, sun, and sea.

The book was written at a time of personal stress for the author. Ill, and desperately worried about the war of independence that had broken out in Algeria in 1954, his attitude to that conflict left him isolated politically from both the left and the right, and the fame brought by the award of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1957 seemed to him merely to underline the notion that he was not writing at his full strength. So he had high hopes for *Le Premier Homme*. It would be a return to creativity, an epic novel of Algerian history, his *War and Peace*, he joked to his friends. What we are presented with in the published version is a text established from Camus's draft and a first typescript by his wife Francine.<sup>16</sup> Included in the French and English editions are notes and marginalia made by

Camus on the further development and refinement of the work. These indicate that it would have encompassed the history of Algeria from the coming of the French (in 1830) up to World War II and the German occupation of France. Camus himself was active in the Resistance movement in Paris as editor of the clandestine newspaper *Combat*.

As an unfinished work, *The First Man* is a mixture of fiction, autobiography and epic history, all unreconciled. The narrative is more like a cluster of disparate narratives characterised by abrupt shifts and false starts. Moreover, it is more personal and emotional than the more austere novels such as *The Outsider* (1942) and *The Plague* (1947), which made Camus instantly famous. No reader in Camus's lifetime would have known him like this. His daughter Catherine Camus believed that as a very reserved man, her father would probably have masked his feelings in the final version.<sup>17</sup>

Despite its fragmentation the book is deeply satisfying and it convinces, one critic has suggested, *because* of its incompleteness. The man stands in the middle of his story, unable (for reasons I will elaborate upon soon) to make sense of his past; unable to see his own future and therefore to complete his story; and unable as a writer to resolve the artistic and ethical demands of fictionalising his own life.<sup>18</sup> What we see then between the covers of the book is not a finished 'novel' so much as memory caught in the act of doing what memory does. Archivaly speaking, it is a record in the process of becoming, as some have argued is so for all records.<sup>19</sup> Facing up to the difficulties of the work, Camus himself wrote in notes accompanying the manuscript: 'The book *must* be unfinished.'<sup>20</sup>

Camus began writing the book in 1959 but aspects of his childhood, and especially the figure of his mother, had appeared in his writing in various guises for many years, beginning with some of his early essays, published in two collections in the 1930s.<sup>21</sup> The story of his father's life and death, and of his family's antecedents in Algeria, France and Spain had also long been a subject of his interest. In 1942 he visited the cemetery at Saint-Brieuc, in Brittany, where his father was buried, and in 1952 he drove through the villages where his mother's forbears had lived, in the hilly country west of Algiers known as the Sahel. He found a family name on a tombstone, and even a living relative with whom

he could talk. In the same region is the village of Ouled Fayet, where his father's family had lived and where Camus had been born. There he tried to trace the origins of his father's family but apparently he discovered that the Algerian municipal authorities do not possess such information. 'In most cases the town halls of Algeria *have no archives*', he observed in the notes for *The First Man* (original emphasis).<sup>22</sup>

He continued to believe, and wrote into *The First Man*, the family legend that his forbears were from Alsace and emigrated to Algeria after the end of the Franco-Prussian War in 1871. Later, one of his biographers, Herbert Lottman, discovered records at the *État Civil* – a public records office – in Nantes (in France) which show that Camus's father's grandparents had been from Bordeaux and had been in Algeria a full generation earlier than Camus thought. Records offices like these had been recording the biographical details of every French citizen (including French Algerians) since the late eighteenth century. Why Camus did not realise this is something we shall never know, according to Lottman. When it came to studying Camus's formative years in Algeria, Lottman's task as biographer became more difficult. Algerian independence, gained in 1962, had gradually effaced the 130-year French presence in Algeria, and so vital records were lost and witnesses dispersed. The best record of Camus's childhood, Lottman decided, is the evocations by the author himself in those early essays, and in *The First Man*.<sup>23</sup>

About his father Camus knew almost nothing, and after the visit to Saint-Brieuc, longed to know more. The Saint-Brieuc episode becomes pivotal in the *The First Man*. Reading his father's headstone at Saint-Brieuc in 1942 at the age of 39, Camus ('Jacques Cormery') was shocked by the realisation that at age 29 his father had died younger than his present age. In the book, Jacques feels a wave of tenderness and pity, not that of a son towards a vanished father, but of a grown man towards an unjustly murdered child. Reading the simple words and dates inscribed on his father's headstone had set the 'statue' that represented Cormery's sense of himself, built and hardened over the years, now crumbling. Something here is 'not in the natural order of things', for in truth, 'there was no order but only madness and chaos when the son was older than the father.'<sup>24</sup> Looking about him he realised that

the soil was 'strewn with children who had been the fathers' of the greying men of his time. He decided it was not too late to try and learn more about this man who was suddenly alive to him, even if it was a 'strange, silent life'. This man now seemed 'closer to him than any other being on earth.'<sup>25</sup>

### In search of the father

For Cormery the search for his father would never be easy. In a family 'where they spoke little, and where no-one read or wrote', who would have talked to him about his young and pitiable father? Only his mother knew him and she had forgotten him, Jacques believed.<sup>26</sup> Thus it was for Albert Camus. Books and written records were virtually non-existent in the three-roomed apartment where he and his older brother grew up. There was no electricity or running water; the toilet was on the landing outside the apartment, a mere hole with a drain. Dominating the household was Catherine Sintès, the boys' maternal grandmother. The other adults living there were the boys' widowed mother, Catherine Hélène Camus, and their uncle, Étienne Sintès, a cooper. Catherine Camus had returned to her mother's house with her children after her husband Lucien left Algeria with his regiment to fight for France. He was fatally wounded at the Battle of the Marne in 1914. Catherine stayed at her mother's, and worked during the war in a cartridge factory. For years after that she was a cleaner.

None of these adults could read or write. Catherine Camus was partially deaf and, bizarrely, her brother Étienne had been born deaf and was mute until the age of 13 when a medical operation rendered him able to speak, with difficulty. Catherine could lip-read. In notes associated with the manuscript of *The First Man* Camus says that she had a vocabulary of about 400 words.<sup>27</sup> Poverty, disability and exhaustion made Catherine Camus extraordinarily timid, passive and silent. She allowed her mother to rear the children and Catherine Sintès did so harshly, with a whip. Camus later believed that his mother's deafness set in after a childhood attack of typhoid. Family story was that the shock of her husband's death brought an 'attack' (meningitis they thought, although that is a bacterial



disease) that affected her speech and made her mispronounce words. No one really knows; surviving records and memories yield no more than this.<sup>28</sup>

That scene - the bringing home of the news of the death of Camus's father - is starkly rendered in the novel. Catherine (called Lucie in this part of the draft; her husband is Henri) is sitting with her mother on the landing of the stairs leading to their poor apartment. The women are picking over lentils by the light of the window at the top of the stairs. The baby Jacques lies in a laundry basket sucking a carrot. A grave and well-dressed gentleman appears on the stairs and the surprised women put down their bowls and wipe their hands to greet him. He was carrying 'a sort of envelope'. The gentleman (the district mayor) asked for Mme Cormery and told her that he bore painful news. Her husband had died on the field of honour. France was mourning him and was proud of him.

Lucie Cormery had not heard him, but got to her feet and very respectfully offered him her hand; the grandmother stiffened, hand over her mouth, and was saying 'My God' in Spanish over and over again.

The gentleman holds her hand, murmured condolences, gives over his envelope and departs.

'What did he say?' Lucie asked.

'Henri is dead. He is killed.'

Lucie had stared at the envelope without opening it, neither she nor her mother could read; she turned it over, without a word, without a tear, unable to imagine this death, so far away in the depths of a mysterious night. And then she put the envelope in the pocket of her apron, passed by the baby without looking at him, went into the bedroom she shared with her two children, closed the door and the shutters of the window that looked out on to the yard, and stretched out on her bed, where she remained for many hours silent and without tears, squeezing the envelope in her pocket and staring into the dark at the misfortune she did not understand.<sup>29</sup>

Camus has fictionalised this scene, for he could not have remembered it (he is the baby with the carrot). But from growing up in that household he knows its routines and rhythms and into a typical day the cataclysm breaks, without drama. There is the click and scrape of lentils in the bowls, the burble of the baby, the man's inadequate murmurings, the grandmother's 'My God ... my god ...', and Lucie's silent retreat into the dark.

And there is the telegram. Instead of discarding it on the stairs she takes it and clasps it to herself in her room, squeezing it, as if to extract meaning from text she will never read because she can't. Tearlessly she stares into the future. It will be one of endurance, as grown up Jacques observes:

... of hard days working in the service of others, washing floors on her knees, living without a man and without solace in the midst of the greasy leavings and dirty linen of other people's lives, the long days of labour added up one by one to a life that, by dint of being deprived of hope, had become also a life without any sort of resentment, unaware, persevering, a life resigned to all sorts of suffering, her own as well as that of others.<sup>30</sup>

In a biscuit tin were put the few other bits and pieces signifying Henri's war service. There were 'dry, terse cards' Henri wrote to Lucie. As an adult Jacques could recite by heart. 'My dear Lucie. I am well. We're changing quarters tomorrow. Take good care of the children. I kiss you. Your husband.' A shell fragment split her husband's skull. In hospital he scrawled her a couple of cards. 'I am wounded. It is nothing. Your husband.' He died, and a nurse wrote that it was 'better that way' as he would have been left blind or insane. 'He was very brave.' Lucie was sent the shell fragment, and she kept it with the cards.<sup>31</sup>

Years later, Lucie could tell the adult Jacques almost nothing about his father.

'Papa?'

...

'Yes.'

'His name was Henri, and what else?'

'I don't know.'

'Didn't he have any other name?'

'I think he did but I don't remember.'

...

'He looked like me?'

'Yes, he was your spitting image. He had blue eyes.  
And his forehead was like yours.'

'What year was he born?'

'I don't know. I was four years older.'

'And you, what year were you born?'

'I don't know. Look in the family book.'<sup>32</sup>

Lucie had never been to France. The war was like an evil black cloud that had no causes. '[S]he did not know the history of France, nor what history was. She knew a little of her own history, barely knew the history of those she loved, and those she loved had to suffer as she did.' Apart from what was in the biscuit tin, nothing was left, 'neither in her nor in this house, of that man who was consumed by a cosmic fire and of whom there remained only a memory as imperceptible as the ashes of a butterfly wing incinerated in a forest fire.'<sup>33</sup>

To find out more, Jacques travels to Mondovi, a town in eastern Algeria. Outside the town was the vineyard that Henri Cormery had managed briefly in 1913-14. He finds little trace of his father's time there. The farmer Veillard who owns the property now is hospitable to Jacques, but he knows nothing of Jacques's father. The place had changed. 'We don't preserve anything here,' Veillard says. 'We tear down and we rebuild. We think about the future and forget the rest.'<sup>34</sup> In the village of Solférino,<sup>35</sup> Cormery found a small cemetery, its tombstones greened-over, illegible, and 'hardly distinguishable from the earth'. These were the graves of the European settlers of the region. Solférino was founded by 'forty-eighters', Parisian veterans of the revolution of 1848, Cormery is told by the local doctor. Fleeing poverty or persecution, they found only 'sorrow and stone'. The sun, the rain, disease and a hostile indigenous

population carried many of them off. It was an 'enemy land that refused to be occupied and took its revenge on whatever it found.'<sup>36</sup>

This section of the book is presented as Cormery's sleepy, discomfited reflections as he travels by plane back to France. His thoughts begin to spin and the prose becomes uncontrolled. In his mind he identifies the settlers of Solférino with other waves of European migration to Algeria, including his mother's Spanish ancestors and the Alsatians of 1871 who, as he thinks, were his father's. For generations, men had dug the earth, procreated, lived 'without ethics, without guidance, without religion' and disappeared, an 'enormous oblivion spread over them'. And that is what the land gave out, what fell from the sky: oblivion. People had disappeared without trace, 'locked within themselves'. Cormery would, after all, never know his father. His father was a mystery, although really the mystery was 'only the mystery of poverty that creates beings without names and without a past, that sends them into the vast throng of the nameless dead who made the world while they themselves were destroyed for ever.'<sup>37</sup>

Cultural historian Jay Winter implies that World War I was the tragedy that left the fatherless Jacques Cormery as 'the first man', having to find his way in life alone.<sup>38</sup> But it was not just that; it was also the decades of migration to Algeria. Biographer Herbert Lottman suggests that Europeans who migrated to Algeria 'virtually waived their ancestry'. Cormery thinks his migrant forbears had no love of their past and renounced it.<sup>39</sup> And migration rendered Cormery's father part of a 'tribe' of men who struggle in 'transient towns' for a foothold on one of history's 'oldest territories' and left few traces. That history was 'evaporating under the constant sun with the memory of those who made it'. Cormery had tried to escape this life of blind patience, 'without words, with no thought beyond the present', but he too was a member of that tribe, 'in a land of oblivion, where each one is the first man, where he had to bring himself up, without a father to share knowledge or memories with him'. Like all men born in that country, the only consecrated traces of his passage on earth would be 'the illegible slabs in the cemetery'.<sup>40</sup>

In the cemetery at Saint-Brieuc in France, 'memories and names were preserved in measured spaces', but in Algeria names are obliterated

by the wind and the sand. For Comery the Mediterranean separated two worlds in him – represented by the graves at Saint-Brieuc and Solférino – but he acknowledges finally that the world of the green-encrusted grave stones at Solférino were his ‘true homeland’ and with a strange sort of pleasure he realises that death will return him there and all memory of him will be lost. There is an enormous silence over this land, the silence of anonymity. It envelops everything.<sup>41</sup>

### The ‘story-telling animal’

We are a long way from the characters – those historically-minded obsessive notetakers and professional recordkeepers – quoted by Sue McKemish in ‘Evidence of Me ...’. Listen again to Tom Crick from Graham Swift’s *Waterland*:

Wherever [man] goes he wants to leave behind not a chaotic wake, not an empty space, but the comforting marker-buoys and trail-signs of stories, he has to go on telling stories, he has to keep on making them up. As long as there’s a story, it’s all right.

And listen to Jacques Cormery:

... poor people’s memory is less nourished than that of the rich; it has fewer landmarks in space because they seldom leave the place where they live, and fewer reference points in time throughout lives that are grey and featureless. Of course there is the memory of the heart that they say is the surest kind, but the heart wears out with sorrow and labour, it forgets sooner under the weight of fatigue. Remembrance of things past is just for the rich. For the poor it only marks the faint traces on the path to death.<sup>42</sup>

So much for trail-signs and marker-buoys. Camus admired Proust but his anti-Proustian message here is obvious: ‘Remembrance of things past is just for the rich’ (‘Le temps perdu ne se retrouve que chez les riches’).<sup>43</sup> As one critic has pointed out, Proustian characters, with their pictures and documents, are the inheritors of noble titles and revel in overabundance. They are never anonymous.<sup>44</sup> The young Jacques Cormery, however, grew up in poverty ‘as naked as death’, and feels

himself to be a different 'species' from a school fellow who has a holiday home in France with an attic full of family letters, souvenirs and photos. Even in her old age, when her sons could afford to support her in comfort, Jacques's mother refused to move to a better apartment and lived with only the bare necessities, nothing superfluous. In the wardrobe and the sideboard, among the buttons and balls of string, Jacques finds little more than a few old newspapers, a pension book, and an identity photo. 'There was nothing to see here, and little to say,' and that, he thinks, was why he knew so little about his parents. They had accumulated almost no records or possessions, and so – Jacques seems to be implying – had almost no story to pass on.<sup>45</sup>

Jacques has arrived at an insight familiar in anthropology, that the things people own are part of the 'language' they use to express themselves.<sup>46</sup> And as we know, deafness and illiteracy have robbed Lucie Cormery/Catherine Camus of spoken and written language as well. She cannot tell her story and, moreover, she hardly knows it. She knows nothing of history, the war, France or Algeria, the story of her family or her husband's family. She barely even knew her own age. 'Look in the family book', she tells her son, indifferently. Later, walking in the cemetery at Solférino, Cormery reflects that he, like the men coming before him, 'had never known those moments when a father would call his son, after waiting for him to reach the age of listening, to tell him the family's secret, or a sorrow of long ago, or the experience of his life.'<sup>47</sup> There had been no story-telling there either.

And yet – there *is* a 'family book' in the Cormery family, scant though it is.<sup>48</sup> There is a biscuit tin of relics and documents from the war. Even in this family, even in this wordless world, there are the makings of a narrative. The paradox of *The First Man*, of course, is that Camus actually writes it, that he *can* write it. The children of Henri Cormery do learn to read, and one of them – Jacques – is taken up by a talented school teacher and war veteran, who acts as a surrogate father. He encourages the boy to apply for a scholarship and sets him on the path of learning and knowledge. All this happened to Camus; he too rose into the recordkeeping class.<sup>49</sup> Education provided an escape from anonymity and silence and, furthermore, a means to set down in words the story of his family and his people. A struggle to read and to write, a struggle

for words and text, and their meanings, saturates the book. An illiterate widow clasps for hours the telegram bringing news of her husband's death. As an adult Jacques scrambles in the dust to read names on headstones that had been half worn away by wind and sand. All his life Jacques feels his mother's silence locks him away from her, when what he most wanted in the world 'was his mother to read everything that was his life and his being.' He dedicates *The First Man* to her: 'To you who will never be able to read this book.'<sup>50</sup>

The effaced graves at Solférino covered generations of people who had died 'locked within themselves', Jacques believes, and he identifies with those people. But, given a choice, who can really live forever locked within themselves? In the very act of writing Camus demonstrates that even he cannot, and with this novel declares his hope:

Rescue this poor family from the fate of the poor, which is to disappear from history without a trace. They were the Speechless ones. They were and they are greater than I.<sup>51</sup>

### **Conclusion: 'small stories'**

When Schwartz and Cook called for a greater understanding of how records function in society it was to suggest that at the heart of the relationship between archives and the societies that create and use them, is power. That is to say, the power of the present to control what will be known as the past, and the power of remembering and forgetting.<sup>52</sup> Camus's novel offers an insight into the lives of the powerless, people who, like his mother, could not record or manipulate their lives and their world through records. At a broader level, we observe the confusion of a man seeking to understand his past only to discover that (as he thought) his country *had no* municipal archives. Jeannette Bastian has shown how in the Virgin Islands people robbed of most of their written records turned to ritual and commemoration in order to reflect upon their past. She has shown how strong an oral culture can be in the absence of a written one.<sup>53</sup> But in Camus's novel, as we have seen, none of these apply. Eric Ketelaar suggests that individuals can resist 'Power' – power in the sense of government or socially dominant authority – by 'emigrating into their inner self' and reverting to private memories. By sharing these memories within their families and other trusted groups,

he says, 'remembrance of time past will stay alive.'<sup>54</sup> This cannot be said of the Algeria that Camus evokes in his novel. There, as we have seen, generations of people did die 'locked within themselves'. As the farmer Veillard says: 'We don't preserve anything here. We tear down and we rebuild'. Every new generation begins again, as if they were the first men.<sup>55</sup>

South African archivist Verne Harris noted that in 'Evidence of Me ...' Sue McKemmish set out to explore the factors that condition the recordkeeping behaviour of individuals. But, he argues, 'what about the equally valid and important question, "how does recordkeeping condition a life?"'<sup>56</sup> A further question we might then ask is: how does a *lack* of recordkeeping condition a life? What happens when people and communities can make only the most rudimentary records, if any? When each generation believes it must re-invent itself? How can we know – if no records are left to us? Camus's novel is something towards an answer. I say 'something towards' because it is not a complete answer, just a series of moments of insight or recognition: 'small stories' (*petits récits*), as has been said of McKemmish's piece.<sup>57</sup>

Camus himself was always suspicious of grand generalisations. In one of his early Algerian essays he wrote:

Between this sky and the faces turned toward it there is nothing on which to hang a mythology, a literature, an ethic or a religion – only stones, flesh, stars, and those truths the hand can touch.<sup>58</sup>

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> Joan M Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: the Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos 1-2, 2002, p. 6.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 8-9.

<sup>3</sup> Sue McKemmish et al (eds), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, Charles Sturt University, Wagga Wagga, 2005, p. iii.

<sup>4</sup> Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 24, no. 1, May 1996, pp. 28-45.

<sup>5</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 31, 28.

<sup>6</sup> See especially Michael Piggott, 'Human Behavior and the Making of Records and Archives', *Archives and Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 1, no. 0, March 2007. Also see: Catherine Hobbs, 'The Character of Personal Archives: Reflections



on the Value of Records of Individuals', *Archivaria*, vol. 52, Fall 2001, pp. 126–35. Within material culture studies, literature on the significance of 'things' (as opposed to records) is vast. For an introduction, see Chris Tilley et al (eds), *Handbook of Material Culture*, London, Sage, 2006.

<sup>7</sup> McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me ...', p. 31.

<sup>8</sup> *ibid.*, p. 6, quoting Graham Smith, *Ever After*, Picador, London, 1992, pp. 51–2.

<sup>9</sup> *ibid.*, p. 36.

<sup>10</sup> *ibid.*, p. 37, quoting Graham Swift, *Waterland*, Picador, London, 1992, pp. 62–3.

<sup>11</sup> Piggott, pp. 243–7.

<sup>12</sup> Jeannette Allis Bastian, *Owning Memory: How a Caribbean Community Lost Its Archives and Found Its History*, Libraries Unlimited, Westport, Connecticut, 2003, pp. 2, 8–9. See also Ann Laura Stoler, 'Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance: On the Content in the Form', in Carolyn Hamilton et al (eds), *Refiguring the Archive*, Kluwer Academic Publishers, Dordrecht, the Netherlands, 2002, pp. 83–100.

<sup>13</sup> On this, see Nils Nilsson, 'The Memory of a Person', *Comma: International Journal on Archives*, no. 1, 2004, pp. 179–82. I thank Michael Piggott for this reference.

<sup>14</sup> The first French edition was published by Éditions Gallimard in 1994. Hamish Hamilton published the first English edition in 1995. Penguin published an edition in 1996, reprinted in 2001. The delay in publication was because Camus's widow Francine feared that the fragile, unfinished work would give ammunition to Camus's detractors. In the meantime biographer Herbert Lottman was given access to the manuscript.

<sup>15</sup> The term  *pied-noirs*  (black feet) came into use from the mid-1950s to refer to French Algerians. It was not one that Camus himself chose to use. See Edward J Hughes (ed.), *The Cambridge Companion to Albert Camus*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2007, p. xvii.

<sup>16</sup> Albert Camus, *The First Man*, translated by David Hapgood, Penguin, London, 1996, p. vii. Abbreviated hereafter as *FM*.

<sup>17</sup> Herbert R Lottman, *Camus: a Biography*, Pan, London, 1981, pp. 6–7; Raquel Scherr Salgado, 'Memoir at Saint-Brieuc', *Modern Language Notes*, vol. 112, no. 4, September 1997, pp. 576–94; Catherine Camus, editor's note for the English translation of *FM*, p. vi–vii.

<sup>18</sup> Salgado, p. 578.

<sup>19</sup> Sue McKemmish, 'Are records ever actual?', in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years*, Ancora Press, Clayton, 1994, p. 200, also available at <[http://ourhistory.naa.gov.au/library/records\\_continuum.html](http://ourhistory.naa.gov.au/library/records_continuum.html)>, accessed 17 January 2009.

<sup>20</sup> *FM*, p. 235.

<sup>21</sup> Albert Camus, *L'Envers et L'Endroit* (The Wrong Side and the Right Side), 1937 and *Noces* (Nuptials), 1938. Both appear in Albert Camus, *Lyrical and Critical Essays*, edited by Philip Thody and translated by Ellen Conroy Kennedy, Vintage, New York, 1970.

<sup>22</sup> Lottman, p. 517; Olivier Todd, *Albert Camus: a Life*, Chatto and Windus, London, 1997, pp. 429–30, 517; *FM*, p. 226.

<sup>23</sup> Lottman, p. 9, p. xi.

<sup>24</sup> *FM*, p. 20.

<sup>25</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 21–2.

<sup>26</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>27</sup> *ibid.*, p. 250.

<sup>28</sup> Biographical details in this and the previous paragraph are taken from Lottman, chapters 1–3, and Todd, chapters 1–3.

<sup>29</sup> *FM*, pp. 55–56.

<sup>30</sup> *ibid.*, p. 46.

<sup>31</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 50, 57.

<sup>32</sup> *ibid.*, p. 48.

<sup>33</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 54, 57.

<sup>34</sup> *ibid.*, p. 139.

<sup>35</sup> Camus appears to use the place-name ‘Solférino’ interchangeably with Mondovi. Mondovi is certainly a real place (now known as Dréan), but Solférino is possibly his invention, named for a place in Paris. It has been suggested that in Camus’s mind this would be symptomatic of the staunchly Parisian roots of the 1848 settlers. See Edward J Hughes, ‘Building the Colonial Archive: the Case of Camus’ *Le Premier Homme*’, *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 30, no. 3, Fall 1999, p. 177. Note the anachronism however: the Battle of Solférino, fought in Italy and which gave its name to several places in France, did not occur until 1859.

<sup>36</sup> *FM*, pp. 144, 149, 148.

<sup>37</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 150–51.

<sup>38</sup> Jay Winter, ‘Kinship and remembrance in the aftermath of the Great War’, in Jay Winter and Emmanuel Sivan (eds), *War and Remembrance in the Twentieth Century*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000, pp. 52–4.

<sup>39</sup> Lottman, p. 7; *FM*, p. 149.

<sup>40</sup> *ibid.*, pp. 149–52.

<sup>41</sup> *ibid.*

<sup>42</sup> *ibid.*, p. 62.

<sup>43</sup> Albert Camus, *Le Premier Homme*, in *Cahiers Albert Camus*, vol. 7, Éditions Gallimard, Paris, 1994, p. 79.

<sup>44</sup> Salgado, p. 579.

<sup>45</sup> *FM*, pp. 162–3, 47–48.

<sup>46</sup> For an example of recent work, see Daniel Miller, *The Comfort of Things*, Polity, Cambridge, 2008, especially his first two ‘portraits’: ‘Empty’ and ‘Full’.

<sup>47</sup> *FM*, p. 152.

<sup>48</sup> The tradition of keeping a family book (*livre de famille*) dates back at least to the fifteenth century in France, Spain and Italy. It could combine the functions of account book, genealogy (marriages, births and deaths), and chronicle of a family’s fortunes. By the nineteenth century, as the family ceased to be an autonomous economic unit, *livres de famille* became rarer. In the twentieth century its functions were taken over by pre-printed diaries and ledger books but it seems that even a poor family like the Camus/Cormerys might keep one. I thank Martyn Lyons for assistance with information on *livres de famille*.

<sup>49</sup> I thank Christina Spittel for this lovely phrase.

<sup>50</sup> *FM*, pp. 238, 3.

<sup>51</sup> *ibid.*, p. 238.

<sup>52</sup> Schwartz and Cook, pp. 2-3, 5. See the two issues of *Archival Science*, vol. 2, nos 1 and 2, March 2002, and nos 3 and 4, September 2002, for how the authors under Schwartz and Cook's editorship explored the themes of archives, records and power.

<sup>53</sup> Bastian, pp. 9-12. Classicist Rosalind Thomas makes the additional point that in ancient Greece, literacy and 'orality' (which she defines as oral communication, composition and transmission) are not mutually exclusive. Communities may at the same time draw on sophisticated written *and* oral traditions. See her book, *Literacy and Orality in Ancient Greece*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1992, esp. pp. 3-5.

<sup>54</sup> Eric Ketelaar, 'Recordkeeping and Societal Power', in McKemmish et al (eds), *Archives: Recordkeeping in Society*, pp. 278-98 (quotes are on p. 278).

<sup>55</sup> Seth Graebner, *History's Place: Nostalgia and the City in French Algerian Literature*, Lexington, Lanham, Maryland, 2007, p. 232.

<sup>56</sup> Harris, p. 13.

<sup>57</sup> Frank Upward and Sue McKemmish, 'In Search of the Lost Tiger, by Way of Sainte-Beuve: Re-constructing the Possibilities of "Evidence of Me"', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 29, no. 1, May 2001, p. 25.

<sup>58</sup> Albert Camus, 'Summer in Algiers', published in *Noces* (Nuptials), 1938. See Thody, *Albert Camus: Lyrical and Critical Essays*, p. 90.