

ARTICLE



A societal provenance analysis of the First World War service records held at the National Archives of Australia

Anne-Marie Condé

National Archives of Australia, Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT

This article offers a societal provenance analysis of the First World War personal service records held at the National Archives of Australia as Commonwealth Records Series B2455. It describes the communities of people and communities of records with which the series has its origins. Since creation, the records have enabled intricate interactions between individuals, families, government agencies and communities. They have facilitated personal, local, and national processes of grieving and commemoration, and bridged spatial, temporal and emotional distances. They have contributed to national projects such as the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial, and the provision of pensions and support for veterans and their families. Their use by historians continues to shape our understanding of the history of the war. Access to the records helps build new personal identities, and new online communities of users. It is suggested that all these interactions are part of the history of the records we now have. The losses in the records, the gaps and silences, are also identified.

KEYWORDS

First World War; service records; societal provenance; digital access; commemoration

Introduction: ‘a drab little room’

This story begins with a mother and her baby. In September 1915 a reporter for the *Melbourne Age* spent a few hours observing the public enquiry office at the Department of Defence at Melbourne’s Victoria Barracks, on St Kilda Road. Here, members of the public could come to ask about the fate of a soldier relative or friend on active service. The reporter noticed that most of the enquirers were women. Occasionally a father would come through to ask about his son, but mostly it was the wives, mothers or sweethearts who took upon themselves the ‘sorrowful task’ of making those ‘final enquiries’.

This woman with the baby wanted to know the fate of ‘her Ted’, her husband, an infantryman who had been reported firstly as missing, later killed in action on Gallipoli. The initial erroneous report raised doubts in her mind about the veracity of the second, and she suggested that perhaps it was a case of mistaken identity. This was reasonable. The official news of casualties from Gallipoli was notoriously slow and families could be in suspense for months.¹ The officer working in the enquiry room that day, ‘himself an old soldier’, treated her with ‘infinite tact and sympathy’, but could give her no hope. ‘Sobbing bitterly, the woman left the building, her child clutched despairingly to her breast.’²

This 'drab little room' at Victoria Barracks was staffed 12 hours each day to take enquiries like this. The officer sitting there would have had the latest casualty lists in front of him, and likely also he would have taken particulars from enquirers and sent them back via messenger boy for further checking. So let's imagine that, cinematically, we could follow the boy carrying Ted's details. We might glimpse ahead of him as he passes along lengthy corridors until finally we find ourselves in a series of vast rooms full of paper: paper in piles and in files, paper in packets and bundles. There is paper on shelves almost to the ceiling, rows of card indexes in wooden cabinets, in-trays and out-trays on every desk. We lose sight of our messenger boy among dozens of military and civilian clerks, busy like ants, typing, filing, fetching and carrying. This was the Base Records Office, and it was here that all records of every enlistee – eventually over 416,000 of them³ – in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) were kept. Daily it received reports and cables from a network of offices in Cairo, Alexandria, Rouen and London, and daily it sent casualty lists to the press for publication, and despatched hundreds of letters and telegrams across Australia to the next-of-kin of members of the AIF. Base Records had been established on 17 September 1914, only about 5 weeks after war broke out, with the appointment of its officer-in-charge, Major James Lean.⁴ From a staff of 3 in October, by June 1917 Base Records was employing 328 staff, a strength of about one clerk for every thousand records.⁵ From September 1914, newspapers were reporting on its work because the press always took a keen interest in Base Records. It was the hub of all information about Australians serving abroad and anyone with a soldier or nurse in the AIF would have received regular communications under the signature of Major Lean. Indeed, a recent book about Base Records carries the (somewhat hyperbolic title) of *The Man who Carried the Nation's Grief: James Malcolm Lean and the Great War Letters*.⁶ Still, as Ken Inglis has pointed out, if we count a person's parents, children, siblings, aunts, uncles and cousins, every second Australian family was bereaved by the war.⁷ The quantum of records created to administer each enlistee's time in the AIF, and to convey news to next-of-kin was vast.

The timeliness and accuracy of the news Base Records sent to relatives of members of the AIF who were wounded, ill, missing or killed could only be as good as the news it received from AIF records offices overseas: Cairo, Alexandria, Rouen and London. Paul Dalglish has written about how information flowed between these offices and Melbourne, and has noted that where these systems became flawed or broke down, as they did during the Gallipoli campaign in 1915, the delivery of news to relatives was delayed and this in turn became a political issue in Australia.⁸ An alternative, unofficial, news source was established by the Australian Red Cross, which coordinated a network of volunteer 'searchers' based in Cairo and later in London to scour hospitals and camps for eye-witness accounts of the fate of soldiers. These reports were sent back to state-based Red Cross offices in Australia, and then to relatives who in desperation had turned to the Red Cross.⁹

So our young war widow was just one of hundreds of thousands of relatives dependent on accurate information. For her, it all came to an end at Base Records in Melbourne, and it is not hard to imagine her distress at learning the final truth in that drab little room, among strangers. She left, clutching her child, to return on foot, tram or train to her home in some suburb where she would have to convey the news to her extended kin. After that she had nothing to do, no body she could bring home, no funeral to arrange.

Eventually, she would have received a few tokens of her husband's life, parcelled up and sent via London and Melbourne. Who was Ted? We have no surname. Whoever he was, his service record certainly still exists, held by the National Archives of Australia (the Archives) and available for viewing online for everyone, including any living descendants of Ted and his wife.

Understanding First World War personal service records: a societal provenance approach

If we can follow Ted no further, at least we know that the record of his experience in the AIF did link and may still be linking his story with that of his family and community. These records were transferred to the Archives in 1993 and registered as Commonwealth Records Series B2455, 'First Australian Imperial Force Dossiers, 1914–1920'. There are 376,096 items (files) in the series, which covers 3,381.57 shelf metres at the Archive's Canberra repository. All are digitised.

This article is an enquiry into the history and continuing significance and use of these records. I might call it a 'cultural history' of B2455, but a more flexible approach would be to apply an understanding of the 'societal provenance' of the records. This concept was fully articulated by the Canadian archivist Tom Nesmith in 2006, and since then has been considerably extended in Australia by Michael Piggott. Both thinkers propose that we move beyond a view of archival provenance that focusses merely on the single person or institution responsible for inscribing the records. Instead, Nesmith suggests, records are the product of a variety of factors across their entire history, 'from literal inscription through to archival actions with records, and even to readings of the records in archives by their users.' We must look beyond the surface level to their social dimensions. People make and archive records in social settings for social purposes, he continues. Recordkeeping and archiving behaviour needs to be understood in the context of socially held assumptions, values, ideas and aspirations. These circumstances shape and are themselves shaped by the record that is created and transmitted over time, and used in the present.¹⁰ Michael Piggott is attracted to the flexibility of the societal provenance idea over the more rigid and theoretically dense records continuum model developed in Australia over the last several decades. 'Records have a back story and an afterlife' he notes. They have 'breadth and depth', and 'lead a double social life'. Creation, co-creation, interpretation and use of archives; the 'silences of non-creation'; the work of archivists and organisations: all are linked and layered within a societal provenance approach.¹¹ It is especially hospitable to the history of recordkeeping and archives, a field Piggott has pioneered in Australia.

Although Nesmith and Piggott have opened up a space for exploration of the societal provenance concept, few writers have taken up the challenge to offer case studies, or to posit regimes that allow for a richer description of provenance.¹² So here I will take B2455 as a case study into the possibilities. I will trace its origins and show how it underpinned myriad social interactions and administrative processes over many decades. I will explore the cultural agency the records had and have as an enabler of practices of grieving, commemoration and identity formation over time. My emphasis is on the community of records out of which emerged the records we now know as B2455. My interest is the societal 'work' that the records did, and do. A critical aspect of this was to bring immediate news to

families so that they could mourn their dead, or prepare for the return of the maimed, and to generally re-arrange their lives to cope with their losses and meet the future. The records helped to bridge distances: they brought news from distant fronts, facilitated mourning and memorialisation practices in the absence of a body to bury, and mediated in a myriad of practical ways between people and agencies of the state. As time passed, over the course of the twentieth century, records with purely administrative functions have enabled the formation of a shared memory of the First World War, and as ‘archives’, have helped to bridge temporal and psychological distances between the past and the present. Histories have been written from them, and individuals and families have used and shared them in processes of learning, self-discovery, identity-formation. This ‘silent work’ that records do, often poorly understood, is the subject of my enquiry in this article.¹³

‘Deceased was buried with full military honours’: the war years

Where shall we start then? With the personal and the particular. Let us move beyond the unknown ‘Ted’ to a man whose file illustrates very well how a particular record can bridge distance across time, space and experience. Louis Frederick Cooper was a farm labourer, and a Methodist, living in Longford, Tasmania, when he enlisted in October 1916. He was assigned to the 12th Battalion and embarked in May 1917. He fought briefly in France but was invalided to England in January 1918 with trench foot. He never returned to the front, but died of broncho-pneumonia at the military hospital at Tidworth, in Wiltshire, on 24 July 1918. He was 23.¹⁴

I have selected Cooper merely because his file is typical of any B2455 file today. It also shows how intimately linked were the emotional and practical impacts of his death. Foremost in any file are the multiple copies of the attestation form, which records a soldier’s personal particulars, the results of a medical examination (Louis Cooper had been previously rejected for service because of goitre, a widespread health problem in Tasmania because of its iodine-deficient soil¹⁵), his having signed an oath to serve in the AIF for the duration of the war plus 4 months, and a brief statement of his service. There are usually several copies the B.103 ‘Service and Casualty’ form, which was designed to capture information about a soldier’s movements, transfer between units, promotion, illnesses and wounds, and his ultimate fate. From Cooper’s B.103 we learn that he spent most of his service away from the front line, either in training or recovering from injury and illness. His family received word from Base Records about his trench foot diagnosis, but the cablegram announcing his death was sent not directly to the family, but, by established procedure, to the Commandant of the 6th Military District in Hobart. This action is recorded by Base Records in a stamp on the second last page of the file. Staff in Hobart would then have cabled the Methodist minister in Longford with a request to visit Cooper’s parents, William and Fanny, with the news. The hope was that relatives of members of the AIF would have had immediate spiritual comfort if needed.¹⁶ After that, his parents received a steady flow of correspondence from Base Records over a period of years. Because Cooper was buried in Britain, well out of danger, he received a relatively elaborate funeral and to his parents was sent a detailed account of the ceremony, noting the exact location of the grave at Tidworth. His family escaped the horror visited on those of the missing, those with no known grave. His effects were parcelled up and sent from London home to Longford. The bundle included postcards, photographs, letters, a diary,

a Bible and various small personal items. Fanny wrote to find out what had happened to a wristlet watch and money belt given to him as keepsakes, but they never came to light. Like all relatives of the dead, the Coopers received a copy of the booklet *Where the Australians Rest*, featuring descriptions and sketches of the most prominent cemeteries in which Australians were buried or commemorated. Also sent to them was an official photograph of Cooper's grave, his campaign medals, and a bronze plaque and parchment scroll issued by British authorities to all deceased soldiers of the British Empire.¹⁷ The despatch and receipt of each parcel was noted with a stamp on the file. Every file of every deceased member of the AIF documents these exchanges: the mementoes would be the only direct, tangible link to the dead – in the absence of a grave they could visit – by which families could mourn. In approximately 60,000 Australian households, in probably every town and suburb in the country, would such things have been kept on mantelpieces and bedside tables, in cupboards and drawers.¹⁸

Meanwhile, there were financial procedures to work through. The record of Cooper's service kept by Base Records established that as his next-of-kin, Fanny Cooper was eligible for various kinds of financial support. Copies of Cooper's will and death certificate were furnished by Base Records so that his family could claim insurance benefits from the Mutual Life and Citizens' Assurance Co Ltd and the Independent Order of Rechabites. A war gratuity card kept by Base Records validated Fanny's claim of his war gratuity, which was a one-off payment to members of the AIF or their next-of-kin, made after the war, in recognition of honourable service, and separate from Repatriation benefits. Fanny Cooper applied in August 1919 and in October 1919 was paid £65 9 s 6d. The processing of payments was done not at Base Records but locally, in Cooper's case by the 6th Military District. His war gratuity file also shows that prior to embarkation Louis allotted her a portion of his pay, four shillings a day later reduced to three, which she claimed at the post office in Longford. After his death she claimed his deferred pay and a 'war leave' payment of £10 7 s. The paperwork shows that she was also receiving a pension from the Repatriation Department of 30 shillings a fortnight.¹⁹ Historians have paid scant attention to the financial aspects of service in the AIF. There is voluminous scholarship now on the impact of grief for those left behind, but there is much work still to be done on how families picked up the financial pieces to cope with the loss of a breadwinner. If nothing else, Cooper's war gratuity file reminds us of the weary time Fanny Cooper had, filling in forms and writing letters.

'2,308,070 distinct records on charge': the post-war years

After the war, records deemed worthy of retention from Australia's overseas records offices were transferred to Melbourne, and along with the records Base Records already had, they enabled the administration of soldiers' affairs for many decades. James Lean left the position of officer-in-charge in 1922, but noted in his final report that his office still received a minimum up to 600–700 pieces of general correspondence each week, in addition to 200–250 about deceased soldiers, and 200 on 'every conceivable subject affecting AIF records'. Attending to the needs of the bereaved was the office's main focus. Reports on the burial location of the soldier were sent at a rate of 40 each week; photographs of the burial place at 50 each week. Base Records held 43,000 photographic negatives of graves.²⁰ Where new remains were identified and re-buried, Base Records

notified the families. In 1922 there were 2,000 memorial scrolls to issue to next-of-kin, 6,000 memorial plaques and 39,000 campaign medals. For the living, the office sent out duplicate discharge papers to soldiers on request (needed as identity papers when applying for employment or unemployment or charitable benefits). Just as unrelenting were demands from the Repatriation Department, which sent 100–150 weekly requests for information. Each of these was a request for copies or originals (which were returned) of documents from an ex-serviceman's war record. Repatriation was a vast system of social welfare in Australia and its scope was for many years far greater than any civilian pensioning. The legal accountability of every single claim, not just from ex-soldiers but from widows and other dependents, rested on the records held by Base Records. In all, Lean estimated that in 1922 his department held over 750,000 personal files, and over 1.5 million correspondence and policy files, and over 4,000 copies of orders and regulations. The total was a massive 2,308,070 'distinct records on charge'.²¹

So, the demand for Base Records' services was not in decline. A report it prepared in 1931 gives us a startling insight into just how significant its work was at that time. Years after the war, the information it provided was still intimately woven into the texture of Australian life. For instance, there was still a constant need from various authorities for copies of soldiers' wills and death certificates. This was routine. More troubling were the wives and fiancées who wrote asking if their husbands or future husbands had suffered venereal disease. Men asked for certificates that they had *not* suffered from venereal disease. 'Mothers-in-law elect' wrote asking if an ex-soldier was single on enlistment, or whether he had married during service abroad.²² Police asked for records of military convictions. Neglected children's departments asked for help in tracing defaulting fathers, and enquiries were received from Governors of Gaols and Masters of Lunacy.²³ Clearly, information like this mediated the relationship between people and agencies of the state, and was critically influential in how families made intimate and difficult decisions about their futures. Would a girl's family insist she breaks off her engagement if her fiancé had syphilis? Very possibly. Each one of these letters could represent some family tragedy somewhere, lost to history now. None of this correspondence appears to have survived (although I have not found any record of its destruction either). Had it survived, its value to the social history of mid-twentieth-century Australia would have been incalculable.

Unfortunately for Base Records, the demand coincided with diminished spending on defence in Australia during the 1920s and early 1930s. The war was over, and Defence authorities were constantly seeking reductions and efficiencies in process. There was an expectation that the work of the unit would shrink towards a function with a definite end in sight. However, attempts to streamline operations were hampered by extremely cumbersome filing systems. At that time – the 1920s – there was not one file per person for each member of the AIF, as we might assume from the structure of B2455 today. Attestation papers, duplicate attestation papers did form a 'core' record, it would appear, but in addition, there were voluminous medical and other records and correspondence on each enlistee which were all filed separately. Since 1917 they had been arranged by arms of the service, meaning that all files of infantry personnel were filed together in alphabetical order, and likewise the light horse, field artillery medical corps and so on.²⁴ This had been acceptable when there were hundreds of clerks in Australia and overseas to maintain the system. But in 1926, staffing at Base Records was down to just 30.²⁵ Each request for information from the Repat Department, averaging over 700 a month in

1930–31, required an ‘intimate knowledge’ of the ‘intricacies’ of the records.²⁶ In May 1930, Defence Department officials finally accepted that the solution would have to be a process of both amalgamation and culling of records, so as to concentrate ‘all important personal documents in one folder.’²⁷

The most obvious result of this was that the overseas copies of soldiers’ attestation papers (known as the ‘London’ attestation paper) were filed with the Australian version.²⁸ This explains why there are usually duplicate attestation papers on B2455 files. Likewise, duplicate B.103s were amalgamated and filed on the personal file. Certain sorts of medical records which had been filed separately were also added to the soldier’s personal file. Some records were culled *from* the file. For instance, thousands of ‘Applications to enlist in the AIF’ were removed. These forms were filled out when a potential enlistee first presented himself at a recruiting depot. If he passed certain basic requirements (health standards, age, natural-born British origins) he would receive a second medical examination and be formally attested in the AIF. With successful enlistees, the original practice was to keep these application forms with each soldier’s attestation forms, but from 1931 they were extracted and apparently destroyed. It was probably felt that there was nothing on the application forms that was not later captured on the attestation.²⁹ This process appears to have happened over a long period only as each file was handled in the course of other business, and was not complete. (Occasionally, we notice a B2455 service record with an application to enlist still on it.³⁰) The fate of records culled or kept separate from the personal files can be hard to trace.³¹ For instance, there were once 10,000 certificates of marriages of members of the AIF abroad. There were 6,000 syphilis case sheets, and 65,000 cards documenting patients treated at the Australian Dermatology Hospital at Bulford, in Wiltshire, which was the main hospital in England for members of the AIF with venereal disease. (Our man Louis Cooper was treated for syphilis at Bulford in May 1918).³² All of this re-organisation and disposal helps to explain the duplications, curious omissions and general haphazard nature of the documents within the service records as we find them today.

‘The transfer ... to the War Memorial will be of great advantage’: the commemorative function

In the post-war years, records held by Base Records underpinned a number of historical and commemorative projects. For many years it fielded requests from the staff of Charles Bean, official historian (based in Sydney), who needed biographical information about members of the AIF mentioned in the histories.³³ In the 1920s, Base Records routinely received requests from local authorities for lists of fallen men in their districts to help construct local war memorials.³⁴ It also assisted the Shrine of Remembrance in Melbourne in compiling a list of the Victorian war dead.³⁵ Few families would ever visit graves overseas so the naming of the dead on war memorials was vitally important for many. It gave them a place to grieve. Ken Inglis notes that the practice of erecting local war memorials in Australia began during and after the Boer War and continued on throughout the twentieth century. Local committees dedicated much effort to obtain an agreed list of names (not just of the dead, but often of the survivors as well).³⁶ Where details were hard to verify and local knowledge patchy, committees would write to Base Records. So, quite obviously, Base Records’ records facilitated processes by which the

living could participate in processes of communal grieving and bridge the distance between the actual grave overseas, and the surrogate in Australia.

On an even larger scale, there is the relationship between Base Records and the Australian War Memorial in Canberra. In the interwar years and beyond, these two agencies had parallel roles. Both had responsibility for enabling the dead to be remembered by the living. As we have seen, pressure of space at Base Records in Melbourne in the 1930s had been relieved by the re-organisation and disposal of large quantities of records, but it was not enough. Entirely different accommodation for the unit was needed, so in March 1938 the Memorial's Director, John Treloar, was asked if it could house Base Records in its new building in Canberra, which although not yet open to the public, had been occupied since early 1936 by administrative staff. Treloar readily agreed.³⁷ There was enough space in Canberra and he could see other advantages as well. Surviving correspondence suggests that the Memorial hoped one day to acquire the AIF personal records for its own collection, so there was a hope that physically accommodating Base Records might help establish this claim. The Memorial had always associated what it called the 'historical' records of the AIF, which it already had, with 'personal records' still needed for 'administrative purposes' by Base Records. The latter should eventually pass to the Memorial, it believed. Indeed, when planning its Canberra building, it made specific allowance for the transfer of Base Records' records.³⁸ Moreover, the Memorial was engrossed at this time in the task of compiling the Roll of Honour: the list of names of the dead cast in bronze proposed for installation in the commemorative area. (This was expanded later to include the dead of all wars and some peacekeeping operations.) The Roll of Honour posed many complex problems and took so long that ultimately, the first panels were not installed until the 1960s. At issue in the 1930s was who would be eligible, how to arrange the names, and how to obtain complete and accurate lists of names.³⁹ Much effort went into collecting names, and information came from a variety of sources including cemetery registers, the Repatriation Department, the public, and from Base Records itself.⁴⁰ The transfer of Base Records 'will be of great advantage', Treloar wrote in a letter to Defence, 'with the compilation of the draft Roll of Honour'. The prospect of having the resources of Base Records at hand to assist in verifying details was gratifying.⁴¹

So: in 1938 Base Records was transferred to Memorial and housed on the lower ground floor, adjacent to its own collections library and archive material. The office was staffed with a mixture of Melbourne and locally hired staff.⁴² Treloar withheld from Defence the small fact that an allocation of space had always been made for Base Records, and charged rent for the 5,500 square feet it occupied. He always had an eye towards financial advantage for his institution.

'I am now able to see that my dad was a real person': records become archives

By the early 1950s, the accumulation of the Memorial's Second World War collections exerted such strain on its storage capacity that it found it impossible after all to contemplate acquiring records held by Base Records. In 1954, Base Records was asked to move. The Department of Defence took 4 years to find a place for it but in late 1958 arrangements were made to house the unit back in Melbourne at Albert Park Barracks.⁴³

Now it sat with its younger sibling: the Central Army Records Office (CARO) which managed Second World War personal records.⁴⁴ CARO eventually assumed responsibility for all personal records of soldiers in peace time and in war from 1901 onwards. In 1986, it estimated it had 27,500 active files and 2.8 million 'inactive files' from previous conflicts and eras.⁴⁵ It sought to modernise its access to its active files using early forms of digital control, while at the same time entering into discussions with the Australian War Memorial and the Archives about transferring older records into archival custody. The Memorial was enthusiastic and wanted *all* army personal files from 1900 to 1947 transferred to its custody. It argued in 1983 that under its legislation, revised in 1980, the Memorial was required to develop a national collection of historical material relating to Australian military history. Just as it had in 1938, it suggested that its current archival holdings justified the transfer of records that would be a 'perfect complement' to its current holdings. It also wanted them because it was still constantly receiving public enquiries about names on the Roll of Honour, and 'having the backup of the CARO files . . . would considerably rationalise our work.'⁴⁶ In reality, the Memorial did not have the space to house the records nor the staff to service public and government enquiries on them, and the acquisition seems to have been quietly shelved. Meanwhile, the Archives had been working with CARO since the 1970s to establish disposal schedules for CARO personal files, and with the Memorial out of the picture, serious negotiation to transfer First World War service records to the Archives began in the late 1980s. It was achieved when the records were transferred from CARO's facility at 83 Batman Street, West Melbourne to the Archive's Canberra repository, in the suburb of Mitchell, in August 1993.⁴⁷

In 1990 CARO still received 600 enquiries per month on them, often concerning medal entitlements but more frequently, family history as well.⁴⁸ The Archives asked CARO to stop adding this correspondence to soldiers' files, noting that section 26 of the *Archives Act 1983* prohibited correspondence dated 25 years after the last action to be added to a file. CARO agreed that the procedure was not satisfactory but argued that it was still the most convenient way of dealing with ongoing action.⁴⁹ In practice, the Archives had little power to enforce the Act, and the best solution was to transfer the records into its custody. Concern about how to resource public interest in the records, as well as considerations of space, were probably the main reasons for the transfer to Canberra rather than to the Victorian office of the Archives, as had originally been proposed. Another driver was the interest shown by the Australian Defence Force Academy in Canberra, which, with the considerable energy of historian Peter Dennis, was establishing an 'AIF database', drawing on newly digitised biographical records held by the Australian War Memorial, and now the records being transferred to the Archives.⁵⁰ Members of the public would be able to pay for a summary of the record of the service of a relative on the AIF database and, for a moment, both the Archives and Defence pondered if public enquiries about the service records could be channelled in that direction.⁵¹ Ultimately, the Archives pushed ahead with the work of providing access to the records itself (as indeed it was obliged to do under its Act). The series was registered in Melbourne in 1993 as B2455, and a series registration prepared outlining the provenance and historical use of the records. The Archives determined upon an accumulation date range of 1914–20, although as we have seen, the records covered extensive action for many decades after that. By the time the records were transferred, all

the complex culling and amalgamation of records, which had been authorised by Defence way back in 1931, had been done by (or at least done up to the point where no more resource could be devoted to it) with the aim of consolidating the most important papers about an enlistee's service on to one file. There was now one file per person. However, managing the records was complex because even as the Archives undertook the listing and repackaging of the files (at times calling on the services of volunteers), public interest in them was high. Access was opened to the public through a photocopy service. A flat fee was charged to locate and post a copy to an enquirer. This service was gradually phased out after digitisation was complete. The digitisation project was dubbed a 'Gift to the Nation' and launched by John Howard in 2007.

Letters from members of the public to the Archives at that time demonstrate that many people found access to the service records profoundly healing and affirming. Some noted that a service record told them a great deal about a relative they had hardly known.

My mother never knew her father and we are still unsure whether he knew of her. It has taken a long time to get to this point and . . . hopefully we will locate where he lay to rest and perhaps even find her half-brother.

It was nice to fill in some of the gaps as it wasn't a topic of family conversation.

I know more about him now than when he was alive – just love these records.

I now am able to see that my dad was a person who, unfortunately, I did not see in my younger years – a man of courage and strength. I feel that I will be able to be guided by his characteristics for the rest of my life.⁵²

These snippets and others were collated as background information for the Prime Minister's Office prior to the launch of the digitised records by Prime Minister Howard. In fact, the Archives has not undertaken any evaluation of the emotional, or 'affective', impact of the records (although reference archivists frequently encounter these responses as they interact with individual readers). At that time, what had been known as the 'affective turn' in the humanities and social sciences had not reached archives, but since then the study of affect in archives has developed. Archivists have begun to enquire into psychological and physiological responses to archives, recordkeeping practices, archives as physical places, and the absence, displacement or loss of archives.⁵³ Much work could be done on how archivists could, or should, anticipate and incorporate affective responses into regimes of archival description and public programming.

Easier to measure is the use of B2455 by military and social historians. No First World War unit, battle or campaign history, or military biography, can be written without it now. It is used constantly by the media, students, writers and family historians. Other collecting institutions refer to the files in describing their own holdings of militaria. Especially notable is the development of military prosopography (group biography) by Peter Stanley in three works: *Men of Mont St Quentin*, *Digger Smith and Australia's Great War*, and *The Lost Boys of Anzac*.⁵⁴ Broadly similar is Bruce Scates' and Rebecca Wheatley's *World War One: a History in 100 stories*. Another example is Scott Bennett's *The Names of the Nameless*, which examines the grief experienced by families of men posted as missing, their remains never found.⁵⁵ On a larger scale is the digital project 'Diggers to Veterans', a Monash University project funded by the Australian Research Council which offers a 'cradle-to-grave medico-demographic study' of 10,000

Victorian men who served in the First World War.⁵⁶ Digital possibilities have also been explored by the Archives itself with the launch in 2008 of 'Mapping Our Anzacs', which drew location metadata for each item in B2455 and plotted it on to Google maps. Users could search not just by name, but by place of birth or enlistment. They could also add comments and photographs of their own. This functionality was expanded with the re-launch of the site as 'Discovering Anzacs' in 2014, one of the Archives' Centenary of Anzac projects. Under an agreement with Archives New Zealand, New Zealand service records were added. Users can now also arrange the records in groups of their own devising (family, community and so on) and can transcribe the records: thus (it is hoped) unlocking the data within the records and making it available for other users. Under partnership arrangements, B2455 data is also available to subscribers to the commercial family history provider Ancestry, and, in the United Kingdom, the Imperial War Museums project, 'Lives of the First World War'. Meanwhile, 'Honouring Our Anzacs' is a private project using B2455 data and invites users to regard the project as a digital memorial. Users can pin poppies against names, and generate commemorative certificates to add to their family archives.⁵⁷ All of these modes of digital access are part of a broader movement in Australia and elsewhere towards not just digitisation of historic records, but crowdsourced input and transcription. By transcribing and adding to the record, users can feel they have a stake in it. Power shifts from the archives as the sole authority as the holder of the physical record, to authority being shared between the archives and users.

Conclusion

'Historical memory has been wrested away from the "great men" in history', writes Carolyn Holbrook, 'and put into the hands of the masses.'⁵⁸ So too have archives. And yet amidst all the rich scholarship on the impact of the First World War, the archival legacy, until recently, has scarcely rated a mention. Holbrook herself, in her 2014 chapter on the First World War and family history, concentrates on letters and diaries privately held in families, not access to public archives. The 2018 conference 'Recording, Narrating and Archiving the First World War', which stimulated the papers in this special issue of *Archives & Manuscripts*, is a welcome sign that things are changing. We must hope that these findings can move from the specialist to a more general audience. After all, national and state archives, and libraries, have been expanding access to their holdings of military-related records for many years. Governments continue to pour money into the coffers of the Australian War Memorial and the National Archives to make war-related records more accessible. And why not? That is where public demand lies. But that demand does not come from nowhere. Who is tracing a potential connection between the development of the Anzac legend (known in its extreme form as 'Anzackery') and access to archives?⁵⁹ There are power relationships there that deserve scrutiny. Consider for a moment that all the 376,096 items in B2455, documenting the experience of Australian enlisted personnel in the First World War were fully digitised by 2007. But 95,051 separately held files of men *rejected* for military service will not be digitised until late 2020. The 6,347 files of Australian civilian munitions workers who volunteered for work in British factories and, separated for years from their families, suffered long hours of hard physical work

in poor conditions, are nowhere near complete.⁶⁰ Is there a hierarchy of privilege at work here? Certainly. Archives are about power and always have been, as Joan Schwartz and Terry Cook pointed out many years ago.⁶¹

Archives are social constructs. What comes out of the box in the reading room, or pops up on the screen, is a result of many socially constructed processes. This article has sought to describe some of them in order to demonstrate the active – and not passive or neutral – ways in which archives shape knowledge and memory. If historians are prone to overlook this insight, it would help if archivists would make information about the history and provenance of records easier to find, and if they could be more open about their decisions and interventions in the record. The Australian series system does offer a means by which multiple provenance can be captured, but can it – should it? – acknowledge, for instance, the powerful affective nature of some records for potential users? In our descriptive standards, how committed are we to the notion that records ‘are always in the process of being made’?⁶² Should the series note for B2455 have been updated in 2014 to note that the ‘Discovering Anzacs’ website offers a new mode of access? Indeed, should it be corrected and expanded on the basis of my own research for this article?

Finally, what of the impact of digital access on popular understandings of history, and on personal family and community identity? There is much work to be done to understand how the sharing, manipulating, scraping and visualising of data may be enlarging or distorting our relationship with our history. A study of the crowd-sourced data in the Archives’ ‘Discovering Anzacs’ website might be a reasonable start, to evaluate what people have actually discovered and shared. This does not alter the archivists’ fundamental task of describing records in context. This is more important than ever in a world where pieces of data can so easily float free of their origins, and where trust in authentic records is so needed and so precious.

Notes

1. Peter Stanley, *The Lost Boys of Anzac*, Newsouth, Sydney, 2014, pp. 148–227.
2. *The Age*, 14 September 1915, p. 9.
3. Ernest Scott, *Australia during the war*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1941, p. 889.
4. *A Report upon the Department of Defence from the first of July 1914 until the thirtieth of June 1917*, Government Printer, Melbourne, n.d., p. 211. This implies that the office was established on 20 October 1914. In fact, Lean’s appointment to Base Records was announced in the *Commonwealth of Australia Gazette*, no. 784 on Saturday 19 September 1914 (p. 2230). See also ‘Officer’s Record of Service’, B4717, LEAN/JAMES MALCOLM. Newspaper reporting: *Brisbane Daily Standard*, 23 September 1914, p. 5. In general, see Carol Rosenhain, *The Man who Carried the Nation’s Grief*, Big Sky Publishing, Newport NSW, 2016. All archival references in this article are to records in the collection of the National Archives of Australia unless otherwise noted.
5. *Report upon the Department of Defence*, p. 211.
6. Rosenhain.
7. Ken Inglis, *Sacred Places: War Memorials in the Australian Landscape*, The Miegunyah Press, Melbourne, 1998, p. 97.
8. Paul Dalglish, ‘Keeping the AIF’s Personnel Records’, in Jean Bou et al., *The Australian Imperial Force*, Oxford University Press, South Melbourne, 2016, pp. 175–91; and see also

- his essay in this special issue: ‘Recordkeeping in the First Australian Imperial Force: the Political Imperative’.
9. Melanie Oppenheimer and Margaret Kleinig, ‘“There is no trace of him”: the Red Cross, its Wounded and Missing Bureaux and the 1915 Gallipoli campaign’, *First World War Studies* 2015, vol. 6, no. 3, pp. 277–92.
 10. Tom Nesmith, ‘The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal-European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice’, *Archival Science*, vol. 6, no. 3–4, 2006, pp. 351–3. See also Nesmith’s earlier work: ‘What’s History Got to Do With It?: Reconsidering the Place of Historical Knowledge in Archival Work’, *Archivaria: the Journal of the Association of Canadian Archivists*, vol. 57, Spring 2004, pp. 1–27, especially p. 12 where he acknowledges the critical work of Australian archivists Peter Scott and Chris Hurley in recognising and forging regimes to describe the multiple provenances of institutional records.
 11. Michael Piggott, *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays*, Chandos Publishing, Oxford, 2012, pp. 3–4, 175–95.
 12. However, in anthropology and archaeology, there is a broadly similar field of enquiry known as ‘object biography’. This concept is founded on the insight articulated by Igor Kopytoff and Arjun Appadurai that material objects have a ‘social life’ that can be researched and explored. They can be interrogated for their interactions with people and systems; for the history of their manufacture, use, preservation and deterioration; and for the impacts they have as they move through place, space and time. The emphasis is on the agency objects: people make objects and objects can make people. See Arjun Appadurai (ed.), *The Social Life of Things*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1986. This volume contains Igor Kopytoff’s influential essay ‘The Cultural Biography of Things: Commoditization as Process’, pp. 64–89. Museum curators have taken to object biography with considerable enthusiasm. See, for example, Karen Schamberger et al., ‘Living in a Material World: Object Biography and Transnational Lives’, in Desley Deacon et al. *Transnational Ties: Australian Lives in the World*, Canberra, ANU Press, 2008, available at <<https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hcg1>>, accessed 27 December 2019.
 13. I have explored some of these themes in some of my own earlier work. See in particular: ‘Capturing the Records of War: Collecting at the Mitchell Library and the Australian War Memorial’, *Australian Historical Studies*, vol. 37, no. 125, April 2005, pp. 134–52; ‘Imagining a Collection: Creating Australia’s Records of War’, *reCollections: Journal of the National Museum of Australia*, vol. 2, no. 1, March 2007, available at <https://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_2_no_1/papers/imagining_a_collection>, accessed 27 December 2019; and ‘A “gift to the nation”: the diaries and notebooks of C. E. W. Bean’, *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 39, no. 2, Nov 2011, pp. 43–64, available at <<https://publications.archivists.org.au/index.php/asa/article/view/10157>>, accessed 27 December 2019.
 14. B2455, COOPER L F.
 15. MT1486/1, COOPER/LOUIS FREDERICK. See also Erin Cooper, ‘What is the Origin of the Joke About Tasmanians Having Two Heads?’, available at <<https://www.abc.net.au/news/2019-06-13/curious-hobart-origin-of-two-headed-tasmanian-myth/11197982>>, accessed 28 December 2019.
 16. *Report upon the Department of Defence*, p. 213. See also Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Thomas Nelson Australia, West Melbourne, 1980, pp. 25–6.
 17. *Where the Australians rest: a description of many of the cemeteries overseas in which Australians, including those whose names can never now be known, are buried*, Department of Defence, Melbourne, 1920; ‘1914–18 Memorial Plaque’, available at <https://www.awm.gov.au/articles/encyclopedia/memorial_scroll/plaque>, accessed 5 September 2019.
 18. On the significance of photographs and information about graves and cemeteries, see Bart Ziino, *A Distant Grief: Australians, War Graves and the Great War*, University of Western Australia Press, Crawley, 2007, pp. 82–9, 139–40.
 19. P1868, T1864.

20. 'Summary of activities of Base Records Office', n.d., c. June 1929, MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
21. 'Report by Major J.M. Lean to Adjutant-General', 4 December 1922, B197, 1925/1/54.
22. 'Report of the Committee appointed ... to formulate instructions for the disposal of documents held by Base Records', 19 January 1931, B1535, 753/1/34.
23. 'Summary of activities of Base Records Office'.
24. *Report upon the Department of Defence*, pp. 212–3.
25. Report, Base Records to Adjutant General, 4 February 1926, MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
26. Report by W. Mackintosh to Adjutant-General, 27 June 1929, MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
27. Report by A. Robinson to Adjutant-General, May 1930, MP742/1, 396/1/1133; 'Report of Committee: appointed ... to formulate instructions ...', January 1931, B1535, 753/1/34. This report and its appendices demonstrate that the numbers of records held by Base Records then was vast compared to what was eventually transferred to archival custody.
28. For example, in January 1931 1,300 'London' attestation papers were filed with Base Records', ie Australian, attestation papers. See A. Robinson, 'Base Records Office – monthly report for January 1931', MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
29. 95,051 forms for men who never made it into the AIF did survive. They were transferred to the Archives and registered in 1975 as MT1486/1. The reasons for *rejection* for service in the AIF can be illuminating. Rejection was mostly on medical grounds but some men were found to be underage, or not of 'natural-born British decent' (often meaning Aboriginal or Chinese). A study of the medical reasons for rejection would offer a snapshot of the health of that generation and would finally extend with some hard data the analysis done many years ago by Alison Pilger in her pioneering article: 'The Other "Lost Generation": Rejected Australian Volunteers, 1914–18', *Journal of the Australian War Memorial*, no. 21, 1992, pp. 11–9.
30. For example B2455, Jones F E.
31. In January 1931, 2,300 attestation files were 'purged' of 'useless' documents, in an ongoing process. This wording suggests that these documents – 'useless' – were destroyed. MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
32. 'Report of the Committee appointed ... to formulate instructions ...', 19 January 1931, B1535, 753/1/34.
33. 'Base Records Office – activities' [April 1930], MP742/1, 396/1/1133. See also letter, Arthur Bazley (assistant to Charles Bean) to John Treloar (Director Australian War Memorial), 18 February 1938, Australian War Memorial, AWM315, 201/001/023.
34. 'Statement of Activity of Base Records Office', n.d., c. June 1929. See also the report on that statement by W. Mackintosh, 27 June 1929, MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
35. By the end of April 1930, 42,000 index cards had been typed by Base Records for this purpose. 'Base Records Office – activities' [April 1930], MP742/1, 396/1/1133.
36. Inglis, pp. 43–6, 179–89.
37. Minute, Director of Works to Secretary, Department of Defence, n.d., c. early 1939, MP927/1, A1/1/276.
38. Agenda and Minutes from the 23rd meeting of the Board of Management, Australian War Memorial, 15 June 1938, agenda item no. 17, copy on Australian War Memorial AWM315, 2001/001/023. On this file see also letter from A J Withers to Arthur Bazley, 8 February 1938.
39. Peter Londey, 'Known Soldiers: the Roll of Honour at the Australian War Memorial', in Martin Crotty (ed.), *When the Soldiers Return: November 2007 Conference Proceedings*. Brisbane: University of Queensland, School of History, Philosophy, Religion and Classics, 2009, pp. 261–8, available at <<https://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary;dn=725803849978034;res=IELHSS>>, accessed 27 October 2019.
40. Australian War Memorial, series note for AWM145. See also 'Statement of Activity of Base Records Office'.
41. Letter, John Treloar to Secretary, Department of Defence, 19 March 1938, Australian War Memorial AWM315, 201/001/023.
42. See in general MP927/1, A1/1/276.
43. See in general MP927/1, A259/18/340, and A274/1/200.

44. CARO's origins lay with 2nd Echelon (CA 2002), established in 1939 at the outbreak of the Second World War. 2nd Echelon was succeeded by CARO in July 1948.
45. Australian Archives (AA, now the National Archives of Australia) internal minute, 14 November 1986, B899, 1986/453.
46. Letter, B.E.W. Kelson (Australian War Memorial) to Department of Defence, 21 July 1983, Australian War Memorial AWM315, 417/020/063 01.
47. Letter from R. Waller (CARO), to Margaret Wade (AA) 15 July 1992, B899, 1986/453.
48. AA internal minute, 5 July 1990, B899, 1986/453.
49. AA file note and letter, Margaret Wade (AA) to John Egan (CARO), 18 December 1989, B899, 1986/453.
50. AA internal minute, 7 October 1991, and file note, 21 September 1992, B899, 1986/453. The AIF database can be searched for free at <<https://aif.adfa.edu.au/index.html>>.
51. Copy of information from the Soldier Career Management Agency, c. May 1993, B899, 1986/453.
52. 'What Do Service Records Mean to Families?', 3 April 2007, A14195, 2007/1103.
53. See especially *Archival Science*, vol. 16, no. 1, March 2016, special issue: 'Affect and the Archive, Archives and Their Affects'. More recently: James Lowry, "'Displaced Archives": proposing a research agenda', *Archival Science*, vol. 19, no. 4, December 2019, pp. 349–58.
54. Peter Stanley, *Men of Mont St Quentin: Between Victory and Death*, Scribe, Melbourne, 2009; Peter Stanley, *The Lost Boys of Anzac*; Peter Stanley, *Digger Smith and Australia's Great War: Ordinary Name, Extraordinary Stories*, Pier 9, NSW, 2011.
55. Scott Bennett, *The Names of the Nameless: Recovering the Missing Anzacs*, Scribe, Brunswick, Victoria, 2018.
56. <<https://research.monash.edu/en/projects/diggers-to-veterans-risk-resilience-and-recovery-in-the-first-aus>>, accessed 12 October 2019.
57. <<https://honouringanzacs.net.au/>>, accessed 12 October 2019.
58. Carolyn Holbrook, *Anzac: the Unauthorised Biography*, Newsouth, Sydney, 2014, p. 147. The subject is touched upon lightly in the chapter she co-wrote with Bart Ziino, 'Family History and the Great War in Australia', in Bart Ziino (ed.), *Remembering the Great War*, Routledge, London, 2015.
59. David Stephens, 'Honest History: Lessons in the Politics of History', in Carolyn Holbrook and Keir Reeves (eds), *The Great War: Aftermath and Commemoration*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2019, pp. 232–43. Among many fine essays in this book, there is no consideration of the archival aftermath of the war.
60. MT1486/1 and MT1139/1.
61. Joan M Schwartz and Terry Cook, 'Archives, Records, and Power: the Making of Modern Memory', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 1, 2002, pp. 1–19.
62. Verne Harris and Wendy M Duff, "'Stories and Names": Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings', *Archival Science*, vol. 2, no. 2, p. 284.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

Anne-Marie Condé is Senior Curator of Exhibitions at the National Archives of Australia. She has previously worked as a curator and historian at the National Museum of Australia and the Australian War Memorial. She publishes on the history of archives and museums in Australia.