

ARTICLE



The historian activist and the Gift to the Nation project: preserving the records of the Australian Red Cross

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ABSTRACT

In 2014, as part of their centenary celebrations, the Australian Red Cross initiated a project in which it transferred archives to various national, state and territory institutions across Australia including the University of Melbourne Archives and the State Library of New South Wales. The transfer of this voluminous (but not complete) collection built on earlier transfers of archives to the State Library of South Australia and the Australian War Memorial. This paper charts the origins of the plan to donate the records to public repositories. It interrogates the societal provenance of those collections, recognising that the pluralising of records is an historical process, in which the agency of archivists, historians and administrators must be understood. An investigation of Red Cross records in Australia exposes that process in its contingency, inertia and, ultimately, enthusiasm. The paper also reveals the challenges faced by voluntary organisations in preserving their records, and how historians and archivists both can benefit from assisting such organisations. Finally, this paper argues that the 'Gift to the Nation' project, with its national and international significance, reflects a shift in our understanding of the First World War to a transnational paradigm that recognises the important role of voluntary organisations.

KEYWORDS

Australian Red Cross; archives; First World War; social history; humanitarianism; voluntary organisations

This article examines the origins and challenges of a plan by the Australian Red Cross, one of Australia's most important and longstanding humanitarian voluntary organisations, to donate its archives and memorabilia to public repositories in 2014.¹ As part of their centenary celebrations, the Australian Red Cross initiated a 'Gift to the Nation' project, whereby its voluminous records were to be permanently transferred to various national, state and territory institutions across Australia. Two of the largest collections, the National and Victorian Division records were deposited into the University of Melbourne Archives. Another substantial collection, the archives of the New South Wales Division, was donated to the State Library of New South Wales.² These depositions built on earlier transfers of Red Cross records to the Australian War Memorial (the central collection of Australian Red Cross First World War Wounded and Missing records from London) in the 1920s, and in 2003, the South Australian Division's archives were donated to the State Library of South Australia.

A study of how a prominent voluntary organisation formulated an understanding of the value of their records in an early twenty-first-century context is valuable, in that it meets Tom Nesmith's important demand that we should 'see archives'. That is, we must produce histories of records so that the agency of archivists in contextualising and recreating those records can be exposed.³ Yet in focusing on a volunteer organisation, the imperative is not just in exposing the activities of the archivist, but in detailing the process by which the organisation itself came to value its records in a particular way. Archivists are important here, but so too is the activism of historians and individuals within the administration of the Red Cross. Michael Piggott in 2007 sought the humanity in the makers of records; this article seeks out the humanity not only in the making of a humanitarian archive, but in its recreation and pluralisation at the point of significant public interest in the First World War.⁴

The Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society, to give it its full name until 1927 when it became a national society in its own right, was formed in August 1914 on the outbreak of the First World War by the wife of the Governor-General, Lady Helen Munro Ferguson. This was 50 years after the Red Cross Movement began in Geneva, Switzerland with the founding of the International Committee of the Red Cross.⁵ With the federation of the Australian colonies occurring only thirteen years earlier, keenly aware of the federalist tensions, and borrowing on the Scottish experience with which Lady Helen had been intimately involved, the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross Society established a national body in Melbourne where the Commonwealth government was based. Operating out of Lady Helen's residence, the Society re-purposed the Government House ballroom as its main depot until 1920 when the Red Cross was removed for the visit of the Prince Regent.⁶ Directed by Lady Helen (the Australian Red Cross was the only national society during the First World War that had a woman as its leader), each wife of a State Governor established her own autonomous State-based Division.⁷

As a historian with a deep and longstanding interest in the history of the Australian Red Cross and the Red Cross Movement more broadly, I had been agitating for the deposition of the Australian Red Cross archives into public repositories since the late 1980s. I first encountered the problem when writing a dissertation of my grandmother's experiences as an Australian Red Cross Voluntary Aid Detachment (VAD) who served on British aircraft carrier, *HMS Glory*, from September–December 1945 at the end of the Second World War. I had my grandmother's and other members' diaries and letters and conducted oral interviews with those surviving members. But I was unable to gain access to the Second World War VAD records held by the New South Wales Division. They were being held by a leading, then subsequently retired member of the Division, the formidable Lady Galleghan, who was writing her own history of the VAD movement. Despite allowing me access to their 'archives room' which was more like an internal storeroom piled high with various records and memorabilia, the organisation was unable to assist me with the VAD files. The extensive Second World War VADs records, 49 boxes in all, were later found after her death in a spare shower recess at her home. With the records retrieved, and funded by a Galleghan bequest, I was commissioned by the New South Wales Division to write a history of the VADs in their state.⁸ This early experience of access difficulties within an organisational setting led me to begin a conversation with members of the Australian Red Cross about the long-term

preservation of their archives as well as the benefits of public repositories. Fifteen years later, when I was conducting research for the centenary history of the Australian Red Cross, I found my correspondence to the then Secretary-General, Jim Carlton, and details of a presentation I made to the National Executive in March 1995 on the writing of a history and the preservation of Red Cross archives.⁹ This article, therefore, has a personal dimension that extends over 30 years, and is framed around my own recollections and personal correspondence archive, as well as that of the Red Cross, as I sought a common path that would, in my view, benefit all constituents, the Red Cross, historians and the public.

I view my work in this space as that of the ‘historian activist’. That is, a historian who actively engages and assists a non-government organisation to achieve their goals, often involving a tension between public repositories and private, in-house collections. This approach may concur with archivists who have worked on and engaged with non-government organisations, and who rather than being ‘neutral, objective, [and] impartial’, find themselves as active agents ‘wield[ing] enormous power’.¹⁰ It also acknowledges the existence of ‘subjectivity’ and embraces an ‘active engagement with the archives and their creators’ as suggested by Flinn.¹¹ My work occurred around the same time as the ‘community archives movement’ accelerated in the UK and the explosion in the number of independent community archives in that country and elsewhere around the world.¹² This case study, therefore, may be relevant to archivists when viewed through the prism of the fourth dimension of the records continuum model that is to pluralise records as collective memory in order to mobilise for multiple uses beyond the original reason for their creation.¹³ The ‘historian activist’ is, therefore, an agent in the process by which an archive achieves its social utility which can have substantial social benefits. Although there are many challenges faced by voluntary and charitable organisations in the preservation of their archives, this case study reveals how we, as historians and archivists together, can benefit from engaging directly and helping voluntary organisations whose archives we wish to consult and/or protect, to help them navigate their way through the complexities of preserving archives. Historians and archivists each have a job in empowering voluntary organisations for appropriate outcomes. Secondly, such engagement can have a profound impact on our understanding of the First World War that extends far beyond the shores of Australia. In doing so, it further extends Robert McIntosh’s 1998 arguments about the archivist as a ‘creator of memory’ to include the role of the historian activist as an accomplice in this endeavour.¹⁴

The historian/activist and voluntary organisations

For historians, archives are our bread and butter; they are part and parcel of the ‘tools of our trade’; and without archives and archivists our job is all the harder. Archives make history, literally. Archives or what records historians use shape our understanding of history. The role of archivists and how the agency and interventions of archivists shape our histories have been critiqued with Ridener suggesting that archivists and historians ‘influence one another through their theories and practices’.¹⁵ The discipline of history has shifted markedly through the studies of feminism, otherness, and whiteness with post-modernism and post-colonialism helping us to further reframe how we view the

past. Finding new voices through the use of methodologies such as oral history and other non-written forms of evidence such as landscapes has also enriched our history. Archivists, too, have had important encounters with postmodernism in particular where they have been challenged to cease seeing themselves as neutral ciphers.¹⁶ However, we often privilege the government or state archive over other collections, in large part because of their accessibility, enshrined in law. Its authoritative, largely male voice booms through the historical narrative of our nation, the consequence of which is the pushing of activities of ordinary citizens, or those less visible, into the background. Stories of Indigenous peoples, women, and children are often either missing or out of focus, in the shadows, not in full view, even irrelevant. We see that clearly now through the analyses of gender, race and class. Additionally, as Flinn notes, community archives often 'hold materials that transcend traditional archival definitions' therefore problematising the process further.¹⁷ Although Flinn is largely discussing archives created for the purpose of engaging in identity politics, the point remains useful for this discussion.

As historians, we need to do more work on accessing and using the voluminous records of non-government agencies and organisations. There are, of course, large non-government archives of high repute and well patronised especially outside of Australia. For example, the Hoover Institution Archives at Stanford University or Rockefeller Foundation Archives in New York State are examples I have used in recent years. The Wellcome Institute in the United Kingdom is another stellar body and there are many more. However, it is the voices of the smaller voluntary organisations that are often missing. It is not necessarily because they need to be convinced of the importance of their records, the problem is more to do with organisational focus and lack of funds. Whether large or small, for institutions like the Red Cross, the preservation of their archives is not their main priority, it is hard to make a case to spend precious money and resources on them, and often they simply do not know what to do with them.

Since the 1990s in the United Kingdom, the Voluntary Action History Society (VAHS) has been working on identifying problems and issues faced by charities and voluntary organisations in preserving their archives. These include a lack of resources, not knowing what records to keep, the challenges brought by the digital revolution and inadequate legal protection for charity or voluntary sector archives.¹⁸ Historians working on topics revolving around voluntary action history are particularly aware of the problems. Coming together through an organisation like the VAHS and meeting regularly through conferences and other networks, a critical mass evolved. In response to a United Kingdom review of trust and foundation archives, the VAHS was involved in the launch of a Campaign for Voluntary Sector Archives in the House of Lords in October 2012.¹⁹ Against a backdrop of spending cuts to the voluntary sector, the campaign brought together historians, those working in the voluntary sector, archivists and record management experts to raise awareness of the importance of voluntary sector organisational archives.²⁰ In 2014, British historian of voluntary action, youth and education and blogger, Georgina Brewis published 'Eight reasons charities should be interested in their archives'.²¹ More recently she has been part of an ongoing British Academy research project, funded by the British Academy in partnership with the Institute of Education, University of London that seeks to support voluntary organisations to preserve their archives through a series of knowledge-exchange events, tailored workshops and the production of digital resources that can assist them in

planning, preservation and care of their archives.²² In Australia, research conducted by historians together with archivists, researchers, executives from charities and caregivers as part of the children in out-of-home care – the *Who am I?* An Australian Research Council linkage project (2008–2012) – identified and then sought to assist with improving record-keeping practices and archives.²³ This is a beginning but the focus and impetus for historians and archivists in Australia working with voluntary organisations need to continue and we have some way to go.

Historians, activism and the archive – the Australian Red Cross case study

In 1991, I wrote to the Australian Red Cross Headquarters in Melbourne asking for any information they might have on the 21 Red Cross nurses (referred to as Bluebirds because of the colour of their bespoke uniform) sent to France during the First World War. I had stumbled across the story during earlier forays into the New South Wales Division's 'archival cupboard' when I was researching my grandmother's wartime VAD experiences. I became fascinated with the story of these trained Australian nurses funded by the Australian Jockey Club and dispatched to the war zone under the auspices of the Red Cross as 'gifts for France'. I went to Melbourne, consulted the five boxes of First World War material held by National Headquarters, stored in the roof with little protection from the vagaries of the weather and wrote up the material.²⁴ I then enrolled in a PhD at Macquarie University to continue my tertiary studies examining aspects of voluntarism during the Second World War, with a special focus on the five officially sanctioned philanthropic organisations including the Australian Red Cross.²⁵ On 22 October 1992, Beryl Raufer, Deputy Secretary-General of the Australian Red Cross responded to another enquiry of mine where I outlined my 'plans to continue' researching 'aspects of volunteer workers in wartime Australia'. She advised me to get in touch with the archivist, Miss Margaret Collie. 'We have very little information about Lady Helen Munro Ferguson apart from the fact that she was the wife of the Governor-General and the first President of the Society', Ms Raufer explained.²⁶

By late 1994, I was well into my doctoral research. In the National Archives of Australia (then Australian Archives), I had discovered an 80-box 'not access cleared' collection of policy files of the patriotic funds (or voluntary war charities) as part of the Repatriation Commission that became my main archival sources.²⁷ However, I remained concerned about the uncertain state of the Australian Red Cross archives. I wrote to Jim Carlton, a former Liberal politician who was now Secretary-General of the Australian Red Cross, about writing a social history of the Australian Red Cross, and floated my idea for the preservation of the Australian Red Cross archives. Jim Carlton asked to meet with me and Beryl Raufer, which I did in December 1994. I was then invited to make a formal presentation on both topics to the National Executive of the Australian Red Cross on Sunday 19 March 1995 in Melbourne.

The presentation outlined my dismay at the parlous state of the Australian Red Cross archives and the unsatisfactory relationship (as I saw it) with the organisation's response to its archival heritage and the historical importance of its records. I stressed that my experience only related to the New South Wales Division and National Headquarters in Victoria. With the exception of the National Headquarters, where there was a full-time paid archivist, the Victorian Division was the only State-based Red Cross to have paid

staff in its archives/library. The remainder was run by dedicated volunteers. This is not unusual as voluntary organisations necessarily seek volunteers (often retired staff) for their archives. The unintended consequence of this practice, however, is that the role fails to reflect the records' historical importance within the organisational structure. Secondly, there appeared to be no national strategy for the maintenance of Australian Red Cross archives, little appetite within the organisation for a budget for archive management, and a general lack of recognition of the historical importance of their archives. It was difficult for researchers to gain access to the records, there were no contents lists, and little institutional knowledge. With the exception of Peter Stanley and his early work on the Whyalla Red Cross during the Second World War, few historians were writing about the Australian Red Cross or the wartime voluntary effort on the home front.²⁸ The Australian Red Cross was one of the largest philanthropic organisations in Australian history, and my work suggested it played a key role in many areas of social welfare history, for example, in the repatriation of soldiers after war, the establishment of the blood bank, and development of social work – but little of this was recognised in the history books at that point in time. In terms of First World War historiography, voluntary organisations that exist today, like the Australian Red Cross, the YMCA and Salvation Army, who played an integral role in supporting servicemen and their families, as well as others closed down years ago such as the Australian Comforts Fund were largely omitted from the historical narrative. The nature of government records dominates the production of First World War history in the same way that they dominate archival theory. A lack of interest and awareness of their own historicity by wartime voluntary organisations and their inaccessible archives only adds to the silence.

Accompanying my presentation to the National Executive was a two-page synthesis for a 'National Strategy for Preserving the Records and Archives of the Australian Red Cross'. I suggested that this could be done with each State Division depositing their archives and memorabilia into the relevant State Library, for example, the Mitchell Library for the New South Wales Divisional records, the Mortlock Library for the South Australian records, and the Battye Library for the Western Australian records. State Libraries have policies to collect and preserve a range of records and materials relevant to each State and the Divisional archives reflect an important part of their social history in the twentieth century. I met with Paul Brunton, then Manuscript Curator at the Mitchell Library in Sydney who had some knowledge of Australian Red Cross history and was enthusiastic at the idea of the New South Wales Division depositing its archives there. An alternative option was that all records be deposited into the National Library of Australia in Canberra, where the National Headquarters records should go. I argued that:

Without the preservation of the ARC records, it will be very hard for historians in the future to accurately portray the organisation, and place it within the overall context of social history of twentieth century Australia and beyond. Many of the records I have seen are in a parlous state, and will not survive unless urgent action is taken to preserve what is left of ARC archives and records nationwide.²⁹

On 30 June 1995, the Australian Red Cross National Executive endorsed my proposal to write a history of the Society but nothing more was said about its archives. On the successful completion of my PhD thesis, I was commissioned to write a history of the

VAD movement in New South Wales, published in 1999. In 2000, leading a small committee of volunteers including Edithe Pigott, Chairman, New South Wales Division, I became the Honorary Project Manager, Historical Consultant and Co-ordinator of the Australian Red Cross New South Wales Archives. We applied for and received \$20,000 for a New South Wales Centenary of Federation History Grant for a project 'Archiving and Cataloguing the Records of Australian Red Cross New South Wales'. The History Company, under the management of archivist Joanne Birkel, was hired to work on establishing and implementing a set of archival and cataloguing principles and procedures for the archive. A computerised cataloguing system was introduced and preservation work began. Training workshops were held in May 2001 for Red Cross volunteers to continue the archival project. A student from the University of Western Sydney (now Western Sydney University) where I worked, Annie Campbell, wrote an honours thesis on the Junior Red Cross in New South Wales and she, too, began volunteering in the fledgling archives.³⁰ The collection was enhanced with a call from the archives to the branch network across New South Wales. This came at a time when many branches were closing down and they were encouraged to send their records to Sydney for safekeeping. The response was enthusiastic. The records of 425 Red Cross branches in 341 boxes now form the basis for the collection that was later deposited into the New South Wales State Library as a part of the 'gift to the nation' project.³¹

Although progress was slow, there was a movement within the Red Cross to develop national policies for the maintenance and preservation of the Red Cross collection of historical documents, publications, photographs, memorabilia and artefacts. In May 2000, the inaugural meeting of a Working Party was held chaired by leading South Australian Red Cross stalwart, Val Broadbent.³² In November of that year, and despite some reticence within the organisation, the National Executive of the Australian Red Cross endorsed 'the purpose of the Australian Red Cross heritage collection' which was to 'collect, record, preserve, and where appropriate, promote public access to materials which document the development and evolution of the Australian Red Cross'.³³ Following on from this important decision, the Australian Red Cross Heritage Co-ordinating Group (ARCHCG) was formally established to further the aims of the National Executive. Meeting in Melbourne in March 2001, members included both paid staff from the Australian Red Cross and volunteers including archivists. They were Sharon Pimm (Chairman); Margaret Le May; Tom McCullough (Victoria); Lee Clark (South Australia); Melanie Oppenheimer (New South Wales); Cecily Close (consulting archivist); Noel Barrow (Executive Officer); and Lauren Nelson (ACT). The result was the production of the first *Australian Red Cross Heritage Collection Manual*, a national archival policy and procedures manual for use across Australia.³⁴ The Manual included a statement of collection policy and procedures for appraisal to assess whether a record or artefact fits a set of criteria for retention and whether records could be transferred to the Australian Red Cross National Office Archives. Other areas covered include receiving items, listing of items, storage and preservation, a disaster strategy, access policy, and oral history programs (this was in recognition of the importance of the Red Cross in Australian society and both the South Australian and Western Australian Divisions had conducted a number of successful oral histories with Red Cross members). The Manual also included forms for new researchers, researcher privacy agreements, a deed of gift form, and an Australian Red Cross accession register.³⁵

In the lead up to the centenary of the Australian Red Cross, the organisation continued to actively engage in addressing the problem of the management of its heritage collection. However, finding a consensus about the best way forward was an ongoing challenge. Although it was recognised that the Australian Red Cross Heritage Collection was important, Australian Red Cross staff were 'unable to find a major use for it', and the 'place the Australian Red Cross Heritage Collection plays in the day to day operations . . . is peripheral at best and discomfiting at worst being seen to be using up valuable space and resources'.³⁶ With the support of the new CEO, Robert Tickner who saw the centenary of Red Cross in Australia as a major moment to further develop the national profile of the organisation and allow people to see the Red Cross as an institution worth supporting, an internal review was completed. An external company was hired to prepare an Australia-wide assessment of the collections held in the Red Cross state, territory and national offices. It included a full assessment of the value of the Australian Red Cross Heritage Collection around Australia, an estimate as to what resources would be required to catalogue the collection and whether it should be transferred to an external institution. Disappointingly, the draft report completed in April 2009 concluded that 'the Collection should not be considered for transfer to an external organisation until a thorough understanding of its value and potential benefit to Australian Red Cross has been undertaken and considered at the highest level'.³⁷

In 2009 a public tender was advertised to research and write a history of the Australian Red Cross for publication during its centenary year. As the successful applicant, I went around Australia to visit the Red Cross divisional and territory archives and conduct research for the book. Once more, I was concerned at the state of much of the collection. In the Northern Territory, for example, precious few records prior to the 1970s had survived. Much of the collection had been destroyed by Cyclone Tracy in 1974 and the current storage conditions in a tropical climate were inadequate. The records were kept in a container with no air conditioning and the resident cat (for vermin control) and her kittens only removed prior to my arrival. In Tasmania, the records were stored in a dank, damp basement. The remaining records in Queensland were limited although there was a significant photograph collection. Although the records in Western Australia were safely stored by volunteers, there was no indexing or cataloguing which made it difficult to use especially when time was limited. The collections in Victoria (both National and Divisional) and New South Wales were, by now, reasonably well organised, and the South Australian records had been deposited into the State Library by Divisional leaders. The archive dilemma re-emerged. How could any historian or member of the public consult the Australian Red Cross records and, in my case, write a nationwide history of the organisation with limited access, poor indexing and cataloguing? I continued to agitate for the Australian Red Cross to make a decision about the future of their archives.

After further consideration, senior executive members proposed a 'Gift to the Nation' initiative that was accepted by the Australian Red Cross Board. Managed by a Centenary and Member Engagement Committee (CMEC), all states and territories would deposit their archives into a named public repository during the centenary year. Letters were drafted and re-drafted. This plan built on previous initiatives to 'ensure the appropriate care and protection of our historical records, and of allowing the widest possible public access to such archives and records in the future'.³⁸ The plan of a gift to the nation revealed that the Red Cross now actively wanted its records available to a wider audience. Thus, the archive could speak to the organisation's contribution to the nation, framing its value in a very specific way. The

substantial Victorian and National Headquarters records (co-located and effectively merged in 2007 but with two separate databases and many uncatalogued archival records and heritage materials) were deposited into the University of Melbourne Archives in November 2014 and a significant number of items were transferred to the university's Medical History Museum.³⁹ At approximately 400 shelf metres, it was the largest single donation ever received by the university.⁴⁰ This five-year transfer process to hand over, catalogue, curate as well as digitise large portions of the collection will conclude in 2020. The second major tranche of Australian Red Cross records to be deposited into a public repository as part of the 'Gift to the Nation' was that of the New South Wales Division. In August 2016, the State Library of New South Wales announced that over a two-year period, the records would be transferred and would be 'preserved, gradually digitised and made available to students, historians and members of the public'.⁴¹ The first extensive transfer has been completed and a second is being prepared. It remains unclear as to what the situation is with the other States and Territories.⁴²

What was happening in Australia mirrored events overseas and reveals that the Australian experience did not exist in isolation. This was a common theme across the Red Cross Movement. The International Committee of the Red Cross (ICRC), founded in 1863 and the International Federation of Red Cross and Red Crescent (IFRC), founded in 1919, both based in Geneva, opened up their archives in the 1990s. Through the hiring of professional archivists, their in-house collections are now recognised as globally significant to the history of humanitarianism, international humanitarian law and the Geneva Conventions.⁴³ The rise of the discipline of humanitarian studies can be directly linked to the opening up of these archives with a significant increase in historians travelling to Geneva to consult the records. The issue of sharing of record-keeping and archival practices, as well as a recognition of the value of archives and heritage collections across the Red Cross Movement, was reflected in 2011 when the Council of Delegates to the 31st International Conference of the Red Cross and Red Crescent supported a resolution to recognise and preserve its historical and cultural heritage.⁴⁴ This has encouraged national societies, like the Australian Red Cross, to deposit their collections in public repositories. For example, the American Red Cross has placed many of its records into the National Archives in Maryland and the Norwegian Red Cross archives have been deposited into the National Archives in Norway. The Canadian Red Cross dispersed their collection to multiple sites across Canada. On the other hand, the British Red Cross Society has retained their collection in-house as a way of ensuring preservation and access, and as part of the centenary of the First World War, they have digitised their voluminous and important VAD records. The British Red Cross is one of the best-preserved charity archives in the UK, where there is a strong tradition of pursuing a mixed economy of archiving.⁴⁵ The overall result, however, has been a plethora of studies on the role of the Red Cross Movement and humanitarianism more broadly in the lead up to, and during, the centenary of First World War.⁴⁶ This demonstrates that the opening up and further accessing of Red Cross records have made different histories not only possible but also actual.

The potential of Australian Red Cross First World War records in and beyond Australia

There is substantial historical potential in the Australian Red Cross records, not only those archives pertaining to the First World War but to subsequent periods of war and

peace through the twentieth century. For the First World War in particular, and as Peter Grant's work has demonstrated with the UK, the potential lies in rethinking the place of voluntary action and philanthropy within the war historiography.⁴⁷ It also points to the potential of Australian voluntary sector records, and therefore Australian archivists and librarians actively shaping the histories of war and peace in Australia through their contextualising and description of that archive, as well as how they make access possible, that is through digitisation programs and the like. Although born out of war, the Australian Red Cross has evolved into an organisation that has a 'presence at every level of Australian society – local, regional, state, and national'. It is also part of a global humanitarian network, the Red Cross movement, and it is difficult to find another organisation 'that has that reach and capacity or level of responsibility'.⁴⁸ The long-term benefit of having its records placed in public repositories exposes a plurality of agents in creating Australia's past, and unsettles the dominance of the government (official) archive. The value for historians, archivists and the general public, not only in Australia but internationally, can be gauged through a brief discussion of two collections of Australian Red Cross Wounded and Missing Bureau records from the First World War. Today, the Tracing Service (as it is now called) remains one of the Red Cross' major global programs. In 1919, its records spoke to the world of private pain so much of the keynote of the war, and yet so much less evident in the official archive.

The rich collection of the South Australian Information Bureau (one of the five State-based Bureaux established during the war as part of the Australian Red Cross' First World War Wounded and Missing Bureaux) has special relevance because it comprises the only set of State-based Bureaux records to have survived. The British Bureau records were destroyed after the war and none of the other Australian State-based records have survived.⁴⁹ Over 8,000 packets relating to enquiries by family and relatives of soldiers from the South Australian Red Cross Information Bureau were digitised in 2015 by the State Library of South Australia as part of the centenary of the First World War.⁵⁰ The other major collection of Australian Red Cross archives deposited into a public repository prior to the 'Gifting to the Nation' project was the records of the Australian Red Cross' Egypt and London Wounded Bureau. The highly significant records, around 32,000 individual cases in 583 boxes, were donated by the Australian Red Cross in the 1920s to the Australian War Memorial following a call for materials of interest from the war. In 2002, in one of the first large-scale digitisation projects undertaken on First World War records in Australia, the records became more accessible and thus more widely used.⁵¹

In response to the carnage of the Gallipoli campaign (25 April to December 1915), the New South Wales Division opened the first Australian State-based Bureau in July 1915. The South Australian Bureau was the last one to commence, on 6 January 1916. As in other States, the local South Australian Law Society was an integral body, working with the South Australian Division of Red Cross providing lawyers who worked pro bono through the war. Through this unique collection, we can see the personal toll and consequences of war and families' relentless quest for answers to what had happened to their father, husband, son, cousin, lover. Some families with relatives missing from the Gallipoli campaign had to wait until 1919 for some measure of closure.⁵²

War historian, Jay Winter, was one of the first to work on the South Australian records. In the 1980s, he had to travel half-way around the world to consult the files in a successful attempt to reorient study and understanding of the First World War.⁵³ Now that they are fully

digitised, historians and members of the public can be anywhere in the world and consult the collection. The response has been outstanding as Andrew Piper, Manager Online Services at the State Library of South Australia outlined in May 2018:

Since the official opening in February 2016 we've had 177,009 page visits and have obvious spikes each ANZAC Day [25 April]. These are largely from Australia (80%) as expected and we've had interest from all over the world with 7% coming from the US and 4% from the UK. That said, there has been interest on the site from Canada, New Zealand, France, Germany, Belgium and India. Most users are first time users, though around 14% are return visitors. We receive a comment or a new photograph almost weekly.⁵⁴

As of 19 August 2019, there were 49,352 users, 72,257 sessions, 309,031 page views and 371 user contributions with photographs and stories.⁵⁵ With public repositories such as the University of Melbourne Archives and the State Library of New South Wales' intention to digitise large swaths of the Australian Red Cross records in their custody, these records will become more accessible to future generations of scholars and interested individuals. The archives, too, it is assumed will be safe under the custodianship of these institutions and their professional staff, which are properly equipped to preserve and care for them. A potential concern is a shortage of funding to these public institutions or a lack of appetite for the Australian Red Cross to complete its 'Gift to the Nation' project. Secondly, there is the question of access conditions for researchers. Will transferring the records actually result in better access or will impediments remain? Clearly for Red Cross staff and volunteers, not having access to their own records on site could create some challenges. Cost, too, could become an issue for researchers. The Australian War Memorial, for example, charges a fee for copies of its extensive photographic collection, including images from the Red Cross archive originally donated by the organisation many years ago. Will this be the case with the Australian Red Cross photographic collections now housed at the State Library of NSW and the University of Melbourne? Conditions of access after transfer could potentially impede the work of researchers in the future.

These concerns aside, the 'Gift to the Nation' initiative was a brave one for the Australian Red Cross, one that ensures the appropriate care and protection of its historical records and memorabilia into the future and allows for the widest possible public access. It is an example that further extends the community archives movement and provides an approach that can build 'sustained equitable relationships'.⁵⁶ In this case, a historian activist, in partnership with archivists, has used their expertise and knowledge to work with and assist non-government organisations to manage and preserve their archives for the future.

Notes

1. This paper was originally presented at the 'Recording, Narrating and Archiving the First World War' conference, 9–11 July 2018, Deakin University, Melbourne. I would like to thank the two anonymous referees for their valuable comments and especially Dr Bart Ziino, one of the editors of this special issue, for his encouragement and professionalism.
2. For a perspective from the State Library of NSW, see Alison Wishart and Michael Carney, 'An archive of humanity: the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross, 1914–2014', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 47, no. 2, 2019, pp. 260–9.
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4. Michael Piggott, 'Human behaviour and the making of records and archives', *Archives & Social Studies: A Journal of Interdisciplinary Research*, vol. 1, 2007, pp. 237–58.
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31. Wishart and Carney, p. 261.
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38. I was involved in this process and have draft copies of letters on Australian Red Cross letterhead in my personal collection. They were to be signed by Michael Raper, who had joined Australian Red Cross in 2008 as Director of Services and International Operations. I am unsure if these were the final letters that were sent.
39. Because there were plans in the late 1990s and early 2000s to establish a Red Cross museum (there are a number overseas including in Geneva, Switzerland and Germany), the Victorian Division had been collecting objects and memorabilia for some years.

40. 'Australian Red Cross donates 100 years of memories to University of Melbourne archives', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 November 2014; available at <<https://www.smh.com.au/education/australian-red-cross-donates-100-years-of-memories-to-university-of-melbourne-archives-20141105-3jmqb.html>>, accessed 19 August 2019. The Transfer #3 to the University of Melbourne is currently being prepared by Archives staff in Melbourne as per the 2014 agreement.
41. State Library of NSW, Media Release, '100 years of Red Cross donated to NSW State Library', 12 August 2016.
42. The longstanding Archivist based in Melbourne, Moira Drew's coordination role with state archives ceased shortly after the centenary year and she only has occasional contact with those involved in the archives. Email from Moira Drew, Archivist, Australian Red Cross, to MO, 20 August 2019.
43. For the IFRC, see <<https://media.ifrc.org/ifrc/who-we-are/archives/>> and the ICRC, <<https://www.icrc.org/en/archives>>, accessed 19 August 2019.
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50. For a detailed analysis of this archive and the stories contained therein for the Gallipoli period, see Melanie Oppenheimer and Margrette Kleinig, "'There is no trace of him": the Australian Red Cross, its Wounded and Missing Bureaux and the 1915 Gallipoli Campaign', *First World War Studies*, vol. 6, no. 3, 2015, pp. 277–92. I worked with Andrew Piper who oversaw the project and contributed an essay on its history. See <<https://sarcib.ww1.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/short-history-south-australian-red-cross-information-bureau#https://sarcib.ww1.collections.slsa.sa.gov.au/sites/default/files/images/page/Verco%20Building-war%20memorial.jpg>>, accessed 17 August 2019.
51. Australian Red Cross Society Wounded and Missing Enquiry Bureau Files, 1914–1918 War, 1DRL/0428, Australian War Memorial, Canberra. Importantly, the South Australian records complement, but do not duplicate, those held in the Australian War Memorial.
52. Oppenheimer and Kleinig, pp. 277–92.
53. Jay Winter, *Sites of Memory, Sites of Mourning*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1998.
54. Email communication, Andrew Piper to author, 18 May 2018.
55. Email communication, Andrew Piper to author, 20 August 2019.
56. Flinn, p. 163.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the author.

Notes on contributor

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