

REFLECTION



An archive of humanity: the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross, 1914–2014

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ABSTRACT

To commemorate its centenary, the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross decided to donate its archive to the State Library of New South Wales in 2014. The State Library is honoured to be the recipient of these significant and extensive archives. In this article, the authors outline the process the librarians and archivists used to manage the donation and the importance of communication, both internally within the Library, and externally with the volunteers at the Red Cross who had arranged, compiled and cared for the archive. They describe the extent and organisation of the collection, the variety of formats and subjects, its historical significance and how it has been promoted to the State Library's audiences. The authors reflect on how the archive charts the evolution and growth of Australia's longest-running humanitarian organisation and how it contains the records of people who made history, but did not write the history books.

KEYWORDS

Australian Red Cross; archives; World War I; history

To commemorate its centenary, and as part of a national process termed a 'gift to the nation', the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross decided to donate its archive to the State Library of New South Wales in 2014. The State Library is honoured to be the recipient of these significant and extensive archives. In this article, we will describe the process the librarians and archivists used to manage the donation, the extent and organisation of the collection and how it has been promoted to the State Library's audiences.

Preliminary assessment of significance

The archive of the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross dates from its inception in 1914. It is a compilation of information produced by the State Divisional Office and its branches in a large variety of formats that document the core activities of the organisation including coordinated humanitarian campaigns and responses to wars and natural disasters. Over the decades it had been managed by a team of Red Cross volunteers who had organised it into 11 discrete sequences based upon subject matter, format and size. The following gives an indication of each of these sequences and the volume within:

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1. 341 boxes of branch records

Minutes, correspondence and operational records of 425 Red Cross branches located throughout New South Wales.

2. Approximately 7400 photographs stored in 61 albums

Photographs from Red Cross branches, the divisional office in Sydney, and of individual members.

3. 124 boxes of Divisional Records

Business records documenting the activities of the State Divisional Office in Sydney.

4. 49 boxes relating to Voluntary Aid Detachments (VADs)

Records of the Red Cross's Voluntary Aid Detachments who served during World War II.

5. 86 framed images

Images framed by the Red Cross, mostly reproductions that have hung on walls in various Red Cross offices.

6. Three boxes of posters

Campaign posters and others generated by the Red Cross (see [Figure 1](#)).

7.42 flat boxes of various formats

Material best stored flat including posters, newspaper cuttings, architectural drawings, photographs and realia.

8. Four boxes of outsize material

Large-format material including posters (see [Figures 2 and 3](#)), newspaper cuttings, architectural drawings, photographs and realia.

9. 30 boxes of Realia

Objects used and created by the Red Cross including badges, coins, insignia, commemorative spoons, trophies, fundraising tins and a milk pail.

10. 14 boxes of Red Cross publications

Circulars and unbound publications distributed by the Red Cross and its branches.

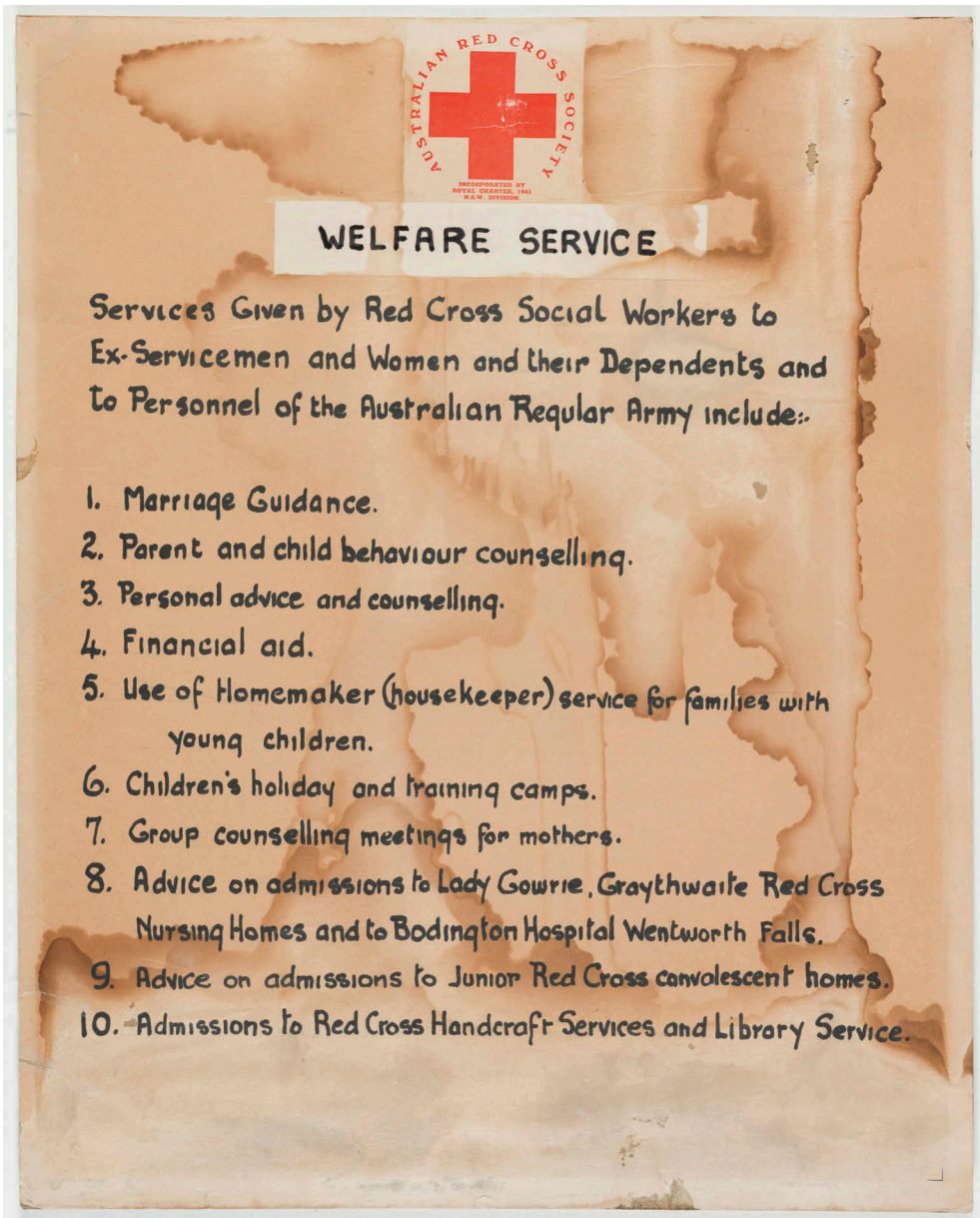


Figure 1. A hand-drawn poster for the Red Cross Welfare Service, V/326, State Library of NSW.

11. 17 library books

Books used in the reference library of the NSW Divisional Headquarters and donated to the Red Cross.

The Library appraised the materials based on their significance according to its Collection Development Policy. Given the Policy's emphasis on documenting life in New South Wales and given that the archive represented Red Cross's activities within



Figure 2. Red Cross Air Race poster, XV/196.

this state, the majority of materials were highly significant. With some sequences however, the Library selectively acquired materials to be representative rather than comprehensive. The sequences of branch records, photographs, committee minutes and VAD records were accepted as complete sets while others – realia, posters, framed pictures – were taken more selectively.

At the same time as the State Library was appraising this donation, the National and Victorian Divisions of the Red Cross, both located in Melbourne, donated their archives to the University of Melbourne. Both of these transfers were expected to take about five years. It is still unclear what is happening in other States (who were also meant to be a part of the centenary ‘gift to the nation’). All these archival donations followed that of South Australia, who donated its records to the State Library of South Australia in the early 2000s.

Red Cross volunteers provided soft-copy listings of each sequence which the Library quality-checked before transferring this information into their native archival cataloguing system, AdLib.

Establishing a project

Due to the large volume of records and the significance of this acquisition, the Library set up a project framework to manage the acquisition of the archive. This allowed the Library to organise the transfer into 11 manageable phases. To implement the project,

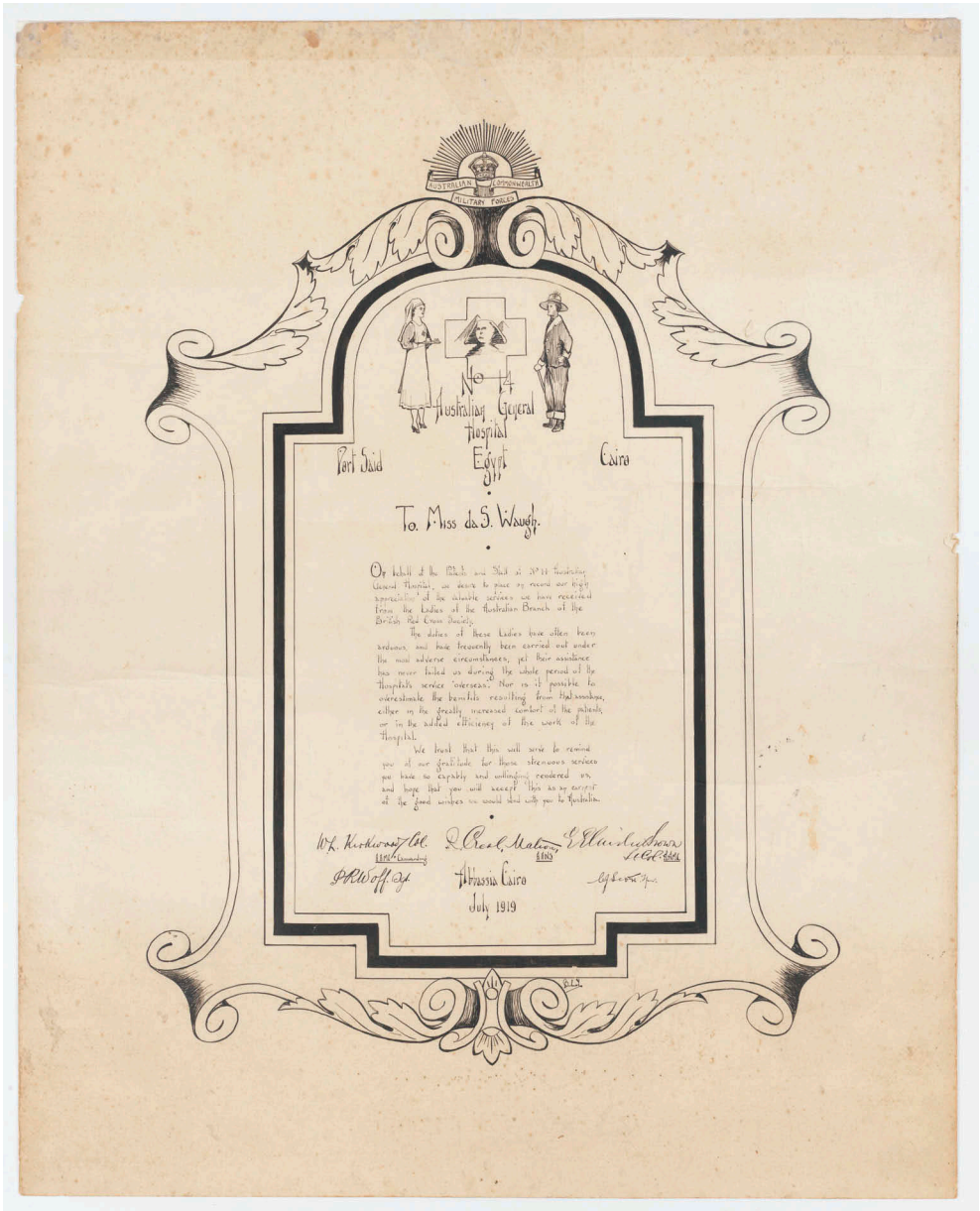


Figure 3. Illuminated address presented to Miss da S. Waugh by the patients and staff of No. 14 Australian General Hospital, expressing their appreciation to the ladies of the Australian Branch of the British Red Cross, ca. 1918–20, MLMSS 9926/Box 1X.

a team was formed which included specialists in acquisition, cataloguing, collection transfer, storage, curatorship and publicity. The project was organised around the arrangement of the archive. Each sequence was treated as a phase, where a date would be set for transferring the sequence from the Red Cross to the Library, and target dates set within the Library for completing the processing and rehousing.

Organising the project in this way proved beneficial as it provided a framework with agreed timeframes which allowed the two stakeholders to deal with the unique requirements and challenges inherent in each sequence. For example, to prepare the sequence of framed pictures for transfer to the Library, a team of conservators organised an appropriate space at the Red Cross Divisional Headquarters where they could de-frame some of the pictures and wrap others up. The pictures were then transported by specialist art movers to the Library's framed pictures storage in Macquarie Street in Sydney's Central Business District (CBD). The 341 boxes of branch records were destined for long-term storage at the Library's off-site store in Penrith (western Sydney). To avoid double-handling this large number of boxes (by bringing them to the archivist in Macquarie Street and then sending them out to Penrith), the archivist was able to create the catalogue records using listings of the contents of each box provided by the Red Cross volunteers. Computer-generated box labels and barcodes were then printed for each box and attached to the correct box by the Red Cross volunteers before a courier transported the boxes to the storage unit in Penrith.

Cataloguing the 61 albums of photographs was a two-step process. Firstly, a Librarian created catalogue records for each album by counting the number of photographs and briefly describing the main subject of the album. Then a team of library volunteers were trained to type up the captions for each photograph (where they existed) and add them to the catalogue record. This provided additional metadata, which was particularly useful when some albums were chosen for digitisation.

Communication

Both internal and external communication was important in managing the delivery and movement of materials. The project team produced a monthly 'status report' to Library management on the progress of the project, so that any issues could be dealt with as they arose. For such large sequences of material, storage had to be planned, as well as appropriate work areas for staff members who rehoused, arranged and described the material. External communication was managed through the Volunteer Coordinator at the Red Cross. A parameter to work within was that volunteers in the Red Cross Archives Team only worked on Tuesdays each week, so all technical questions about the archive had to be dealt with on that day.

Archival approach

The way the archive was originally arranged by Red Cross volunteers was reflected in the Library's arrangement and description of the archive on the catalogue. The highest level of the hierarchical record, the fonds, was described as 'Archives of the Australian Red Cross Society, New South Wales Division, 1914–2014'. Each of the 11 sequences was then treated as a sub-fonds. The sub-fonds level is further divided into series, file and item levels. Item-level records provide the opportunity for digitised items to be attached to individual records.

Arranging the archive in this way retains the original order of the materials and reflects the way they were collected and arranged by Red Cross volunteers as a working archive. The colloquial names given to the sequences by the Red Cross, including 'Black Boxes' and 'Flat Boxes', were not used in titling but referred to in notes, so that the

history of the working archive was preserved. The final hierarchical record provides a navigable and granular way for scholars, researchers and readers to access materials from the archive.

Significance of the archive

The Australian Red Cross has a classic grassroots history. Formed as a branch of the British Red Cross on 13 August 1914 in response to the outbreak of World War I, the organisation quickly grew to 358 local branches in New South Wales by the end of 1914 and 632 branches by the end of 1918.¹ The pace of growth demonstrates the level of goodwill and patriotism that could be harnessed during such turbulent times. Post-War, the Red Cross worked with wounded returned soldiers as they sought to re-integrate into families and society. The organisation continued to evolve to provide support for individuals and communities to rebuild their lives after disasters struck, such as the Hunter Valley floods, Cyclone Tracy, the Thredbo landslide and, more recently, international events such as the 2004 Indian Ocean tsunami. The depth of this archive documents how the Australian Red Cross has grown as a humanitarian organisation centred around events that have unfolded in the broader socio-political world.

Three items stand out within the archive as primary sources that document the work of the organisation. Firstly, a hand-drawn poster for the Australian Red Cross Welfare Service (ca. 1941), which documents the specific services offered by the organisation to returned servicemen and their families, including the offer of psychological support before post-traumatic stress disorder was a recognised diagnosis (see [Figure 1](#)).

Secondly, a hand-drawn map of a Red Cross fundraising Air Race (1944) from Melbourne to Geneva is a decorative take on a fundraising thermometer (see [Figure 2](#)). Each stop on the journey is given its own symbol, such as a hula dancer for Honolulu or a kiwi for New Zealand. The money raised during each leg of the flight (shown by a moveable airplane) is recorded beside intricate, hand-drawn leaves, trees, iridescent blue birds (Red Cross nurses who worked in France were known as ‘bluebirds’ due to their blue uniforms) and spectacular sea life. The poster was created by Miss Linfay Lonsdale, a graduate of the Sydney School of Design. Described in the *Melbourne Argus* at the time as an imaginary air race for an unlimited amount of entries, it shows the creative means by which the Red Cross raised money.

Thirdly, an illuminated address presented to Red Cross volunteers by the Australian General Hospital in Abbassia, Cairo, features Egyptian drawings and hieroglyphics combined with the Red Cross logo (see [Figure 3](#)). This item shows how the skills of Australian Red Cross VADs who were deployed during the war were appreciated on the other side of the globe.

Publicising the donation

The donation of the NSW Division of the Australian Red Cross Archive to the State Library is a ‘good news’ story that both organisations wanted to capitalise on. The two organisations issued joint media releases and agreed on spokespeople. Two events were held at the State Library to thank the volunteers and generate media interest: on 12 August 2016 (the 102nd anniversary of the formation of the NSW Division of the Red Cross) to announce the donation, and on 19 June 2018 (during Red Cross Week) to celebrate the complete transfer

of the archive. Both events generated print and radio coverage. Red Cross realia was on display in the Library's galleries for each of these events.

As most of the volunteers who make up the Red Cross in NSW are women, the Red Cross decided to hold their Society of Women Leaders event at the Library in May 2018. Members were invited to view highlights from the archive, most of which had not been on public display before.

State Library staff wrote blog posts about the collection to raise awareness of the archive outside of Sydney. For example, the archivist who catalogued the 61 albums of photographs wrote blog posts about some of the more significant and interesting albums. All of these posts were linked through a webpage: <https://www.sl.nsw.gov.au/research-and-collections-significant-collections/red-cross>

Future relevance of the archive

The depth and breadth of the archive has appeal for a wide range of researchers. Firstly, feminist historians will recognise that this is an archive of a women's organisation – of women who held regular meetings and raised funds for the Red Cross. The passionate, energetic, dedicated and formidable women (and some men) who make up the Australian Red Cross is unique in the world, as the only ongoing, national society started and initially led by women. Nine days after the commencement of World War I, Helen Munro Ferguson, wife of the Governor General of Australia, started the Australian branch of the British Red Cross Society. For the next six years, before she returned to Scotland with her husband in late 1920, she went on to lead an organisation which grew exponentially to boast 632 branches in NSW by the end of 1918. Interestingly, and appallingly, there is an entry for Sir Ronald Munro Ferguson in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, but none for his wife, Lady Munro Ferguson, founder of the longest-running, voluntary humanitarian organisation in Australia.

Secondly, economic historians could make a significant mark on the Australian historical record by calculating the monetary value of the work that the Red Cross volunteers in Australia have contributed to the Australian and NSW economies. We know that during World War I, Australia spent over £307,962,399 on defence.² We also know that the value of goods despatched overseas from the Australian Red Cross depot in Melbourne was estimated at £1,276,666 at the end of the war.³ And we know that in its first three months of operation, the NSW branches despatched goods to the value of £44,255/6/4.⁴ However, no one has calculated the value of the in-kind and voluntary labour that (mostly) women were doing on the home front. Women's work inside the home, such as domestic labour and caring for children and other family members, has long been invisible because it is unpaid, and therefore regarded as 'unproductive' and not contributing to the economy. However, the Red Cross volunteers worked both inside and outside the home.

For example, Red Cross volunteers, known as VADs, ran 16 convalescent homes and seven army hospitals during World War I alone. By 1917 there were 3000 VADs in NSW who had received their St John's First Aid certificate and been trained in home nursing and invalid cookery.⁵ During World War II, there were over 5700 VADs enlisted in NSW and many of them joined women's auxiliary services such as the Women's Auxiliary Australian Air Force.⁶ These women were part of the citizen forces

and worked full-time or part-time cleaning, cooking, doing laundry, making beds and serving meals.

Then there is the volunteer work of knitting socks for soldiers and trauma teddies, sewing clothing, boiling, bottling and selling jams and pickles, compiling comfort parcels, making and rolling bandages, running fundraising opportunity shops, setting up disaster relief centres, making furniture for the local Red Cross hospital, providing counselling and support, and organising fundraising concerts, garden parties and fetes. It is impossible to be comprehensive in this article, however calculating the value of this volunteer work could potentially change the way we perceive the contributions of women to Australian society, particularly during war time.

Conclusion

The transfer of the Australian Red Cross New South Wales Division Archive 1914–2014 to the State Library has taken over three years to complete. Even though there was tremendous goodwill on both sides, there were still hurdles to be negotiated in the selection, organisation and transportation of the archive. The fact that the archive is stored in two different locations approximately 60 kilometres apart across Australia's largest city, coupled with a desire to minimise handling and transportation costs, added to the project's complexity. Over the three-year life span of the project, while the volunteers at the Red Cross remained consistent, there were some staff changes at the Library and when new people came onto the project they had to learn quickly. The Red Cross volunteers who managed the archive when it was at the Red Cross Divisional Headquarters needed to feel assured that the Library would manage it as faithfully as they had, and make it accessible to a wider cohort of people.

It would be hard to overstate the significance of the Australian Red Cross New South Wales Division Archive 1914–2014 to the history of NSW and to future researchers. It is an archive of the people who made history, but did not write the history books. It is a rich and largely untapped resource which opens many research doors and has the potential to change the way we understand our history.

Notes

1. Melanie Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity: 100 Years of Australian Red Cross 1914–2014*, Harper Collins, South Sydney, 2014, p. iii.
2. *Official Yearbook of the Commonwealth of Australia*, no. 12, Government Printer, Melbourne, 1919, p. 1017.
3. Oppenheimer, p. 21.
4. British Red Cross Society, Australian Branch, 'New South Wales Division Report and Financial Statements for 1914–1918', p. 16.
5. British Red Cross Society, Australian Branch, 'New South Wales Division Report and Financial Statements for 1917–18', p. 23.
6. Melanie Oppenheimer, *Red Cross VAs: History of the VAD Movement in NSW*, Ohio Productions, Walcha, NSW, 1999, p. 83.

Disclosure statement

No potential conflict of interest was reported by the authors.

Notes on contributors

Alison Wishart worked as a Senior Curator at the State Library of NSW for 3 years. She worked with the librarians to interpret and promote the Red Cross Archive through onsite displays, stories for the website and public presentations.

Michael Carney is Coordinator of Projects and Policy at the State Library of NSW. He oversees the coordination of large projects, policy development and strategic development for the organisation. Michael planned the project to transfer the records of the NSW Branch of the Red Cross to the State Library.