



The end of reckoning – archival silences in the Germaine Greer Archive

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ABSTRACT

The Germaine Greer Archive was created by Greer in the 1970s to document her career and provide counter-evidence against false claims about her work and personal life. Later attempts to address gaps in the archive in relation to her television career were hampered by the poor record keeping of production companies and film and television archives. The archive documents both an attempt to create a complete record and the deliberate creation of a counter-narrative through arrangement and juxtaposition of records.

KEYWORDS

Personal archives; television archives; University of Melbourne Archives

Germaine Greer is a list maker. Throughout the Greer Archive we find examples of these jotted on the reverse of printed emails and letters: shopping lists; family trees for sixteenth-century poets. The Greer Archive itself is a series of lists. The ‘Television’ series is a list of programs she’s appeared on. The ‘Women Artists’ series is a list of women artists, from antiquity to contemporary practice, with files relating to over 4000 individual artists. She even began work in the 1970s on a ‘Women’s Book of Lists’, a potboiler including lists of bestselling pantyhose and current bride prices. Archivists trade in lists too. Box lists, finding aids. Why do we make lists? To help us find things, to help us remember things.

The Television series of the Germaine Greer Archive contains 665 files relating to as many television appearances over a 50-year career. Most of these files contain documentation and emails relating to the arrangement and administration of performances. However, a significant portion, mostly relating to appearances in the 1960s, relate to attempts to source recordings of those television programs some 40 years after the programs’ original air date. Greer went as far as to employ an assistant specifically tasked with hounding production companies for copies of these programs. Despite this, many early programs, such as the documentary program on the English writer Arnold Bennett *Good Ol’ Nocker*, and sketch comedy series *Twice a Fortnight* and *Nice Time*, were unable to be sourced for the archive.

The reasons for this are well enough known. In the 1960s and 1970s television was still considered an ephemeral medium. Tapes were expensive, and were often wiped and reused. In the UK the British Film Institute, while it began acquiring recordings of news broadcasts in 1960, only seriously began collecting television broadcasts after it was clear that vast amounts of television history had been permanently lost.¹ The 97 episodes of *Doctor*

Who from the 1960s recorded as missing are a well-known example. We know many of Greer's earliest television appearances primarily through the documentation found in the 'Television' and 'Early Years' series. In 1973 Greer presented a series of four discussion programs for Channel 10 titled 'Courtship and Marriage in Australia', 'Australian Sexual Morality (The Randy Puritans)', 'Women at Work' and 'The Australian Family'. The series brought together audiences from across the social and political spectrum who 'will not be experts or analysts of other peoples' behaviour, they will be demonstrating, criticising and defending their own life-styles and experience'. The file contains lists of topics for discussion and desired audience members. For the program 'Australian Sexual Morality', these included prostitutes (male and female), a sex offender, a sexual athlete, school kids (from a notorious school) and 'an assortment of people who think their sex life is normal'. Rupert Murdoch is also on the list, but crossed out.² An Internet search using the Google search engine returns no record of these programs at all; no press reviews or clips. The National Film and Sound Archive has no record of them. Searching the National Library of Australia's cultural heritage platform 'Trove' for television listings from the time does not even tell us the title the programs were aired under. We assume they were aired because Greer tried to source copies of them around 2010.

We know that the sketch comedy series *Nice Time* was aired between 1968 and 1969; however, of the 29 episodes originally aired, only two episodes that we know of have survived. One of these is recorded on VHS tape in the Greer Archive, while another was uploaded to YouTube by a fan in 2015. Also found in the Greer Archive was a never-aired short black-and-white out-take of Greer greeting Kenny Everett as a milkman including footage of Greer in a bath of milk, found on a 16 mm film reel in the Greer Archive. While there is little surviving video footage of these programs, the textual material that does exist is extremely rich. Among the documents found in the Television series is a master list of sketch ideas, which includes 'a competition for wives to find out which can make the best job of decorating husband's bald head with paint, modelling clay, etc.' and 'three well-known comedians allowed one minute each to try to make a team of undertakers laugh'.³

But what is this impulse to return to the 1960s and 1970s to try and complete the record? We see this all through the Greer Archive, notably in photocopies of student articles in the 'Print Journalism' series made long after they were originally published. At the 'Meet the Archivists' event at University of Melbourne to launch the Greer Archive, Greer said she didn't create the archive, she just kept it.⁴ Now this may have been true in the heady days of *The Female Eunuch* when she was receiving hundreds of letters a day from people all over the world. However, in the years since, its accumulation has clearly been an active process and its arrangement been undertaken with intent. The archive that Greer attempted to complete is her work in the public domain. Very little material exists in the archive from the 1960s and earlier prior to her years at Cambridge. While her recordkeeping may at first appear to be comprehensive, there is also something oddly self-effacing about it. If recordkeeping is 'a kind of witnessing', as Sue McKemmish put it in her seminal 1996 paper 'Evidence of Me',⁵ what is Greer calling on us to witness?

The justification Greer returns to often when asked about the archive is what McKemmish identifies as 'bearing witness to the cultural moment'. An inventory by the creator from 1997 gives as one of the archive's potential uses 'useful not only as a guide to feminist thought, but, because of the 20,000 letters etc. from the public, to the evolution of social attitudes in the latter half of the century'.⁶ It is also in this mode that Greer's television career is often

cast, as a talking head on documentary programs about the 1960s and 1970s, commenting on feminism, pornography and figures like the Monty Python crew and Lillian Roxon. Even *Nice Time*, which at first glance traded in nonsense and the absurd, was in its own way deeply political. *Nice Time* used absurdity as a counterpoint to the grim socio-political climate of the late 1960s. Greer recalls a sketch where they paid a man on the street five pounds to climb a lamppost. The flipside of the sketch was the man was a tradesman who had pawned his tools for alcohol, and could therefore no longer work.⁷ This counterpoint is particularly powerful in original documentation of the programs of the 1960s and 1970s, where the final products are inaccessible or have not survived; where we do not have the thoughts of notorious schoolchildren regarding sex recorded on film.

In my view, there is also an element of verification and validation in play. In files for later programs such as *Late Review*, Greer's assistant emailed production companies requesting VHS tapes of the preceding night 'as we are getting mail and we need to check what was said'. At the Greer Archive launch, Greer spoke about her return to Australia in the early 1970s and of hearing stories about her past that bore no relation to Greer's memory of them. She says of her response, 'This can't go on, this falsification of real events can't continue. What can I do about this?'⁸ The answer to this question is the archive. The archive is set as a bulwark against the public idea of Germaine Greer, the 'mythical beast', as she puts it. Long prior to the transfer of the Greer Archive to the University of Melbourne, Greer wrote frequently in columns and journalism of the archive as a way of setting the record straight. In her 2004 piece 'Exodus from Australia' for the *Sunday Times Review*, Greer writes about her fury at interviewer Andrew Denton's line of questioning on the program *Enough Rope*: 'In fact I was so incensed by Denton's irrelevant and personal questions that he felt it necessary to send me a written apology, which has gone into the archive.'⁹ The letter can indeed be found in General Correspondence file 2014.0042.00218, 'Correspondence DEM'.

Greer's archival instinct is generally methodical. Files in the television series contain the administrative correspondence and any other paperwork associated with the making of a program. Mail in response to television programs is stored elsewhere in the 'General Correspondence' series. Deviations from this approach are revealing. For her panel talk show *The Last Word*, viewer responses are stored with the documentation, giving a range of women's opinions on adultery, home schooling and care for the aged. We see instances of this in other series as well. Hundreds of vicious emails she received for her column on Steve Irwin are filed with the printout of the column itself in the 'Print Journalism' series. Viewer responses for the two episodes of the *Dick Cavett Show* that Greer guest-hosted on rape and abortion are in the 'Early Years' series. These instances where we have the object and the response filed side by side are places where Greer is subtly directing us to look. Likewise, empty folders throughout the archive signpost where documentation should be, but is not. In Verne Harris's response to 'Evidence of Me', he noted that recordkeeping is in a sense storytelling, a way of constructing a narrative of the self. While the Greer Archive may have originally been intended to combat the myths born from Greer's celebrity status, it also creates a counter-narrative in which the archivists who have worked to preserve, catalogue and cross-reference the archive are complicit. There is an ideal archive that is constantly resisted by the physical files in the repository, by the gaps left by incomplete television archives at the BBC and British Film Institute. "Evidence" must always be mourned, for its preservation carries the very possibility of its reduction to ashes.¹⁰

Endnotes

1. S Bryant, 'National Television Archives and Their Role', *Critical Studies in Television*, vol. 5, no. 2, September 2010, pp. 60–7.
2. University of Melbourne Archives, Television, Germaine Greer Specials, Channel 10, Sydney, 1973, 2017.0002.00016.
3. University of Melbourne Archives, Germaine Greer Archive, Television, *Nice Time*, Granada, 1969, 2017.0002.00002.
4. 'Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists', The University of Melbourne, 8 March 2017, available at <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LOcMazsj6OQ>>, accessed 20 October 2017.
5. S McKemmish, 'Evidence of Me', *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 45, no. 3, 1996, p. 174.
6. University of Melbourne Archives, Germaine Greer Archive, Major Works, [Black Notebook and typescript summary inventory] c.1997, 2014.0045.00603.
7. University of Melbourne Archives, Germaine Greer Archive, Print Journalism, 'Exodus from Oz', *Sunday Times*, 18 January 2004, 2014.0046.00942.
8. 'Germaine Greer Meets the Archivists'.
9. 'Exodus from Oz'.
10. V Harris, 'On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in "Evidence of Me"', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 29, no. 1, 2001, pp. 8–21.

Disclosure statement

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Notes on contributor

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