

## **Eternity revisited: in pursuit of a national documentation strategy and a national archival system**

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As I sit down to write this thought piece in January 2014, our Canadian colleagues are preparing for a Canadian Archives Summit with the enviable title 'Towards a New Blueprint for Canada's Recorded Memory'.<sup>1</sup> To me the most interesting word in this title is the word 'new'. While the Canadian summit has been organised in response to the crisis associated with the removal of federal funding for their National Archival Development Program, Australians can nevertheless only look with wonder at another Commonwealth country with a federal system of government that has the luxury of an existing national blueprint for recorded memory – for surely one cannot create a 'new' blueprint if an old one does not already exist.

In a background paper for the summit, Lara Wilson of the Canadian Council of Archives analyses the 'Canadian Archival System'.<sup>2</sup> This paper builds on a 2013 report from the Association of Canadian Archivists' Canadian Archival System Taskforce.<sup>3</sup> While I wish our Canadian colleagues every success with both saving and advancing their national archival system, these developments serve to highlight the poverty of similar arrangements for national archival coordination in Australia.

Since the early-1970s when Dominion Archivist W Kaye Lamb was invited to Australia to study and report on prospects for an Australian national archival system,<sup>4</sup> Canada has loomed large in this country as an aspirational model for archival cooperation and coordination that straddles not only jurisdictional boundaries, but also the divides that separate public records from private records and government archives from community archives. Lamb's 1970s vision was for an Australian archival system with a national archives at its apex. Aspects of this vision eventually found their way into the

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Commonwealth *Archives Act 1983* – reportedly despite the opposition of the then senior leadership of the Australian Archives, who cleaved to a narrower and more traditional view of their institution being a public record office for a single jurisdiction. In practice, the narrower view of the role of the National Archives of Australia (NAA) has prevailed over the past 30 years, with the NAA only ever making occasional, largely ad hoc and half-hearted attempts at exercising national leadership. This ambivalence about pursuing Lamb’s vision of a national archival system stands in stark contrast to the NAA’s erstwhile parent institution, the National Library of Australia (NLA), which since the 1970s has been unequivocal in cooperating with libraries and librarians nationwide to foster and develop a national library system. While the NLA has for many years devoted serious funding to national leadership and coordination, the NAA has always struggled to find capacity in its budget to do something similar in the archival sector. This situation was confirmed recently by current NAA Director-General, David Fricker, when he was quizzed about the matter at the Australian Society of Archivists Conference in Canberra in October 2013.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, perhaps the greatest indictment of the NAA’s dereliction of the Lamb vision is that the only serious attempts at developing a national union list of archival holdings (as mandated in Section 65 of the *Archives Act*) have been pursued by the NLA, not the NAA, initially via the multi-part *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts Relating to Australia* and more recently its online equivalents, the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM) and today’s all-encompassing Trove system (which *inter alia* incorporates the content and functionality of the earlier RAAM system).

For some years Australia had an Australian Council on Archives (ACA), which brought together representatives from across the archival sector, including public records institutions, collecting archives and university archives.<sup>6</sup> The ACA was, however, wound up in 2000 at the instigation of the then NAA Director-General George Nichols. The rationale for this termination was that the ACA had always struggled to carve out a meaningful role for itself and had languished in the face of a lack of funding and a lack of interest in national cooperation and coordination from across the sector. Nichols, for his part, professed to support Lamb’s vision for a coordinated national archival system but argued that this vision could not be achieved by the NAA alone in the absence of any meaningful desire to pursue the vision from across the sector as a whole. One could, though, argue that it is difficult to get people interested in a national archival system if no one bothers to articulate how such a system might operate and the benefits that might be derived from committing to it. The Lamb report is 40 years old, so perhaps it is time for the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) to establish an equivalent to the ACA’s Canadian Archival System Taskforce and convene a summit to commence developing a blueprint for a national archival system. In doing so, CAARA – the Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities – must be involved and supportive, but any taskforce and summit has to have much broader and inclusive participation than just the large and relatively well-funded public records institutions that make up the membership of CAARA. Given the long-established ambivalence of the NAA about such matters, I am now inclined to agree with Michael Piggott, who in his 2008 valedictory on the Australian archival system argued that the *Archives Act* should be revised to remove national leadership functions and powers from the NAA, with an entity quite separate from government being established to take on this role.<sup>7</sup>

Piggott’s valedictory is in fact a very good place for the ASA to start in considering its options in this area. While Piggott’s paper deservedly generated considerable interest and discussion at the time, since then the issue has once again sunk back into the

background of our discourse, while our debates about reinventing archival methods have focused more on the (undoubtedly vitally important) nuts and bolts issues featured in this theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*. Piggott called for ‘an inclusive system, which pursues funding and a research agenda, develops strategies, coordinates societal documentation, represents *all* stakeholders and communicates an agreed vision’.<sup>8</sup> Piggott was not entirely negative in his assessment of the current situation, which he characterised as a ‘proto national system’ – an ‘awkward teenager who experienced two growth spurts’, but now needs to grow up.<sup>9</sup> So, we have some kinds of foundations upon which a proper national system may be built – we are not starting with nothing. We have achieved a great deal collectively over many years. The high international standing of the Australian profession as innovators and standards setters testifies to this. We are not unused to cooperating for the greater good, with an awareness that we share common interests and a recognition that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. The particular flavour that Australia, perhaps unlike Canada, can bring to this endeavour is an inclusive view of the world of records, where historical archives are not disconnected from current records but are viewed holistically as the indivisible records continuum. I would add too that this needs to be a world where private records are not viewed as somehow being fundamentally different from public records and where personal records are not regarded as being fundamentally different from corporate records – where a record is a record is a record.<sup>10</sup>

One of the recommendations of Piggott’s 2008 paper was to develop ‘a grid computing-equivalent for a documentation plan for Australian society’.<sup>11</sup> This echoed an earlier call of mine, made at the 1997 ASA Annual Conference, to develop a national documentation strategy for collecting archives. Subsequently published under the title ‘From Here to Eternity’,<sup>12</sup> the approaches suggested in that paper bear revisiting, and not just in the limited context of collecting archives. Speaking of grids, I even presented a grid that could act as a framework for shaping such a strategy (see Table 1). With some minor updates, this grid promises to be as useful today as I thought it was in the 1990s. The grid had originally been developed in the context of a strategic planning exercise at the NLA in 1996, where I worked at that time – and was subsequently tested and refined at one of the legendary week-long ‘Managing the Records Continuum’ workshops, organised by Monash University and featuring David Bearman.

Where, you might ask, does documentation feature in this framework? My answer is – everywhere. Documentation involves investigating what records society (broadly

Table 1. Possible framework for planning a national documentation strategy.

	Components	Issues	Partners	Strategies	Recommendations
Making Records	e.g. Appraisal; Disposal				
Organising Records	e.g. Intellectual control; Recordkeeping system design				
Keeping Records	e.g. Custody arrangements; Preservation				
Accessing and Using Records	e.g. Online networks; Open data etc.				

defined to include all of its component parts – individuals, organisations, companies, governments – as well as the whole) needs to make, keep and use to function and to understand and account for itself. It also involves putting into place cooperative strategies for meeting these national documentation requirements to the best of our collective ability given the resources at our disposal. I should also note that many of the topics that might be identified in the Components column in the grid are the subject of papers in this ‘Reinventing Archival Methods’ theme issue – and that they are topics that need to be addressed both at the level of professional practice in individual archival programs and at a coordinated national systemic level. My four categories – making; organising; keeping; accessing/using – are not necessarily mutually exclusive – some overlaps are unavoidable and they are certainly not meant to suggest some kind of sequential set of processes. They all occur simultaneously. Nevertheless, they are a useful way of dividing up the terrain for the purposes of devising and implementing national strategies.

In my 1997 paper I recommended a national approach that involved a combination of the Canadian ‘Total Archives’ philosophy and the Australian ‘Distributed National Collection’ philosophy, which at that time was prominent in the library and museum sectors. We needed then, and we still need today, a collaborative system that ensures to the maximum extent possible that the distributed holdings of the archives and records of the nation document the wide diversity of corporate, cultural and intellectual activity in this country to support, in the words of the Archivist’s Mission, ‘understandings of Australian life through the management and retention of its personal, corporate and societal memory’.<sup>13</sup>

I am of course aware of the danger of meta-narratives and dominant discourses, when one starts planning for national coordination of this kind. This is undoubtedly contested terrain. It is vital, therefore, to put in place mechanisms that are hospitable to the powerless in society and that reflect the plurality of society. Grassroots or community archiving initiatives, of which there are many thousands in Australia, need to be acknowledged and nurtured through this national system.<sup>14</sup> Given the scarcity of resources at our collective disposal it is vital that we cooperate to minimise duplication of effort and to maximise the strategic coverage of our documentation programs.

Like Piggott, I believe that we are not starting from ground zero in these national documentation efforts. In the area of making records we have the ASA’s admirable appraisal statement, endorsed after lengthy debate in 2007.<sup>15</sup> In the area of organising records we have a variety of national and international standards for metadata, record-keeping systems design and archival intellectual control, even if our track record in implementing these standards is patchy at best. For keeping records we have made considerable progress in the area of digital preservation, while for access we have the aforementioned Trove system courtesy of the NLA. For many years the University of Melbourne’s eScholarship Research Centre (previously the Australian Science Archives Project) has done exemplary work in documenting and supporting access to the distributed national collection of archives relating to science and technology.<sup>16</sup>

There have been occasional, albeit stuttering, attempts to engineer national coordination in areas of archival activity. During the 1990s there was an Archives Working Group of the Cultural Ministers Council, which carried out some excellent and valuable work, particularly in relation to records relating to indigenous Australians.<sup>17</sup> In 1999 the National Scholarly Communications Forum ran a roundtable at the NAA in Canberra on ‘Archives in the National Research Infrastructure’, which was a national summit in all but name and which agreed on a set of recommendations that served as a ‘to do’ list for national leadership for many years.<sup>18</sup> At that roundtable Michael Piggott

delivered a paper entitled 'A National Approach to Archival Appraisal and Collecting', which in turn inspired the November 2001 theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* on Australian documentation strategies. In 2002 the National Archives hosted another summit examining options for developing a National Online Archival Network,<sup>19</sup> efforts that eventually came to nothing but which nevertheless demonstrated some interest in national systems and collaboration. In 2006 the NAA hosted a 'mini summit' on digital archiving in the twenty-first century in preparation for a national cross-domain digital collections summit that was run by the now defunct Collections Council of Australia.<sup>20</sup>

Despite Piggott's call to arms in 2008, we seem to have lost a lot of our interest in and momentum for a national archival system and for a national documentation strategy. Any discussion about reinventing archival methods has to have this issue front and centre in our debates and discourses. It is time for the Australian Society of Archivists to establish an equivalent to the ACA's Canadian Archival System Taskforce and convene a summit to commence developing a blueprint for a national archival system. At the same time it would also be a good idea to revisit the representational structures and machinery for the various strands of archival and recordkeeping endeavour in this country.

## Endnotes

1. The views expressed in this paper are the personal views of the author and do not necessarily represent the views of his employer.
2. Lara Wilson, 'The Canadian Archival System Today: An Analysis', 2013, available at <[http://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/Attachments/Advocacy\\_attachments/larawilsonsummit.pdf](http://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/Attachments/Advocacy_attachments/larawilsonsummit.pdf)>, accessed January 2014.
3. Canadian Archival System Taskforce, Interim Report, June 2013, available at <[http://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/Attachments/About\\_Us\\_attachments/Governance/cast\\_interim\\_report\\_final.pdf](http://archivists.ca/sites/default/files/Attachments/About_Us_attachments/Governance/cast_interim_report_final.pdf)>, accessed January 2014.
4. W Kaye Lamb, *Development of the National Archives: Report*, AGPS, Canberra, September 1973, available at <[http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Lamb\\_Report\\_tcm16-49445.pdf](http://www.naa.gov.au/Images/Lamb_Report_tcm16-49445.pdf)>, accessed January 2014. See also 'A National Archives System', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 5, no. 5, November 1973, pp. 104–9; Michael Saclier, 'The Lamb Report and Its Environment', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 5, no. 8, August 1974, pp. 200–14; and Bob Sharman, 'Australian Archives in Lamb's Clothing', *Archivaria*, no. 2, Summer 1976, pp. 20–32.
5. Professor Sue McKemmish of Monash University posed the question to David Fricker, observing that Australia does not have a national archives, but rather a national government archives.
6. Baiba Berzins, 'The Australian Council of Archives', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 20, no. 1, May 1992, pp. 51–6.
7. Michael Piggott, 'The Australian Archival System, 1971–2008: A Valedictory Appraisal', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 36, no. 2, November 2008, pp. 189–208.
8. *ibid.*, p. 191.
9. *ibid.*, p. 201.
10. Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott, 'Toward the Archival Multiverse: Challenging the Binary Opposition of the Personal and Corporate Archive in Modern Archival Theory and Practice', *Archivaria*, no. 76, Fall 2013, pp. 111–44.
11. Piggott, p. 202.
12. Adrian Cunningham, 'From Here to Eternity: Collecting Archives and the Need for a National Documentation Strategy', *LASIE*, vol. 21, no. 1, March 1998, pp. 32–45. The original ASA Conference version of this paper can be found at <<http://search.informit.com.au/fullText;dn=753951008958185;res=IELHSS>>, accessed January 2014.

13. See the 'Archival Profession' page on the Australian Society of Archivists' website, available at <<http://www.archivists.org.au/about-us/archival-profession>>, accessed 19 June 2014.
14. The work of the National Library of Australia's Community Heritage Grants Scheme, which has operated since the early-1990s, in supporting grassroots collecting and preservation activity should be acknowledged here – Australia's nearest equivalent to the Canadian National Archival Development Program. See <<http://www.nla.gov.au/awards-and-grants/chg>>, accessed January 2014.
15. See <[http://www.archivists.org.au/icms\\_docs/112149\\_Appraisal\\_Statement.pdf](http://www.archivists.org.au/icms_docs/112149_Appraisal_Statement.pdf)>, accessed January 2014.
16. See <<http://www.esrc.unimelb.edu.au/>>, accessed January 2014.
17. See <[http://cmc.arts.gov.au/working\\_groups/past\\_working\\_groups/archives/archives\\_working\\_group](http://cmc.arts.gov.au/working_groups/past_working_groups/archives/archives_working_group)>, accessed January 2014.
18. Report on the National Scholarly Communications Forum Round Table on Archives, available at <<http://www.asap.unimelb.edu.au/asa/aus-archivists/msg03483.html>>, accessed January 2014.
19. Colleen McEwen, 'National Online Archival Network Summit', *Australian Society of Archivists Bulletin*, December 2002, pp. 16–19.
20. Council of Australasian Archives and Records Authorities, 'Digital Archiving in the 21st Century: Archives Domain Discussion Paper', September 2006, available at <<http://www.caara.org.au/wp-content/uploads/2010/03/DigitalArchiving21C.pdf>>, accessed January 2014.