



GUEST EDITORIAL

Documenting Australian Society Redux

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The work of archivists is vital for ... supporting understandings
of Australian life through the management and retention
of its personal, corporate and social memory.

(extract from Australian Society of Archivists,
'The Archivist's Mission', 1996)

'The Archivist's Mission' was endorsed by the Council of the Australian Society of Archivists (ASA) in July 1996. From 1999 it was published in the frontispiece of *Archives and Manuscripts* until it disappeared from the journal in 2012 at the time of the switch to Taylor and Francis. Nevertheless, the statement can still be found on the ASA website, so it still constitutes our formal statement of professional intent.¹

The mission statement confirms our professional commitment to the ambitious cause of documenting Australian society. While the statement implies that this is an endeavour that is a responsibility shared by a range of professional groups, including librarians and museum curators, ASA members understand that archives constitute a vital and perhaps the most important segment of the totality of Australia's documentary heritage. Also implied by the statement is an understanding that, because every archivist and archival program contributes to the cause, Australia's documentary memory is distributed across thousands of keeping places scattered all over the nation. These keeping places range from large national and state institutions through corporate, organisational and collecting archives to small, grassroots, community-led initiatives.

While the mission statement refers to archives as records that have continuing evidential value, this neatly avoids the question – probably the hardest archival question of all – of how do we decide what records have continuing value and what records do not have that value? It is an archival truism that the most important decisions archivists ever make are appraisal decisions. Because records are unique, once a record has been destroyed it is gone forever. Decisions to dispose of records are the ultimate denial of access. Many of us take this solemn responsibility so seriously that it is probably no exaggeration to say that it is one that from time to time keeps us awake at night. Are we getting and keeping the 'right stuff'? Are our holdings truly representative and reflective of the full diversity of society and human experience in Australia? What perspectives are privileged? What and who is being silenced by their omission from our archival estate? Are

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the most significant and distinctive aspects of life in Australia adequately documented for the benefit of current and future generations? Who gets to have a say in our appraisal decisions and how defensible, evidence-based, transparent and accountable are those decisions?

Today's archivists have devised sophisticated frameworks and tools to guide their appraisal decision making processes. Our textbook *Keeping Archives* includes an extensive chapter on appraisal. In 2007, the ASA endorsed a formal statement on appraisal, which every ASA member should take the trouble to read carefully.² As useful as these things are, their focus is necessarily granular – that is, performing individual appraisal exercises within the context of an archival program's unique mandate and/or collection development policy. Left hanging is the broader and harder question of how does each archival program's appraisal decisions fit into the wider landscape of Australia's national holdings of documentary heritage?

It is that broader question that the 'Documenting Australian Society' initiative seeks to address. Established under the auspices of the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program following a national summit meeting in December 2018, the initiative has since run a number of symposia and seminars.³ The most recent of these was a panel session addressing the question 'How can we rethink our appraisal practices?', held at the 2023 Annual Conference of the ASA in Melbourne.

It is with great pleasure that I was invited to edit this theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* devoted to the work of the Documenting Australian Society initiative. Long-term readers of the journal will know that this is not the first time that the journal has devoted a theme issue to the topic of 'Documenting Australian Society'. In 2001, Maggie Shapley edited just such a theme issue. Comparing the content of these two theme issues allows us to contemplate just how much progress has or has not been made on addressing the issue in the ensuing 22 years? Since 2001, we have seen the finalisation of the ASA's 'Statement on Appraisal', referred to above, in addition to the 2018 summit meeting with its grandly titled statement of intent, 'The Canberra Declaration'. At one level, it is fair say that the issue is one that will, by its inherently contestable nature, never be definitively resolved. As such, promoting ongoing debate, discussion and awareness raising may be the most that we can ever hope to achieve. Nevertheless, Summit delegates agreed that we should collectively be working towards something more than just ongoing discussions. My attempt to distil the 'Canberra Declaration' into a succinct set of strategic objectives identified the following five goals:

1. A **National Documentation Strategy** agreed by key industry and professional stakeholders and endorsed by governments.
2. An agreed, evidence-based **framework** (developed through research, dialogue and contestation) for mapping Australia's diverse documentary heritage needs and documentation gaps/silences.
3. Effective **coordination** of collection/acquisition/appraisal planning and activity spanning Australia's entire ecosystem of documentary heritage programs and initiatives.
4. Support for **communities of practice**-based efforts to document aspects of Australian society, especially those of First Nations peoples.
5. Inclusive, active, ongoing **discussion and improved community awareness** of the need to continuously improve the documentation of Australian society for the benefit of current and future generations.

A number of constraints on progress, each of which in their own way provide a justification for the existence of the initiative and its steering committee, can also be identified:

- Funding for documentary heritage preservation will always be limited and must be spent wisely.
- Massive volumes of documentation are created every year in Australia, but only a tiny percentage of the totality can and should be preserved for the use of future generations.
- Deciding what to keep and what not to keep involves making hard decisions.
- The hard decisions made by documentary heritage programs and practitioners are made for the benefit of the Australian community. Therefore, these decisions must be defensible, transparent, consultative, evidence-based and made with reference to the wider body of Australia's distributed holdings of documentary heritage materials.

The articles in this theme issue should be read with all of the foregoing in mind. Most of the articles in this issue are based on presentations made at webinars organised by the Documenting Australian Society initiative. Two articles are from the first of these webinars, which in late 2020 addressed the topic of 'Documenting COVID-19 in Australia. Historian Anthea Hyslop takes the long view of documenting COVID-19, by assessing the state of surviving documentation of the 1919 'Spanish Flu' epidemic. First presented when the COVID pandemic was at its height, this paper provided curators with some fascinating insights into the kinds of contemporaneous documentation that should be prioritised for preservation drawing on the strengths and weaknesses of our documentary holdings of a similar pandemic a century earlier. Digital Humanities scholar Terhi Murmikko-Fuller provides additional intriguing insights and asks some hard questions about capturing documentation of 'ephemeral popular culture', for example social media postings, as enduring evidence of the impact of COVID-19 on Australian society and the lived experience of ordinary Australians.

The second webinar was held in late 2022, addressing the topic 'Honouring the stories of struggle: Reassessing Australian records of disadvantage'. From this webinar, we have two papers. Jennifer Jerome looks at how the lived experience of disadvantage is documented (or not as the case may be) in case files preserved by the Tasmanian State Archives. Jerome argues that case files are, in many respects, the best available evidence of the lived experience of disadvantage, as they are often the most substantial body of documentation of an under-privileged and often silenced segment of society. Despite that, our appraisal regimes for case files often regard this form of record as being of low value and low priority for archival retention. The other piece from the 2022 webinar is a transcript of a video prepared by Robyn Sutherland, CEO of the United Communities welfare service in Adelaide. This video features interviews with the clients of that service where they were invited to reflect on the kinds of documentation these welfare recipients would like to see retained as evidence of their lived experiences. Sutherland reflects that, perhaps inevitably, the records created and retained by her organisation are skewed towards documenting the negative experiences of their clients, rather than creating and capturing a more holistic record of lives of the individuals concerned. This insight raises difficult methodological questions for those of us concerned with the creation and retention of a truly representative body of documentation of Australian society.

The theme issue also includes a highly instructive case study by Jenny Fewster of a nationwide community of practice that has formed to improve the creation and preservation of documentation of the performing arts in Australia. The collaborative approach to documenting the often ephemeral and evanescent expressions of performance art described by Fewster provides a compelling model for improving the coordination of documentation of other aspects of societal experience. Finally, we have another case study from Louise Curham describing an exercise in participatory appraisal carried out in the context of documenting an individual suburb in the south of Canberra. This article addresses the important issue of how to involve

and engage the subjects of appraisal decisions in the processes of determining what documentation should be made and kept of their lives and locales. Too often archivists make appraisal decisions within a ‘black box’ that privileges their professional expertise over the knowledge and insights of the people about which the documentation is created and for whom the documentation is preserved. Participatory approaches to appraisal are still the exception rather than the norm in our professional practice – a situation that is untenable in an era that claims to value social justice and self-determination.

I am sure that readers will be stimulated by the various articles in this theme issue. I commend them and the goals of the Documenting Australian Society initiative to readers of the journal and look forward to seeing where our evolving discourse on this important topic takes us over the coming years.

Notes

1. Australian Society of Archivists, ‘The Archivist’s Mission’, available at <https://www.archivists.org.au/learning-publications/the-archival-profession/archivists-mission>, accessed 21 September 2023.
2. Australian Society of Archivists, ‘Statement on Appraisal, 2007’, available at <https://www.archivists.org.au/documents/item/12>, accessed 21 September 2023.
3. ‘Documenting Australian Society’, available at <https://amw.org.au/node/111>, accessed 21 September 2023.