



REFLECTION

Paper Elephants: Reflections on Changing Archival Practice at the Australian Museum

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Abstract

The archives of Australia's first museum, the Australian Museum (AM) in Sydney, are an artefact of colonialism, still intertwined with the complexities of science, public museums, and imperialism. It's the elephant in the archival room. However, change has come to Australia's colonial-era museums, affecting their missions, historical framing, and collections and archives. This article provides a brief history of knowledge at the AM in order to showcase some current initiatives aimed at opening its archival holdings to new perspectives, encounters, shared knowledge, and a protocols-based approach to access. Understanding the history of the museum and its archival structures and methods is vital for rethinking a more open, generous, and responsible future for this important collection.

Keywords: *Museums; Museum archives; History of collections; Colonialism; Record-keeping*

The power and problem of the colonial archives

Empire, record-keeping, and archives are intimately linked. As archival theorists and historians of empire-building and colonisation have repeatedly shown, archival forms and record-keeping practices reflect and inform systems of governance, just as record-keeping was central to attempts by imperial powers and their colonies to assert and maintain administrative control.¹ It's an expanding critical arena, bringing together colonial historical studies and archival theory with studies that subject the colonial archives to sustained historical analysis. These studies view the archives themselves as 'artefacts of colonialism rather than simply the repositories where the data pertaining to the colonial past is stored'.² This thinking is also beginning to be reflected in changes to contemporary archival practice within some of Australia's most significant remaining colonial-era archival repositories.

Australia's first and oldest cultural-scientific institution, the Australian Museum (AM) in Sydney, was founded in 1827.³ Its colonial archive documents the museum's own becoming and its developing knowledge practice in surprising detail. Still in use at the museum, it is one of only a few Australian colonial archives that continue to function in their original administrative context into the present.⁴ This makes it a historical object in its own right and a place

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to reframe current practice. Following the lead of historians and theorists of the archive like Ann Laura Stoler, it is possible to use the AM Archives to both demonstrate and rethink the establishment and longitudinal operation of colonial archival power.

If, as museum theorist Tony Bennett suggests, museums are ‘good to think with’, then an archive within a natural history museum is even better.⁵ We might be able to imagine a museum without objects, but it’s impossible to think of a natural history museum without its archives to create and hold the conditions for its agency, knowledge, collections, and operations. At the AM, the museum’s administrative recordkeeping rules and growing archival repository created and sustained the conditions of its authority and actions. At the same time, its specimen registration systems created and authorised its material forms and structured its scientific knowledge to circulate across worldwide networks of science and sociability. In part, this unique record-keeping system and the detailed paper trail it produced were a generative site for the universalist project to classify and order Australian nature and for the assertion of European ways of knowing across Australian landscapes and environments.⁶

As a clear mark of their continuing importance to the contemporary museum, the museum’s colonial archives and their successors are still held largely in their original order on the same site in Sydney where they were created, ordered and used. Never transferred to the NSW State Archives, these institutional records remain within the neo-classical facade and sandstone walls of the museum. Never finished, the administrative and collection archives are still being added to and used. The archives now include a collected archive and a photography and moving image collection as well as a large digital archive.⁷ The archival collections are vital to museum functioning and they are regularly accessed by museum staff and curators, scientists, historians, Indigenous communities, researchers and knowledge holders, and members of the public.

Legacies and potential

The AM spent its early decades establishing its own authority, and in protracted, and sometimes heated, private and public debate over its mission and leadership. Trust members, drawn from the colony’s social and political establishment, were keen to generate and then share the spoils of the museum’s specimen collections alongside its growing cultural and scientific networks, influence, and power. To read the early Trust Minutes is to see just how much time and energy was spent on rule-making and boundary riding.⁸ Debates spilled into Parliament and the Sydney press too, where there was an avid public interest in the museum’s governance and activities. Behind these debates were not just personal-political tussles, but some of the colony’s most important, foundational tensions between nature, environment, and settlers, and between Indigenous presence and colonisers and settlers’ aggressive claims for knowledge, territory, and authority.

In order to imagine the future, functions, and limits of the contemporary AM archive, it is vital to understand its staggered, uncertain history of becoming and the other possibilities for nature and museum practice its late 19th-century accounting and registration systems carefully papered over. There is a surprising fluidity to the museum’s form and functions over these years. Creating a museum for the colony was an early state priority, but the animal taxonomies and collections focus that have come to define the public natural history museum were not the immediate priority. Rather they solidified as museum ‘common sense’ later in the century as the colony moved to nationhood, biological sciences moved to the university, taxonomic research moved behind the scenes and exhibitions and education became the museum’s public face.⁹ Before that, everything was up for messy, acrimonious debate – mission, governance, audience, material collections and built forms, scientific frameworks, and networks of influence. As part

of this debate on its mission and values, the museum's recordkeeping systems – and especially who had the authority to make, keep, and authorise records – were argued over through the 19th century. This debate sometimes had dramatic results. The physical expulsion of curator Gerard Krefft from the museum building, along with his experimental scientific practice and his heretical evolutionary ideas, is the most graphic example.¹⁰

Of course, the past is never past. In some cases, the AM still uses the same colonial knowledge structures and some of its early recordkeeping series for making and keeping records today.¹¹ These records remain essential for taxonomic work, collection management and description, and historical research. However, understanding the museum's recordkeeping rules and archival materials, as well as their historical significance, allows them to become a central site for new museum taxonomies and other ontologies of nature. These same colonial archives, born in contestation and the quest for colonial power, are now of key significance in addressing a tangle of urgent epistemological and practical questions related to Indigenous data sovereignty, collection stewardship and repatriation, nature and 'country', biodiversity loss, climate change, and environmental sustainability. It's the task of those who work with these archives every day (archivists, but also data analysts, digitisation and preservation specialists, content producers, and curators) to make sure they are understood, accessible, known, and useful to help address these issues and more.¹²

It's a heady mix for a museum archivist, a chance to work at the coalface of critical museum practice and archival theory in a place that holds a complex documentary archive but is also, in itself, an archival object with its own fascinating potential for theorisation, history-making and historical description. With an understanding of this contingent history, it becomes possible to re-imagine contemporary archival practice at the museum to retain the archive as (historical) object but encircle that understanding with alternate contexts and descriptive regimes. We can open new pathways into (and out of) its archival structures and knowledge holdings to help expand and amplify its use. Postcolonial critiques of the archives become part of a reparative project.¹³ Part of this is the work that historian and cultural practitioner Jilda Andrews calls 'cultural diplomacy', with the potential to redistribute museums' knowledges and cultural capital more equitably and more widely.¹⁴ The 2024 NSW State Archives First-Nations-led community access project calls this 'rematriation' or 'the process of weaving traditional and cultural knowledge back in harmony with the land'.¹⁵ As focussed on protocols as it is on holdings, this work can bring ways of being together to regenerate the museum and its archive less as a repository for text and things and for object-based thinking, and more as a dynamic and practical interface to community, country, knowledge, and story.¹⁶

There's one enormous built-in advantage to doing this work at the museum. Archives within museums have a ready-made on site and online audience, and a special opportunity and ability to reach outside their own orders, collections, and walls. The AM has an audience of over 1,000,000 visitors a year, with many more visiting the museum's website and viewing its regional touring exhibitions, events, and public programs. For the Archives team, it is an opportunity to work with urgent archival challenges in an institution committed to public communication, debate and the difficult process of 'unsettling' museum operations, collections, knowledges and narratives.¹⁷

Museums offer multiple pathways to connect issues, knowledge, and people: collections and catalogues, digital initiatives, digitisation and online content, apps and games, exhibitions, public programs, tours and talks, school and tertiary education programs, and research projects and collaborations. So how has AM archival practice responded to the colonial museum-archival challenge and to the wider need for more ethical, equitable, and critical modes of archival practice?

The elephant at the museum: is the museum an archive?

Work on historicising the colonial museum, along with new international definitions of the museum as an active, relational process, are moving museum archives and collection documentation to the centre of museum history, practice, and thought.¹⁸ The idea of the ‘relational museum’ has grown alongside mass digitisation and big data approaches to museum specimens and collections, so that there is also a clearer view of the museum as a data and knowledge infrastructure and fact-making enterprise, alongside its material and object forms.¹⁹ Increasingly, museums are studied as particular, historically contingent knowledge structures, processes, protocols, and relationships as much as they are for their collections and collectors.

The natural history museum has its own, particular methods and framework of ‘common sense’ tied to its scientific research and taxonomic discovery and classification functions. In part, the natural history museum wants to function as a kind of scientific instrument, doing two difficult and different things: making certified knowledge about nature, and then making that knowledge move. Like an archive, the natural history museum’s operations and systems are focussed not just on keeping, but on classification and structuration for continuing motion and for agile access, use, and re-use of its knowledges into the future.²⁰

In 1922, revered archival theorist Hilary Jenkinson posed an archival question that also goes to the heart of museum methods and thinking:

Supposing for example that a Viceroy sends home to the Secretary of State in England an elephant with a suitable covering-note or label; ... the question may be imagined to arise: ... Is the elephant attached to the label or the label to the elephant?²¹

The obvious answer is that the label and the elephant need each other. Historical geographies, networks, and contexts matter, and it’s relationships that count: between people, words, and things. Applying archival thinking to the museum allows us to look at its thing-making and world-making efforts across time and with an archival light. We can move on from the historical museum being the material baseline for discussions and interpretation to allow nuance and change in continuing museum practice.²²

Re-making archival practice at the AM

What this shift means at the AM Archives is the recognition of the need for continual explanation and promotion of its institutional archives as not just central but essential to museum history and to contemporary meaning-making at the museum. In practice, this has involved the small archives team working with collections and digitisation projects to embed archival thinking into digital initiatives, cataloguing protocols, data structures, and data linking projects. Using our museum advantage, a large part of our focus has been on public access and use. This has been expressed in new access regimes and protocols, in revised cataloguing protocols and priorities, as well as in exhibitions, research initiatives, and public histories.

In exhibitions and public programs showcasing the archives collections we have sought not just to showcase the fascinating and beautiful content of the AM archives, but at the same time to highlight their ‘recordness’, utility, and history. Colonial glass plate specimen photography collections, for example, were showcased in the *Capturing Nature* exhibition and book for their quirky beauty, as an undiscovered part of Australian photographic history, and as one of the earliest scientific uses of new photographic technologies in Sydney in the mid-19th century. They were also presented as part of the museum’s innovative and experimental efforts to document its growing specimen collection and to reflect on developing museum-scientific practice.²³ *Transformations*, the book and exhibition based on the art and story of colonial natural history illustrators Harriet and Helena Scott featured their astounding natural

art alongside a consideration of their life-long quest to be recorded and remembered in the archives of Australian science.²⁴

External collaborations such as the cross-institutional and multi-disciplinary Australian Research Council project ‘Merchants and Museums’ focussed on 19th-century museum animal trade and exchange, have highlighted the power of archival records to recontextualise individual museum specimens within their historical narratives. Thinking archivally about museum animals and the paper trail that accompanies each animal as it moves through complex transaction events from field to museum and beyond has helped to understand museum meaning-making, reconstruct animal pathways, and recover the data deficit that can rob animal specimens and museum objects of their context, history, and future in museums.²⁵

But re-making archival practice at the colonial museum requires more than research, exhibition, and the promotion of new archival stories. It means active, purpose-driven sharing and redistribution of archival power. The AM Archives most successful and long-term community-led ‘cultural diplomacy’ work has taken place around the Thomas Dick Birrpai Collection of photographs taken around Port Macquarie in the 1920s. The images document staged reconstructions of ‘traditional’ life and were taken by amateur photographer Thomas Dick working with local Birrpai families. The development of community-led access and research protocols for the collection over the past decade has been led by descendent and Birrpai elder Dr John Heath. This decades-long collaborative work with museum staff, community, and descendants of both the photographer and his subjects is a demonstration of the possibilities of generating and embedding a protocol-driven approach to archives. The collaboration has shown rethinking museum collections as community-led family histories can begin to redistribute museum knowledges and cultural capital.²⁶

Perhaps the most important and long-lasting way to preserve the archival object we have while also pluralising its content and widening access pathways is to re-examine the AM archives’ own historical and current protocols, knowledge structures, and descriptive standards. Understanding the history of previous museum recordkeeping and cataloguing practice is the first step, both their structures and order and their language and descriptive choices. With this understanding, we can provide more detailed context for reading and using the archives not only ‘along the (colonial) archival grain’, but as products of colonial knowledge structures and history. We can also begin to start reading them ‘against the grain’, looking for ambiguities, resistances, and processes of negotiation within the archive.²⁷

Large-scale digitisation projects and new data tools can help us do this by making more visible the tight web of structuration and description that has made the archives so successful and useful as a knowledge tool. But digitisation is not just an opportunity to improve accessibility through the production and publishing of digital surrogates of archival documents. Just as importantly, accessibility can be enhanced and expanded through improving item-level descriptive metadata. With the help of dedicated volunteers, we are re-reading our colonial records (starting with correspondence, minutes and reports) for neglected and overlooked content and new layers within the existing record.²⁸ We are re-indexing these old records with new terms and emphases, applying new descriptive rules and adding new vocabularies and classifications. It’s a semantic approach to redistributing and pluralising the archives’ content that is surfacing new patterns, asking new questions, and revealing new relationships.

The enormous task of re-indexing the museum’s Trust Minutes, for example, has unlocked this vital record for new levels of detail of collection documentation and institutional history. Beyond the ‘who’s who’ approach of the creator of the initial Trust Minutes index, we have revealed layers of names, places, and webs of influence, unrecorded in previous indexes. With these new semantic pathways, spirals, and webs, new museum stories can be surfaced and told. Newly detailed indexes to the AM’s pre-1900 outward correspondence series are allowing,

for the first time, search and retrieval for hundreds of previously unrecorded names, places, and events, including new details of object custody, provenance, and history wrapped up and enclosed in letters on donations, trades, and exchanges. In her article ‘Silence and resistance’, writer Evelyn Araluen challenges us to consider the textual forms as well as the writing and representations of archival texts in order to ‘resist, rewrite and reclaim’ Aboriginal identities.²⁹ At the AM, the mundane and careful technical work of preparing these detailed indexes is helping to make both the contents of the archive and the process of archivalisation (more) visible. We are making the archive responsible.

The AM and its archive embody and enclose colonialist structures of knowledge, but they also hold the potential to help disrupt those structures and established ways of thinking and acting. This reframing can put the archives – with its elephants and its labels – at the centre of Museum history and future. We are only just getting started on thinking about new museum-archival practices and the possibilities (and challenges) for opening the archives to new ways of encountering, reading and using.

Notes on contributor

Dr Vanessa Finney is the Head of World Cultures, Archives, and Library at the Australian Museum. She has authored books and curated exhibitions on the role of photography in museums, including *Capturing Nature* (2018), and on colonial Sydney naturalists and artists Harriet and Helena Scott, titled *Transformations* (2017, 2024). Currently, she is writing a book on 19th-century practices of natural history at the Australian Museum in Sydney. Finney is a curator, archivist, and historian, holding a PhD in the History of Science from the University of Sydney.

Notes

1. Historian Bernard Cohn calls this ‘epistemic colonialism’. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India* (Princeton UP, New Jersey, 1996). For the work of archival repositories in colonialism’s project, see Ann Laura Stoler, ‘Colonial Archives and the Arts of Governance’, *Archival Science*, vol. 2, 2002, pp. 87–109.
2. Tony Ballantyne, *Webs of Empire: Locating New Zealand’s Colonial Past*, UBC Press, Vancouver, 2010, p. 189.
3. The AM opened its first public gallery in 1857 on William St opposite Hyde Park in the city’s cultural heart.
4. Interestingly, several of these remaining in-situ colonial archives are held within other cultural and scientific institutions, bolstering the idea that there is a special connection between cultural/scientific institutions and archival authority and memory regimes. Other Sydney examples include SLNSW, AGNSW and Botanic Gardens.
5. Tony Bennett, ‘Thinking (with) Museums: From Exhibitionary Complex to Governmental Assemblage’, in K. Message and A. Witcomb (eds.), *Handbook of Museum Studies*, Wiley and Sons, Oxford, vol. 1, 2015, pp. 3–20.
6. My PhD investigates knowledge-practices at the nineteenth-century Australian Museum. Vanessa Finney, ‘Putting Nature in Its Place: The Australian Museum, 1827–1890’, PhD, University of Sydney, 2023.
7. For the holdings of the AM Archives see <https://australian.museum/learn/collections/museum-archives-library/museum-archives/>, accessed 10 February 2024.
8. Australian Museum Archives, AMS001, Trust Minutes, 1836.
9. In this move to orderly classification and a strict scientific rationale, the AM was following the general trend of nineteenth century natural history museums. See Susan Sheets-Pyenson, *Cathedrals of Science*. McGill UP, Montreal, 1988. The twin goals of collection and classification, and public education are still adhered to today. <https://australian.museum/about/organisation/reports/>, accessed 10 February 2024.
10. SMH, ‘Kreffit vs Hill’, 19 November 1874.
11. Examples include Trust Minutes and collection registers (now incorporated into an electronic cataloguing system).
12. S. Das and M. Lowe were pioneers in highlighting this global work for natural history museums, ‘Nature Read in Black and White: Decolonial Approaches to Interpreting Natural History Collections’, *Journal of Natural Science Collections*, vol. 6, 2018, pp. 4–14.
13. Timothy Neale and Emma Kowal, ‘“Related” Histories: On Epistemic and Reparative Decolonization’, *History and Theory*, vol. 59, no. 3, 2020, pp. 403–12.
14. Jilda Alice Andrews, ‘Encountering Cultural Material in Museum Collections: An Indigenous Perspective’, Phd, ANU, 2018.
15. <https://mhns.wa.gov.au/news/improving-first-nations-community-access-to-archives/>, accessed 23 April 2024.
16. This work will generate its own, new archive. Work on understanding the complex relationships and place of this future archive begins with critical thinking on data sovereignty. ATSIDA provides a model for this work. On cultural interface see Martin Nakata, ‘The Cultural Interface’, *The Australian Journal of Indigenous Education* vol 36, no 1, 2007, pp. 7–14.
17. ‘Unsettled’, an exhibition produced by the AM in 2002, was a path-making exhibition and community consultation project committed to First Nations led truth-telling about Australia’s foundation stories.
18. The hotly contested process-based definition was approved by ICOM in 2022. <https://icom.museum/en/resources/standards-guidelines/museum-definition/>, accessed 10 February 2024.
19. On the relational museum see Mike Jones, *Artefacts, Archives and Documentation in the Relational Museum*, Routledge, London, 2021.
20. This is the great innovation of the Linnean system. It allows continual movement of individual animals within its base structuration of order, family, genus, species.
21. Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archival Administration*, Clarendon Press, Oxford, 1922.
22. Nicolas Thomas, ‘The Museum as Method’, *Museum Anthropology*, vol. 33, no. 1, 2010, pp. 6–10.
23. Vanessa Finney, *Capturing Nature: Early Scientific Photography at the Australian Museum*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2019.
24. Vanessa Finney, *Transformations: Harriet and Helena Scott, Sydney’s Finest Natural History Painters*, NewSouth Publishing, Sydney, 2018.
25. For a case-study of the Australian lungfish see Vanessa Finney, ‘Dining on Geologic Fish: Claiming the Australian *Ceratodus* for science’, *Journal for the History of Knowledge*, vol. 3, no. 1, 2022, 1–14.
26. John Heath and Ashley Barnwell, ‘From the Inside: Indigenous-Settler Reflections on the family Uses of the Thomas Dick “Birrpai” Photographic Collection 1910–1920’, *Life Writing*, vol. 20, no. 1, 2023, pp. 163–82. The collection was a successful joint nomination for UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Register in 2023.

27. This is the critical methodology of Ann Laura Stoler in *Along the Archival Grain: Epistemic Anxieties and Colonial Common Sense*, Princeton UP, 2010.
28. This work could not have been done without the leadership and insight of archivist Robert Dooley and the transcription and indexing work of volunteers Cynthia Rodrigo, Prue Walker and Kerry Gordon.
29. Evelyn Araluen, 'Silence and Resistance: Aboriginal Women Working within and against the Archive', *Continuum*, vol. 2, no. 4, 2018, pp. 487–502.