

Book Reviews

Edited by Paul Brunton

WOPOP — Working Papers on Photography, No. 9, July 1983. Published by Working Papers on Photography, 20 Wellington Street, Richmond, Victoria. 67 pp. \$5.00.

Ideally, volume 9 of the irregularly published WOPOP series should be read from the back to the front. It is divided into two sections, the latter half being an interesting collection of articles on different aspects of photographic archives. These articles covering such topics as 'Oral History and Photography' and the 'Photo Archives Computerisation Project, Peabody Museum, Harvard University' are interesting and informative. The first section of the volume, comprising WOPOP's submission 'Australia as Australians Saw It. A Comprehensive Pictorial Record of our Heritage — 1839 - 1939' and the 'Position Paper — February 1983', should be read last as it will probably induce a state of speechless consternation in anyone with the slightest interest in, or knowledge of, photographic archives and collections in Australia. This reviewer found it difficult to believe that any project so obviously doomed to failure could be seriously proposed as a workable project.

That such a scheme could be proposed, apparently without consultation with those already working in the field, raises significant questions for archivists and curators of photographic material. Broadly, the aim of the submission is that for the Bicentenary a programme be introduced whereby members of the public are invited to submit photographs 'relating to the development of Australian Society up until 1939'. The photographs to be microfilmed will then be 'fully' subject indexed and described using a seemingly miraculous computer programme to establish an on line data base. An outline of what the computer programme will do is given along with various alternatives to accommodate changing technology, such as the introduction of laser discs. Throughout the submission and the Position Paper the word computer is used as if it possessed talismanic qualities. The authors of the submission have accepted without question that computers will be the solution to all the problems associated with the management of large collections of material.

This is not to say that electronic data processing techniques and

automated finding aids will not be of great benefit. However, the authors of the WOPOP submission have fallen into the common trap of overestimating the time saved by the use of computers. Certainly, access to information on a computer memory can be very rapid, but the time taken to put it there can also be very great.

Given the number of images expected to be in the data base the data entry time cannot be underestimated.

The aim of the submission is undoubtedly praiseworthy, the preservation of photographic images that may otherwise have been lost. It is similar to the thoughts behind the Vanishing Georgia Project. The 'Final Report' by Sherry Konter on the Vanishing Georgia Project is also included in the volume. It is interesting to remember that the Vanishing Georgia Project, while well organised, was not without its problems and resulted in 4, 068 pictures being copied. The authors of the WOPOP submission blithely mention a figure of 500,000 images. It is obvious from the submission and the position paper that WOPOP has not the slightest conception of the logistics of copying such a number of photographs, let alone documenting them and 'fully' indexing them. Even with the computer programme they describe, and there is no evidence that it has been tested in any way, the entire project would be of vast proportions with no guarantee of success. The money would surely be better spent on collections already held and in need of attention.

I seriously doubt that the authors have ever described or indexed one photograph, certainly not five hundred thousand. If they had they would not seriously suggest a project which aimed at producing 500,000 images. It is not stated in the submission where such a project should be based, who should staff it, where the money or the computer and microfilm facilities should come from or who should be responsible for its continued funding. The cost of these considerations alone at a time of reduced budgets for existing collections and archives should make it obvious that the scheme has little chance of success.

One of the major difficulties with the WOPOP submission is that its authors obviously have so little understanding of what is involved in the operation of an archives, or other collection, that they do not feel constrained from stating the impossible and nonsensical as if it were the plainest truth. Any number of statements from the submission may be used to illustrate this, but one example will be given. It is stated that 'the methodology of this project would be readily available to major institutions to process their own collections and thus a national photographic register could be established'. It apparently has not occurred to the authors of the WOPOP submission that most major institutions have a backlog of processing to be done, particularly with pictorial material, and that it is difficult enough to allocate sufficient staff time to the institutions' normal procedures without having to describe the material

again with a different system. The authors of the submission have given no thought to the fact that description practices vary from institution to institution, and often from individual to individual, and that uniformity would be impossible to achieve.

From an archival standpoint the project has little or no validity as each photograph is treated as an individual item. Proper consideration is not given to context or provenance and the proposal does not seem able to cope with a large series of photographs. The idea of treating an individual photograph in isolation is foreign to archival theory and practice, and would necessarily reduce the information value of the image.

The authors' ignorance of the workings and the policies of the major pictorial collections and archives holding photographic material in Australia is demonstrated regularly. It is claimed that the limiting factors for 'total accessibility' of visual material 'are mainly the lack of imagination and forward planning by pictorial resources management'. Thanks to the farsighted authors of this submission 'all pictorial archives will adopt such an approach outlined here'. I seriously doubt that any institution will ever adopt the proposed methodology.

It is also claimed that 'the philosophy of collecting photographs taken by the public is slowly gaining acceptance...'. As well as demonstrating a remarkably patronising attitude towards non-professional photographers this statement is untrue.

The grammar used in both the submission and the position paper is of such a uniformly low standard that, coupled with the misuse of computer jargon to add importance to the scheme, I found much of it difficult to understand. The phrase 'accessed into' is used on several occasions and something called a 'keyword descriptor' is repeatedly referred to. It can only be hoped that the authors are better able to express themselves visually than verbally.

The WOPOP proposal deserves greater attention than it has been given here. It raises serious questions about the attitudes of photographers and the public to archives and collecting institutions. There is great and increasing interest in Australia's rich photographic heritage, and a wealth of expertise and experience in the professional staff of archives and pictorial collections has been built up. The WOPOP submission shows that it is time to gain public recognition for the specialist work that has, and is, being done.

Tim Robinson
Council of the City
of Sydney Archives

International Association of Sound Archives, *Sound Archives: a guide to their establishment and development*, edited by David Lance, International Association of Sound Archives, 1983.

While preparing this review, I joked with our esteemed Book Reviews editor that I would start the review by saying that two thirds of this book is not about archives at all. In a sense, this is true: sound recordings made or accumulated and 'used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction ... of which they themselves formed a part' have little room among the linguistic, natural history, folklore and other artificial collections which are the concern of much of this book. This broad use of the term 'sound archive' to mean an institution or collection holding valuable sound recordings, whatever their origin or principles of arrangement, is common in the sound archives community. Nonetheless, for an archivist responsible for sound holdings which are archival in Jenkinson's sense, this is disappointing.

This volume, edited by David Lance, President and former Secretary of I.A.S.A., and currently Curator of Audio-Visual Records at the Australian War Memorial, aims to be a general introduction to sound archives work and to provide the basic information required to set up a sound archives institution, information which has hitherto been provided individually by I.A.S.A. members. It is intended to be of particular use in Third World countries, and is to be followed by a technical manual and a guide on selection.

It is an ambitious work, to the extent that the authors have had to condense the vast experience of sound archives work into a relatively small volume. This is accentuated by the arrangement of the book, whereby the basics of documentation, access and technical matters are confined to the first four chapters, the remaining eight being concerned with the needs of specialised collections and institutions. I suspect that this emphasis is a response to the kind of demand which led to the preparation of the book.

Inevitably, there are shortcomings. Rolf Schuursma's chapter on approaches to the national organisation of sound archives carefully balances the national sound archive model with that of the specialised collection, but fails to consider the multi-media institution with holdings of sound archives or the relationship between sound archives and archives in other media.

In the technical chapter, Dietrich Schuller, following an excellent layman's summary of acoustic theory, betrays his ethnological background by concentrating on equipment for making recordings, rather than for preserving and reclaiming them, and by discounting the problems of preserving old magnetic tape.

Roger Smither's chapter on documentation is entirely library-oriented in its approach, thereby limiting its application to those collections of sound recordings for which such methods are appropriate.

On the whole, however, the editor and authors have done a good job. The individual chapters are well organised and I had no trouble finding the discussion of particular issues quickly — important in a practical manual — nor in comparing equivalent parts in the different chapters on specialised collections. The use by a number of the authors of case studies and of sample forms also appears helpful. Indeed, one of the highlights of the book, despite its library context, is Roger Smither's comparative case study of the documentation methods used in five very different institutions, well illustrated with samples from their catalogues.

The other major highlight for me was Leslie Waffin's chapter on public access and dissemination. A blend of analysis of issues and of practical advice, of breadth of coverage and of conciseness, this chapter should be read by any archivist with responsibility for audio-visual records.

The book finishes with a 20-page bibliography, divided according to the book's chapters. As might be expected, these sections reflect the authors' approaches and concerns. Hence, some of the sections relating to the chapters on specialised collections appear as much concerned with the subject matter of such collections as they are with their archival management. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* appears in the section of the bibliography relating to the chapter on access, but not in that on documentation.

This book, then, is successful, in that it achieves its stated aims, aims which were determined by the nature of the demand which it seeks to satisfy and by the perceptions and approaches of its authors. But don't expect to see a series or record group among the catalogues, indexes and discographies; or the advice or even recognition that archival principles can be applied to sound recordings of an archival nature; or that there is an alternative to employing librarians or subject experts to look after sound archives.

David Roberts
Australian Archives (NSW)

T Hendley, *The Archival Storage Potential of Microfilm, Magnetic Media and Optical Data Discs*, NRCd Publication No. 19, January 1983. Available from NRCd, The Hatfield Polytechnic, Bayfordbury, Herford, Hertfordshire SG13 8LD, £10.

The National Reprographic Centre for documentation has produced a series of publications dealing with technical developments in the area of information storage and retrieval and several 'technical evaluation reports' on micrographics equipment. The centre is 'a grant-aided centre set up to provide librarians, archivists and information managers with impartial advice on new developments in documentation systems'. The publication under review, number nineteen, was commissioned by the British National Bibliographic Research Fund and appears to be the first produced to impinge directly on archival considerations.

The premise from which the report begins is that paper can no longer be regarded as the ideal storage medium for libraries and archives. This is expanded into a consideration of the dual universal problems of the amount of space consumed and the deterioration of paper. From that premise the report looks forward to a situation where 'techniques of scanning and digitisation become sufficiently reliable and sophisticated for librarians (a term defined widely to include archivists and office managers) to consider not only the storage of computer generated data on magnetic media, optical discs or microfilm, but also the widespread digitisation of original documents as an alternative to microfilming.'

Implicit in this is the idea that all will be well for libraries and archives if the information content of material can be preserved albeit in another medium. It is not within the scope of the report to challenge that assumption, but archivists need to consider it well. A record deemed permanent is deemed permanent in its original format and medium for the length of its physical life. To preserve only the information content of a record is, archivally, by necessity a measure of desperation. This archival distinction between the original document is one that is increasingly neglected when discussing options available within the world of information technology.

With that proviso in mind, I can highly recommend this publication. It is split into five sections: an introduction dealing with paper and its problems; a section on microfilm; one on magnetic media; a consideration of optical data disc storage; and finishes with a summary of the preceding sections and a conclusion.

The report assumes little prior knowledge on the part of the reader of the physical characteristics of media considered as storage alternatives to paper. Physical characteristics of the newer media are explained in some

detail and storage life claims made by manufacturers are presented together with results of independent research into storage life and users' experience. Some attention is also paid to storage conditions required to ensure the conservation of various media.

Microfilm is used as a generic term and within that categorisation silver halide film, diazo and vesicular film, dry process film, updatable film and colour microfilm are considered. The section on magnetic media deals with magnetic discs, magnetic tape and mass storage systems. Optical disc data is dealt with as a medium still in developmental stages and much detail is given on the evolution of the optical disc as a mass information storage system, the systems released on the market, and possibilities of future developments.

The conclusion of the report will surprise no one:

Of the four media reviewed in this report, only high grade paper and silver halide microfilm can be regarded as archival. Magnetic media, almost by definition, have never been developed as a permanent storage media and optical data discs are so relatively new and unproven that any discussion of their likely storage life in the future is little more than speculation.

This conclusion is preceded by a summary of advantages and disadvantages of each medium's potential for permanent storage.

Each of the sections on a different storage medium is supported by a select bibliography, in addition to works referred to in the text. These bibliographies draw source material mainly from America and Britain, but Canadian, Dutch, German and Australian works are cited, in addition to conference proceedings and much technical information produced within the world manufacturers. The text of the report often indicates areas outside its scope and directs the reader to specific literature on that topic.

These select bibliographies will be of continuing use to archivists seeking information in technical areas. However, I would query the standard, not of the contents of the bibliographies, but of the citation. A charitable guess suggests that the author's shorthand abbreviations were transcribed directly into the text and consequently entries appear such as 'IEEE Spectrum' and 'BLR & DD Report 5623'. On the odd occasion the second line of a bibliographic reference or the date of a publication is omitted.

Some interesting practical suggestions are presented in the text. It is suggested that the first two hundred feet of a magnetic tape destined for long term storage be left blank as the information on that initial distance is at risk due to tension exerted within the spool. Hendley also suggests that there is

a strong case for librarians, archivists and all concerned with the permanent storage of valuable information putting their requirements to the tape manufacturers in an effort to persuade them to develop special, top quality tapes for permanent storage applications.

The report also indicated research that was in progress at the time of publication. It may now be possible to pursue these. For example: a project funded by the British Library in 1982 to investigate the conservation needs and policies of libraries and record offices in the UK; and, tests on the accelerated aging of magnetic tapes being carried out in Sweden.

In his conclusion, Hendley remarks that the archival quality of storage media is not a glamorous topic. It is interesting to note the zeal with which the problem is addressed in this publication as this final quotation illustrates:

While ... economic arguments are, of course, well known to librarians, what is less well documented is the likely cost of not microfilming the material. If the national archives of the world do continue to deteriorate at a rapid rate, what will be the cost both in economic and cultural terms?

Barbara Reed
University of Melbourne

National Library of Australia, *Guide to the Collections*, vol. 4, compiled by C.A. Burmester. Canberra, National Library of Australia, 1982.

This is the final volume in this series, Previous volumes were published in 1974, 1977 and 1980. The preface to the earlier volumes states that in December 1970 the National Library Council resolved that the National Library's collections should be publicised and their subject importance emphasised by a descriptive guide, the preparation of which had commenced in 1968. The idea of the Guide was conceived when the new library building was nearing completion and all the collections and staff were about to be brought together under one roof. It was also at the time when the Assistant National Librarian, Mr Clive Burmester, was about to retire after 35 years service to the National Library. During much of this time he had been intimately connected with the selection and building of the collections.

The Library was therefore fortunate to be able to call on his knowledge and meticulous application to act as a consultant in the compilation of these volumes. His excellent descriptive work on the *National Library of Australia — Selection Policy* (published in 1981) will be known to many. That work sets out the general collecting policies and these four volumes are a detailed guide to nearly 2,000 of the collections thus established. A portion of his *Selection Policy* is published in vol. 4 of the *Guide*, giving the history of the National Library's collections.

The *Guide* is perforce a selective listing. Each entry is annotated to give a brief explanatory note and includes associated sources of material or further references. The latter are not comprehensive but give the reader an indication of further paths to follow. Some entries are fuller than others.

The collections include books, periodicals, newspapers, manuscripts, microfilms, microfiche, motion picture films, sound and video recordings, musical scores, maps, plans, pictures, photographs and prints "as well as the newer forms of recording knowledge which modern technology is constantly developing". A full and useful consolidated index to the four volumes is contained in vol. 4. This, together with the alphabetical arrangement by name of the collection, makes it an easy reference tool to use.

An unevenness of entry is inevitable when relying on the descriptive cataloguing of a variety of people. The size and significance of the collections also varies considerably.

An example of this variety can be seen in the entries relating to India, the headings for which are given below together with a summarised description of the entry.

- *India: History, 1910-1929* (information to be found in the general records of the United States Department of State)
- *Indian Ocean* (noting that the National Library has built up a substantial collection on this subject, which is described in *The Indian Ocean: a select Bibliography...*)
- *Indian Publications (Vernacular Languages)* (describing a donation of 10,000 volumes from the New York Public Library)
- *Indian Seamen's Union in Australia* (microfilm copy of records relating to this Union, 1945-49, the originals of which are at the ANU Archives of Business and Labour).

Overlap with National Library entries in the *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts relating to Australia* appears to be minimal, as that deals specifically with manuscripts. It may be noted, however, that the records of the Indian Seamen's Union in Australia as quoted above are listed in the *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts* as originals held in the ANU Archives.

Research can only be carried out on sources which are available. A listing such as the one under review facilitates the availability of resources and is a boon to researchers. Few libraries in the world have detailed guides; such an achievement is still only a dream for most of us.

Margaret Medcalf
 JS Battye Library of West
 Australian History