

BICENTENNIAL RETROSPECTIVE: A REFLECTIVE VIEW FROM WESTERN AUSTRALIA

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Whether or not the Bicentenary had meaning is the question raised in this paper. The meaning for Western Australia was governed by its own history of secession movements and distance from the event being celebrated. For archivists, the Bicentenary had meaning if grants were gained to enhance our work, especially in the preservation of archives. We need to build on the experience gained to make the best of any funds that may be available for the forthcoming Cenentary of Federation.

Western Australia was not the last of the British colonial settlements in Australia, indeed it pre-dated those of Victoria and South Australia. Although a military settlement was established at Albany in 1826 from New South Wales, the Swan River settlement in 1829 was a British Government colony. Auckland is closer to Sydney than is Perth, even by sea, which was the most viable means of travel in the 19th Century. Indeed the unchartered desert between the eastern and western coasts of the continent was a far greater barrier than the sea. Small wonder that the Swan River Colony, or Western Australia, grew to maturity later than the colonies in the east. The latter all achieved self-government in the 1850s, while Western Australia, with the greater difficulties of isolation to overcome, did not do so till 1890. Self-government, when it did come, was highly prized. The mood was not ripe for federation then gaining momentum, and the Western Australian Government was reluctant to participate.

The 1890s saw the population of Western Australia increase almost fourfold as discoveries of rich goldfields attracted a flood of immigrants and expanded the economy.¹ By the census of 1901, more of those born in Australia had been born in other States than in Western Australia. It was this majority which swung the referendum vote towards federation.



Executive Officer, Judy Campbell, left, assists Travelling Archivist, Diane Foster, to sort some records at the Royal Western Australia Historical Society. (Photo courtesy POST NEWSPAPERS, Perth, Western Australia.)

Nevertheless, Western Australians continue to think of themselves as Western Australians first and Australians second. Whenever times get tough and Western Australia sees itself as disadvantaged, there is a movement for secession. This was strongest in the early 1930s and in 1933 a secession referendum was overwhelmingly successful. A petition for secession to the British Parliament was ruled unconstitutional² and in some quarters in Western Australia, this is still resented.

With this background, Western Australia's attitude to the Bicentenary tended to be lukewarm. The sequicentenary of foundation in 1979 was celebrated and people saw little point in doing it all over again. The Australia sequicentenary in 1938 had passed unnoticed. Western Australians interviewed for the Australia 1938 Oral History Project could not remember any celebrations in Perth, but could well remember the centenary of Western Australia in 1929.³

The philosophy and ideal of one Australia had always inspired me and in looking for a purpose or a pull to return to Australia after fourteen very satisfying professional years in Papua New Guinea, the approaching Bicentenary seemed to provide the answer. It seemed likely that a commitment to one's profession and historical source materials could be enhanced by working in any State Collection in Australia, and that one would necessarily become involved in Bicentennial activities. As it happened, a position became available in the Battye Library in mid 1980. However, finding anyone else enthusiastic about the Bicentenary was not so easy. On the other hand, excellent Western Australia publications from the 1979 sesquicentenary were still being produced and provided fine and inspirational reading matter for a newcomer.

Australia 1938 Oral History Project

Oral History had a special place within my commitment to historical resources, and it provided the first breakthrough in the determination to become involved in the Bicentenary. Jean Teasdale, the founder and first president of the Oral History Association of Australia, became the Western Australian coordinator for the Australia 1938 Oral History Project, which got underway in 1982. I became co-coordinator by reason of my position in the Battye Library. We arranged for all tapes and paper work from the project in Western Australia be sent to me first, and all were copied for the Battye Library before being forwarded to Sydney. Of great interest too, was being part of the interviewing team. Certainly those who took part in Western Australia were enthusiastic, but I did wonder if it were enthusiasm about oral history and Western Australia rather than the Bicentenary. Our part was all over by the end of 1983, and the Bicentenary was still more than four years into the future.

Australian Bicentennial Authority, WA Literary and Historical Committee

Another activity I undertook to reinforce my commitment to historical source materials was to join the Western Australian Historical Society (RWAHS), and became a member of Council after one year and served as Chairman of Council for three years and Vice-President for two. Again, enthusiasm for the Bicentenary was not automatic, some positive benefit for the Society always had to be demonstrated. Indeed, some Council members were antagonistic to anything concerning the eastern states, including the Federation of Australian Historical Societies and also to the Royal Australian Historical Society naming itself such when in fact it was the New South Wales society. As a matter of fact, Western Australia could almost have upstaged the Bicentenary if it had focussed strongly on the Tercentenary of Dampier's landing. However, the celebrations for this were, in the event, fairly low key.

In due course an invitation came from the WA Council of the Australian Bicentennial Authority (ABA) for a representative from the Society to sit on the Literary and Historical Committee of that Council. As Chairman of Council of RWAHS, I joined the Committee and found that group not only enthusiastic, but full of stimulating and excellent ideas. We met four times between July and November 1983. Submissions from scores of individuals and groups were assessed by the Committee, as well as making at least one submission from the Committee itself and supporting a number from the organisations represented by the individual members. However, the Western Australia Government announced at the end of the year the major projects it intended to initiate or support, and the WA Council did not seem to be delegating any responsibility or accepting any advice, so with no purpose to fulfil the Committee was never called together again.

Travelling Archivist

Meanwhile, I had become covener of a sub-committee at the RWAHS to make submissions for Bicentennial funding. There were plenty of good ideas and the two best were forwarded, but they fell on stoney ground. However, in 1985, the ABA Bicentennial Heritage Program called for applications for grants. The sub-committee hastily reconvened, revamped the two former proposals and added two more. One of the latter was for a Travelling Archivist; this was successful and so at last the Historical Society had a Bicentennial project of its own. Up to then, it seemed, we were being invited to watch and applaud others in putting on a party which had little to do with our history, or to observe the massive public works such as roads and a new parliament house in Canberra being built under the aegis of the ABA and to consider this our birthday celebration. The Society, was in fact so disillusioned, that the Chairman of the WA Council of the ABA was asked to address a meeting. After his bland

speech, he was put on the spot by two leading Professors of History—Geoffrey Bolton and Reginald Appleyard, both keen supporters of the Society, who forcefully made the point that an historical commemoration seemed to have very little historical content. Whether this clinched the Travelling Archivist grant, I do not know: it was already in the last stages of negotiation.

We took the concept of the Travelling Archivist from the Travelling Curator, a project for which the Western Australian Museum had received a grant from Instant Lottery Funds in the previous year. The Travelling Curator had visited local museums in Western Australia and advised their volunteers on proper methods of cataloguing, registering and conservation. We requested a grant for three years from 1985 to 1988 and the program was to include:

- (a) familiarisation of voluntary staff with existing archives management systems
- (b) development of a system for each historical society and the training of volunteers in the system
- (c) the listing of historical records held in historical societies and production of a unified guide
- (d) assessing the value of such records in the context of the State Collection, rationalising or arranging for microfilm copies where appropriate
- (e) arranging workshops or seminars on archives management for groups of volunteers in various parts of the State, say one in Perth, one in the North-West and one in the South-West
- (f) co-operating with the Historic Records Search⁴

At the time there was no action on the Historic Records Search and in the event it became a little confusing.

The Battye Library and the State Archives became involved in the Travelling Archivist Project in so far as the appointee was to spend the first two weeks being trained there, and in making sure she was aware of how records held by the societies would relate to the State Collection and Archives. Questionnaires which were sent to all Affiliated Historical Societies asking for their needs, were examined by the State Archives on return. The State Archivist supported the application, as did the then President of ASA, Baiba Berzins. The Battye Library's Conservation Section was very helpful with advice to the Travelling Archivist and several members of the Battye Library staff gave talks at seminars.

Pleased as we were with the Bicentennial grant of \$35,000 which was one third of what we had requested for three years, it was in fact a token. In three years we could have done something really significant. A condition of the grant was that part of the project must be run in 1988. By this time it was early 1987 so we decided to spin it out for

18 months with some of the work being done part time. In addition to the \$35,000 which covered salary, accommodation and travel for a professionally qualified person, the RWAHS and its fifty three affiliates, would pay for administrative costs (which were not insignificant considering the size of Western Australia) and any permanent materials such as boxes for storage. On paper too, we could add a salary for three hours a week of my time to supervise the project in a voluntary capacity.

The project was so successful, that in June 1988 when it was due to wind up, the ABA gave us a further grant of \$12,000, and this did not run out till the end of January 1989. Margaret Edwards was appointed as the Travelling Archivist and did some excellent work on the RWAHS records which date back to 1926 and which had never been listed or properly sorted. She began to train some volunteers and sent out the questionnaires to the Affiliated Societies.⁵ She was unable to continue after three months, so then Diane Foster was appointed. This was just before the annual Affiliated Societies' Conference at Bunbury in 1987, so this event was used to get the Affiliated Societies properly involved and Diane was able to make personal contacts and arrangements and plan the program of visits to their needs.

Diane visited nine metropolitan and twenty-nine country centres and travelled 14,000 kilometres by road. Where possible, regional workshops were held, for instance, in the South-West, forty-seven people from twelve societies attended workshops. She discussed their problems, trained volunteers, and suggested better ways of arranging, describing and conserving their manuscripts, photographs and other source materials. Her travels took her to every corner of this very large state, north to the Kimberley, south to Albany, east to Kalgoorlie and she frequently spoke to groups or on the radio. Two seminars were held at RWAHS headquarters, Stirling House, and were well attended, as well as a Photographic Preservation Seminar at the Aviation Museum.⁶

In between all this outside work, she continued to work on the RWAHS records at Stirling House, supervising the volunteers. She also assisted the Library Committee with many of its problems, especially in rationalisation of indexing, and a workshop on indexing for the RWAHS Library Committee was arranged at the Battye Library. Apart from the RWAHS records and a great many individual documents, the Society had another major collection of papers, that is of the Bussell Family. These were closely related to a similar collection of Bussell Family papers at the State Archives, and after negotiation, Council agreed to pass them over. Another aspect of Diane's work was obtaining archival supplies. This has now become a feature of service at Stirling House. Supplies, such as mylar, tyvec, boxes and acid free folders, may be bought by Affiliated Historical Societies and others in small quantities from Stirling House, which has laid in stocks.

Because of the reduction of the original program, it was not possible in the time to put together a unified guide to resources held by Historical Societies, but when the extra grant was forthcoming, a publication⁷ was produced listing the name of the society and its address, a short description of its history, establishment and volunteer workforce, whether or not it had a collection of documents and the subject of same, a short list of locally significant people and places, as well as practical information as opening hours, entrance fees, if any, and from whom to obtain further information. Forty-two societies were listed with this information and eleven more who failed to return questionnaires were listed with address only. Nine non-affiliated societies were also identified and addresses listed in the publication. At the launching of the *Guide* on appropriately, 26 January 1989, Dr Rica Erickson commented how useful such a publication was for any historically minded person around the state and arriving at unknown towns.

It is clear that had we got the original three year grant, much more could have been achieved; indeed it showed how necessary it was for the RWAHS to have its own field officer. After some correspondence with Gail Griffith, Affiliated Societies Field Officer of the Royal Australian Historical Society,⁸ representations were made to the Western Australian Government that funding for such a person should be provided, but to no avail.

Historic Records Search

The Historic Records Search (HRS), which was the subject of so much debate in the ASA in 1986 and 1987, was never a bone of contention in Western Australia. This was probably because to a large extent, the archivists had control of it, whereas they had missed out in NSW. This is not to say it was their fault. In NSW, it seemed to me, there were many more people struggling to get on to the bicentennial bandwagon and archivists not only wanted more safeguards to ensure a fully professional search, they were also involved with quite a few other biennially funded archive projects and the available personnel was too fully occupied to apply for the key positions in the HRS. In Western Australia, the State Archivist, Margaret Medcalf became Chairman of the State Committee of HRS and we were also represented on the National Council by the State Librarian, Robert Sharman, a former archivist. With two more archivists on the state committee, Chris Coggin and myself representing RWAHS, and the rest all people with a great respect for the Battye Library, there was never any polarisation of views.

The only problem occurred when the public, especially members of historical societies, began to be confused by the roles of the HRS field officers and the Travelling Archivist, and indeed HRS especially wanted historical societies to be covered. However, the officers all co-operated

and all was well. In fact, the former were concerned with registering significant finds only, though one criticism was that the paper work required was too complicated for elderly people and too time consuming for volunteers to fill in. The Travelling Archivist's services were primarily for historical societies though others sought her services too, and the emphasis was on training volunteers in the management and conservation of collections, including methods of arrangement and description. Western Australia had five field officers for the HRS, one of them full time for a year, and she was actually located in the Battye Library. Good results were obtained as far as the time allowed.

Nevertheless, exposure to the HRS made one wonder just how much the ABA was providing jaunts for its headquarters staff. The entire HRS Council held at least one meeting in Perth and treated the state committee to a dinner in one of the most expensive restaurants in Perth. A mental calculation of the number of thousands of dollars required for this exercise, brought cynicism to the surface: this was probably happening all over Australia and on all the projects.

The publicity generated by the HRS did a great service in making the general public more aware of the potential value of their family keepsakes and collections of personal interest. What is really needed, though, is a combination of the Travelling Archivist and Historic Records Search and on a permanent basis. Ideally, this should be a field officer employed by the State Library's State Collection, as in the Mitchell Library in Sydney. The Travelling Archivist found she was working really at the grass roots level. She also found that the further away she went from Perth, the greater the suspicion that Perth would take their records from them. Clearly there is a great need for education of the public about archives, but there is also a need for regional repositories in Western Australia as there are in some other states.

The Bicentenary

As I do not like crowds or queues, the "Events" of 1988 largely passed me by. However, even the most serious of my friends who were in Sydney on January 26, or went to Expo in Brisbane, praised these events. Certainly the TV coverage of the former was superb. I went to the travelling exhibition but came away uninspired. No doubt these and many other events will be remembered by many with much joy. But they are all ephemeral. They are primarily meant to entertain, to add to our comfort. I place more value in the rash of Bicentennial publications such as History Project Incorporated's, *Australians: an historical library*,⁹ Tim McCormick's *First Views of Australia 1788-1825*,¹⁰ Robert Hughes' *Fatal Shore*¹¹ and many others. The publications, whatever their quality, do have meaning. They become permanent windows into Australian culture. The philosophical ideal of Australia can only be enhanced by activities which support and

preserve Australian culture. Events are fun for the participants, but are here today, gone tomorrow. Certainly they educate, but do they need to be so extravagant when money for permanent projects is so difficult to find?

Microfilm Projects

I believe that Australians will more and more increasingly value the various microfilm projects which were funded by the ABA in NSW. When John Cross of the Archives Office of NSW commented in 1987 that he had six microfilm projects on the go and could not look at another till 1989 at least, I was green with envy. We had none in Western Australia though we had earlier made good use of Community Employment Project funds. I know that there were a number of other bicentennially funded archives projects in NSW, such as "Conservation on the move" and no doubt in other states as well. I hope they were all as successful as my good wishes were strong.

Microfilm projects benefit the whole country, not just the state to which the records belong. So many people, in this day and age, live in a different state to their forebears. In the State Reference Library of Western Australia, there is very heavy use of the Archives Office of NSW Genealogical Research Kit and indeed of the microfilms of records from all other states. The genealogical boom is not going to collapse, indeed, genealogists are becoming more and more sophisticated and delving deeper into historical resources. Nor is it only the genealogists—tertiary education is now commonplace and more and more students are researching not only historical but all other aspects of our society and spreading their nets widely.

I felt that I had my own personal Bicentennial project in 1987, though it had nothing to do with the Bicentenary. This was the Australia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea Copying Project commissioned by the Australian Libraries and Information Council (ALIC), now Australian Council of Library and Information Services (ACLIS). My brief was to examine the feasibility of one of the goals of ALIC's *Plan for Library and related Information Services in Australia*:

Having regard to the historical development of settlement not only in Australia but also in New Zealand and Papua New Guinea, ALIC also sees a necessity for the establishment of a project, or projects, similar to the Joint Copying Project to ensure that there are at least copies of important historical government records held by the appropriate institutions in the states and countries to which they refer regardless of the present location of the original documents.¹²

In a period of four months, I travelled to every capital city in Australia, four cities in New Zealand and two in Papua New Guinea, surveying the needs. The needs are massive, but it was necessary to focus on three

areas, that is Colonial Secretary's Office Records in NSW from 1826 to 1856 which relate to all of colonial Australia and New Zealand; records relating to the Northern Territory which are in Adelaide and Canberra; and thirdly, records relating to Papua New Guinea in Brisbane and Canberra. The latter, as a microfilm project, should be seen as a moral obligation by Australia towards her former colony and mandated territory, but has nothing to do with the Bicentenary. The first, however, is an extension for one Bicentennial project that was carried out, that is, the microfilming of this series up to 1825, but the latter period is far more complicated. The Northern Territory filming may have more success when the Centenary of Federation approaches or when it achieves Statehood. The recommendations of the report¹³ have been shelved because none of the State Governments see the massive expenditure required as a high priority. The same problem applies to ALIC's Conservation Survey carried out by Paul Wilson in 1985.¹⁴

Another very important information resource, Australia's newspaper collection, is rapidly self-destructing. Newspaper microfilming is also not given sufficient importance by those who hold the purse strings. Newspapers are even more productive of information about the past and reveal more insights into our culture than do a similar bulk of archives or records. Furthermore, they are read by even the minimally educated and are easily understood. Just as oral history is urgent in its need to record before the memory is lost, newspapers on fragile acidic paper need to be transferred to another medium before they self destruct. Microfilming has been shown to be the least expensive option, and at this stage of technology, the most stable.¹⁵ Accelerated microfilming is essential.

Centenary of Federation

In a little over eleven years, Australia will celebrate its Centenary of Federation. There has been little so far, to indicate that the extravagances of the Bicentenary will be repeated, but I feel sure that over the next few years, plans will begin to emerge. Armed with their experience from the Bicentenary archivists need to be ready with cogent arguments to convince the purse string holders of the need to preserve our historical records through microfilm and conservation projects. We now need to find ways of using the information gathered in reports and surveys such as those mentioned above, to write submissions in a sufficiently imaginative way to capture the attention of funding bodies. Surely an aim for the Centenary of Federation could be that pre-Federation records be microfilmed or at least listed. Even the latter is a very old chestnut, going back to one of the projects which seemed most important when the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia was first established in 1951.¹⁶ Total coverage may not be practical, but I believe it would be possible to double or treble the output at least if we cut out the jaunts

and put the available money to work. We need to build on what has already been done, not start from scratch each time.

Conclusion

Was the Bicentenary worth while? Did it make us feel more proudly Australian? It depends, of course, on what turns you on. The events were mere gloss. We, as archivists, feel satisfied and proud when our efforts result in saving and exploiting records, be it by collecting, conserving, microfilming, arranging, describing or publishing guides. I felt proud and delighted by the Travelling Archivist's efforts and pleased by the Historic Records Search in Western Australia, but in general terms, the Bicentenary hardly affected our lives in Western Australia. Hopefully, by the time of the Centenary of Federation, Western Australia will be more eager to participate.

How can we make Western Australia feel more part of Australia? When I point out to Western Australians that I never felt I was a New South Welshman, they say that that is the trouble, an erroneous assumption that NSW is Australia. This is a twist in meaning. The fact is, NSW does not need the defensive extra identity of being NSW, as NSW with the largest population and at the centre of political and commercial life, is quite confidently Australia. Basically, it is economic. Primary industries predominate in Western Australia while secondary industries do so in NSW and Victoria. In the cut and thrust of politics, the latter have the greater advantage and resentment sets in. Distance adds to the feeling of helplessness. The first time I ever left NSW, I was struck by State differences. Rapid transport and communication have now almost wiped out these differences and I have to remind myself on my travels as to which state I am in. Recently this happened in New Zealand—I was hardly aware I was in another country. The cultural differences between states hardly exist any longer.

Just as regional and state differences are breaking down, multicultural differences are being exacerbated, and this is spreading throughout Australia. The black-white debate is also becoming stronger. This debate was what particularly struck me as similar in New Zealand with the Maori land claims. As a continent of immigrants, the need is for the combined societies to preserve what is best in the culture of them all. The Bicentenary was essentially meant to be a celebration of the white cultural input, and this was legitimate. We should not push it aside because of the Aboriginal and ethnic debates. However, it was the Aborigines who stole the show in Sydney on 26 January 1988. While everyone else was having a party, they demonstrated its meaning. The Centenary of Federation will be a celebration of a political rather than an historical event. It will have meaning only if all cultural parts of the political spectrum have a part in it, including the Aborigines and all immigrant groups.

The Centenary of Federation needs a theme that will focus on what we want Australia to be. We need to concentrate on what undoubtedly is Australian. Could anything be more Australian and more important to our cultural heritage, whatever the ethnic background, than our own archives? Save our Archives!

FOOTNOTES

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4. Royal Western Australian Historical Society. Submission to the Australian Bicentennial Authority under the Bicentennial Heritage Program, Regional and Local History.
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6. Diane Foster. Reports to Council and to the Affiliated Societies' Committee Royal Western Australian Historical Society, October 1987 to October 1988.
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