

# TOWARDS THE CENTENARY OF FEDERATION: AUSTRALIAN ARCHIVES PLANS AND PROJECTS

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*George Nichols' paper to the 1991 ASA Annual Conference, which he has slightly edited for publication, covers the context of the celebration in 2001, possible plans for Australian Archives (which he heads), and some related points of wider relevance.*

## **Introduction**

Today I want to talk mainly about two things:

1. The context in which the Centenary of Federation will be celebrated, i.e. the political, organisational and social environment, and
2. Some concrete or near concrete things that Australian Archives sees as relevant and appropriate to pursue in the Centenary context.

I also want to make some wider suggestions that go beyond Australian Archives. And I hope that I can leave with you some suggestions about your own role, as individuals, as members of ASA and as representatives of a range of archival organisations.

First the context. If a week is a long time in politics a decade is right off the end of the time scale. The Centenary is still at least three federal elections away and the scale and direction of the celebrations will be determined in political and economic circumstances which we cannot yet foresee. As yet there is no indication of when the Centenary will make a serious appearance on the political agenda. It is possible there will be a range of celebrations, but that they will be on a smaller and less spectacular scale than those for the 1988 Bicentennial.

One threshold question is whether the Centenary celebrations will concentrate mainly on the decade leading up to Federation in 1901 or whether they will take a broader focus and in effect commemorate a century of federalism in Australia — and of Commonwealth administration. If the narrower approach is adopted the making of the Constitution is likely to have a predominant role, whereas the broader approach could open up many themes in political and social history.

It is perhaps unfortunate that any long term planning for the celebration of the Centenary will take place with the memories of 1988 still quite strong in the minds of most. Because of the lavishness and all embracing nature of those 1988 arrangements, there appears to be a lack of enthusiasm about 2001 celebrations at this stage.

The 1988 celebrations received their initial impetus, which subsequently dictated the scale for the celebrations, following Australian politicians' experiences first hand of the 1976 Bicentennial celebrations in the USA. To date I have not detected any political enthusiasm in respect of 2001 to match the 1988 effort. There is a feeling that the 2001 celebrations should be in a lower key and even perhaps left to the historians and constitutionalists.

Whichever approach prevails I would hope that any projects with which Australian Archives is associated will be directed towards achieving objectives of lasting value both for the Archives and for the community as a whole. The Centenary is important to us because it is the first major national centenary directly related to our own holdings and thus in a sense it is also a centenary for Australian Archives. It will be an important opportunity for us to draw attention to the richness of our holdings and to the fact that they document nearly half the period of European settlement in Australia.

At Australian Archives we believe that now is the desirable time to start planning for the Centenary — not only to make the best use of our own limited resources but also to ensure that at the appropriate time we will have a role in the drafting of the national Centenary agenda. This is a view that has been endorsed by our Advisory Council, which has encouraged us to plan for the Centenary.

To that end we have already prepared a draft guide of our holdings relating to the Federal Conventions and Federation, although more work will be needed to complete the guide and to assess the research value and preservation needs of individual records. By the end of the present year we hope to have completed a strategy plan for our general approach to the Centenary. While we have made no final decisions or commitments we have identified several areas in which our activities are likely to be concentrated and I should like to say a little about each of these today. How much we will achieve in each area will depend of course on resources and on the general directions which government will in due course set for the Centenary celebrations.

I should stress that what I am addressing in this paper is Australian Archives' early thinking on the Centenary. As the Government turns its attention more to the matter, we would expect to be consulted and have an opportunity to contribute to the Government's plans. At this stage, however, I am representing to you activities, plans and projects which we at Australian Archives will be pursuing, irrespective of whether there are more formal celebratory arrangements as occurred for the Bicentenary. Needless to say, if there are additional funds available through Government, or otherwise, we would be looking to secure some share of these to assist our projects.

Let me turn now to some specifics.

### **Finding Aids**

In June 1990 Australian Archives held some 145 shelf kilometres of permanent value records and a further 210 shelf kilometres of records whose status had yet to be evaluated. We estimate that we hold at least 66 shelf kilometres of records which are more than 30 years old but only 9 shelf kilometres of these have undergone access examination and listing at item level on the ANGAM II computer database.

These statistics add up to a massive accessibility problem. Commonwealth records have always presented a fairly daunting front to all but the specialist researcher. In part this is an inevitable consequence of their sheer volume and of the complex administrative history out of which they grew. However the problem has been compounded by the inadequacies of the control records and finding aids for so many of the series in our custody. I should emphasise that we are very much the innocent victims of this problem since we are largely dependent on control records inherited from the creating agencies. Nevertheless it is the Archives which will have to provide a remedy.

The finding aid problem is of course a perennial one and we will certainly not have solved it entirely by the year 2001. It is crucial to the success of our operations and to the extent to which we can hope to reach a wider audience that we want to give it the highest possible priority during the coming decade. We believe that it is justifiable to bring our various initiatives in this area together into an identifiable project which will fly a Centenary of Federation flag.

The key to the improvement of our finding aids is the further development of two of our computer databases, RINSE and ANGAM II. The RINSE database holds information about all agencies and record series registered by the Archives. It is the documentary foundation for our entire record control system and it is also a unique accumulation of information about the administrative history of the Commonwealth. ANGAM II is an item level database listing individual records which have undergone access examination or which

are likely to be of interest to clients. Both databases have been developed over several years, although so far only ANGAM II has been available for online use by members of the public.

Our objective for the two databases over the next decade is to complete the development of a two-tiered system which will offer clients a range of approaches to our holdings. We will be giving particular attention to making both systems as friendly as possible so that users will be encouraged to broaden their research into many record series which are so far virtually untapped and unknown.

Of course I am talking about what we can foresee. By the year 2000 other developments may have profoundly altered the sort of databases we have and the systems supporting them.

### **Subject and Agency Guides**

The development of the computer databases has also opened up new methods of producing finding aids. Australian Archives has commenced the publication of a series of printed guides giving details of our holdings on specific subjects. These guides will be particularly useful in cases in which material on a given subject is spread between a number of record series and regional offices. Over the years our information services staff have gathered a great deal of information about our holdings, often in the course of answering reference queries. Our aim is to bring this knowledge together, fill in any remaining gaps and make it generally accessible to both our own staff and to the public.

Our first subject guide, which deals with lighthouses, has already been completed and work is proceeding on several more on subjects ranging from the Boer War to Tropical Health and Medicine, Royal Commissions and Railways. We hope to continue this project up to and beyond the Centenary and to include a number of subjects relating to Federation and constitutional history. The guides are being produced as an inexpensive desktop project, which will make it easier to update them if more information comes to light.

A further publication project which we have in mind is a range of administrative guides generated from the RINSE database. These summarise the history of various groups of agencies and of the records systems which they created. Our object would be to reproduce in paper form the results of some of the searches most likely to be undertaken on the RINSE database.

### **Major Publications**

While our efforts will be directed towards improving finding aids we also hope to commemorate the Centenary by producing at least one high quality publication based on our own holdings. At the moment we are thinking about a book documenting and illustrating the history of

the Commonwealth administration over the last century by annotated excerpts from records in our custody. The book would have a large pictorial content and would serve both as a work of history and as an introduction and guide to our most significant record holdings.

The production of a book of this type will involve substantial resources to select and annotate relevant material and to turn out a high quality publication. It is not a project to be undertaken lightly, but it has the potential to be successful and would fill a gap in existing texts on administrative history.

A second major publication project we are considering is the compilation of a guide to records relating to Federation held in all Australian archives and libraries. Australian Archives would provide the resources necessary to research its own holdings and to edit and publish the guide, but substantial co-operative assistance would be required from other institutions holding relevant records. This project would not only be a valuable contribution to research in its own right, but it would also be a useful case study of the feasibility of producing other joint guides.

### **Preservation and Microfilming**

The issue of physical preservation of our holdings will loom large over the coming decade. We have already made great progress in building new repositories and we would hope that by the time of the Centenary all our permanent value records will be adequately housed.

However the provision of new buildings is only the first step. The great bulk of our records are in paper form and these are gradually deteriorating, many of them to an alarming extent. It is of course inevitable that paper will deteriorate, but our problems have been compounded by the poor management procedures of those who created the records.

Despite our best efforts we have realised in recent years that we are slipping further and further behind and that we need to rethink our preservation strategy. This rethink is currently being undertaken and I am confident that it will lead to a more workable approach to the problem. Any solution, however, is bound to be resource intensive.

One option would be to commence a high profile program to stabilise and/or microfilm at least the most important of our records, starting with the records documenting the establishment of the Federation. Such a program could fit in well with the Centenary celebration objectives.

A comprehensive microfilming program would not only save the records but also make them significantly more accessible. Once a series has been microfilmed it is relatively cheap to produce additional copies for our various regional offices and where appropriate for use in

other institutions. This will not solve all the problems of a Perth resident who wants to research in detail records located in Canberra, but it will certainly open up more popular series to a much wider body of users. It will permit people undertaking in-depth research to complete more of their work in their home state and it will encourage secondary and tertiary teachers to incorporate research on Commonwealth records in their courses.

### **Old Parliament House**

As some of you will be aware the future of the Old (Provisional) Parliament House has been under consideration since the new Parliament House was opened in 1988. While no final decision has yet been made, it has been proposed that the old building will be restored to approximately its 1927 form and refurbished to provide exhibition and educational facilities for a range of organisations including Australian Archives.

Assuming that the Old Parliament House project goes ahead Australian Archives will have for the first time a substantial exhibition area in a prime tourist location. Until now our exhibition capacity has been confined to intermittent displays in regional offices, together with occasional participation in larger ventures hosted by other institutions.

Old Parliament House is of direct relevance to the Centenary of Federation because it was the centre of federal government for more than 60 years. It would be an appropriate setting in which to display our records relating to the development of the Constitution. We are already working to restore the records of the various federal conventions for a series of exhibitions to be held at new Parliament House at appropriate intervals during the coming decade.

In summary, then, we see the Centenary of Federation as an effective focus for a number of projects of lasting value for Australian Archives. Most of these projects were already on our agenda, but the Centenary will give them a substantial impetus and carry them to a wider audience. We cannot yet foresee how much we will be able to achieve, but at the very least we would hope to make our holdings significantly more accessible and to give Australian Archives a higher profile in the community.

### **Broader Possibilities**

If I can now go a little beyond the immediate and foreseeable and look at what might be possible. Real discussions on what might be done to celebrate the Centenary are only now beginning. Over the last few days I have had conversations with a number of people about potentially more wide ranging projects. Some of these may come to

fruition. What is important at this stage is that we are actively thinking about the sorts of things that we would want to propose to governments as items for a national agenda.

One proposition that has been discussed briefly is the feasibility of joint projects. I believe that there would be much symbolism, as well as permanent benefit, if State and Territory Archives and Australian Archives could undertake one or more combined projects. That would seem to be a fitting way of celebrating a Centenary of Federation — and a lasting example of co-operative effort. One practical issue which may affect this is the absence of standardised descriptive practices between us. The gulf is not wide in many instances, but if it were eliminated, it would make the possibility of networked access to holdings in the various institutions quite achievable.

Earlier I mentioned briefly some publication plans Australian Archives is pursuing. I know there are greater opportunities if we can combine with other institutions in co-operative publishing ventures. And I would also be looking beyond other archival institutions in that sort of venture. These also would be matters of long term value and now seems to be the right time to pursue them.

I have not attempted to traverse the full range of possibilities. One area which might be developed further, and others would be more knowledgeable on this than me, is the possibility of putting in place some framework or infrastructure to support ongoing work relevant to Archives and to documenting the nation's history. My intention today has been to try and stimulate your thinking, not to provide the answers. I would welcome your suggestions. The Centenary celebration will have been fully justified if it paves the way for a more integrated national approach to the recording and dissemination of information about records.

Finally, if as archivists you believe 2001 is an event the nation should celebrate, then that needs to be communicated publicly in a positive and constructive way at every opportunity. That is something you need to do now as individual members of the ASA, through the ASA itself and through your own organisations and agencies. Otherwise 2001 will be upon us and very few in this country will have noticed.