

HISTORY, ARCHIVY, AND CELEBRATIONS OF NATIONALITY

**Marian Aveling; commentary by
Glen Schwinghamer**

In a slightly edited text of an address to the June 1991 ASA conference, the academic historian Marian Aveling reviews involvement of historians in recent 'national celebrations': sesquicentenaries in Western Australia, South Australia and Victoria, and the national Bicentennial in 1988. She then draws some morals of potential use to archivists as thoughts turn to celebrating the Centenary of Federation in 2001. Glen Schwinghamer of the National Library of Australia follows with a comment on the Australian Historic Records Register, the result of one of the more archivally contentious activities which marked the 1988 celebrations.

Why should an historian's thoughts on national celebrations be of any use to a gathering of archivists? The modern varieties of our professions have a common origin, in Wilhelm Ranke's state archives. As a result we share a common ethical concern for the pursuit and preservation of truth, narrowly defined. Less nobly we also share a complicity in the development and justification of the modern nation state. More obviously, our fates are linked by the fact that professional historians (and recently other sorts of historians) are alongside the makers of records the major consumers of the fruits of archivy.

A central theme of this conference is change, in knowledge and in practice. The last ten years have seen major changes in both the discipline and the practitioners of history. Courses and publications reflect the new academic orthodoxy of social history — non-celebratory, written from the viewpoint of those who suffered rather than those who made things happen, a rejection of the grand narratives of political and national history. Outside the academy a new profession has established itself — public history, or history in the field. Public

historians work with architects, town planners, museum curators, town councils, government agencies and community groups, providing the historical context for what is coming to be called the heritage industry. And beyond the academic and public historians there flourishes a much larger group of historians, mostly amateur but with their own quite rigorous kind of professionalism, the genealogists. All of these are equally practitioners of history, and all of these are putting new demands upon the practitioners of archivy — a point I shall return to.

Let me first look back at my personal experience of a cluster of centenaries — sesquis and a bicentennial. I am not attempting to give a complete picture, just my recollections of bits I was involved in. The 1979 Western Australian Sesquicentenary set the pattern for South Australia (on which I cannot comment) and for Victoria. Sir Charles Court's government, advised by academic historians, put its money into three areas: historical publications — no less than fifteen volumes; local celebrations, mostly municipal, marked by nostalgia and a passion for poke bonnets; and commemorative plaques. ('Commemoratory' is not in the dictionary, and I can't pronounce it, but such was the language of the time.) The Western Australian plaques are perhaps the most valuable and certainly the most enduring memorial to that celebration. A walk down St George's Terrace in Perth is an introduction to one hundred and fifty individuals often unnamed in the academic histories, and genuinely representative of community groups over time. The South Australian sesquicentenary has produced a similar, less innovative collection on North Terrace, Adelaide.

To digress a little from my sesquicentenaries, if not from my narrative. In 1981 I talked to the conference of the Australian Society of Archivists in Melbourne. On that occasion I told the archivists that historians were putting new demands upon them — that social history would mean new uses for old documents. I predicted that the search for little people, the sufferers of history rather than its makers, would lead historians into undusted corners of the archives. Historians were a bit wary of archivists in 1981. All that talk about sentencing documents sounded like newly militant professionals playing God. And archivists may well have been wary of historians. The cliometric wing of the profession was postulating the impossibility of the present deciding what the future would need from the past. Citing current exercises in computer counting of unlikely documents from earlier centuries, they claimed that future historians just might need to go through all the traffic tickets issued in Melbourne between 1980 and 1990. Those worries look irrelevant in 1991. Cliometrics is out of fashion; counting tended to demonstrate only the obvious. Archivists haven't done as much sentencing as they planned, and historians have realised that the

electronic records of the totals and varieties of traffic tickets issued are much more useful than the tickets themselves. But the substance of my warning was accurate — both academics and genealogists *have* besieged the archives in the 1980s in search of the little people, the unknown biographies. Though let me hasten to add that I take no responsibility for the new 'access' policy of the Victorian Archival Heritage Program.

Back to 'celebrations'. In its first Liberal manifestation the 1984-85 Victorian 150th anniversary was described, like its Western Australian predecessor, as a 'sesquicentennial celebration'. But a Labor government came to office and at the urging of a committee of academic and public historians the event became officially 'commemorative'. Social history ideas were now popular enough for politicians to see the awkwardness of celebrating the dispossession of the Aborigines, the oppression of women and the exploitation of migrant minorities. But there was still a lot of celebration budgeted for. The Liberals had planned for publications, parties and plaques, as in Western Australian. Under Labor this program was retained, and the few funds that remained uncommitted were spent on two new initiatives that could roughly be described as 'do it yourself history': a project to help local groups publish their own histories, and a project to set up local history resource centres.

The latter I would like to bring to the attention of archivists. Jan Penney, the co-ordinator of the project, has described its planning and execution in *Reclaiming the Past: Local History Resource Centres' Report and Guidelines*, published by Naga Services of 539 Mitcham Road, Vermont, 3133. The aim of the project was to assist local communities to preserve, order and make accessible the records of their own past. With limited funds we could undertake only a pilot project, trialing methods that could be used more widely. Three 'centres' were chosen, one rural, one inner-city and one outer-suburban. Each locality possessed an organisation willing to host a centre, and controlling a suitable keeping place: a local council, a regional library, and a historical society. The Commonwealth Employment Service was persuaded to fund the training of six unemployed people, mostly recent graduates in history. They were trained to assist local communities in the central archival skills of collecting records, preserving and identifying them, and making them accessible to potential users. And though we began with the assumption that we were *enabling* local groups to preserve their own histories, we soon discovered that we were undertaking the more complex archival skill of teaching people what was 'historical' and worth preserving.

The work took an unintended direction of some interest, perhaps, to archivists. Families were keen to make their holdings available to

researchers, but also to retain their originals. So collection and preservation came to mean rather less than possession. Rather than attempting to hold the original document or photograph or audiotape in a central keeping place, we recommended making a high quality copy, keeping that centrally, and advising the family on how best to preserve the original. The policy arose out of necessity, with little thought of the laws of archivy. But had the ghost of Ranke troubled us, we would have replied that an archivist's first responsibility was to the makers of the records under her control, and that the needs of Australian families differed from the needs of the Prussian state archives.

The outcomes of the project were at best mixed. It was in the country, where local history was a new idea, that the best results were achieved. An archive was created where none had existed, and an enthusiastic historical society grew along with it. The inner city was the worst case; here workers found themselves mainly sorting and labelling records already held in the library, only to have the results of their labours locked away, with little public access. In the outer suburb many new records were collected and old records were ordered and preserved, and the local historical society was given a new lease of life. But problems arose once the project had finished, problems that no amateur historical group seems able to avoid. Lack of funds (and often of energy) make it impossible for most groups to keep their keeping places open regularly and often. And perhaps more importantly, local groups do not have (or cannot retain) the expertise to continue the processes of sorting and labelling and cataloguing begun by the trained workers.

Does the fault lie with the amateur archivists, or with archivy itself? Jan Penney taught her workers that the three rules of cataloguing were 'Keep it simple, keep it consistent, and keep your local needs in mind'. 'Cataloguing', she wrote, 'is like baking a cake. Until you actually do it, the steps sound confusing. Once you begin practising the skill you realise how easy it can be'. (*Reclaiming the Past*, p. 49.) In practice, however, even trained volunteers seem to have lost their ability to catalogue almost as soon as the workers departed. Perhaps the relevance of maintaining a 'Subject Authority File' became less pressing. Certainly the effort of deciding whether to list the collision of two nightcarts under 'Pollution' or 'Littering', or both, became more perplexing. The professionalism of archivy has necessarily made its practice more daunting to even the skilled amateur.

The 1988 Bicentenary saw more parties, more publications, thankfully no more plaques. I'd like to draw two activities to your attention, the Bicentennial History Project and the Australian Historic Records Register. The Bicentennial History Project was notably not

government funded; its large research base was paid for from the usual academic sources. Its supporters saw it (in optimistic moments) as the profession's gift to the nation, a means of influencing the content and moral tone of the national 'celebrations'. The volumes and their associated bulletins can probably claim some success in the area of Aboriginal history, where historians brought into currency a language of 'invasion', 'occupation', 'war', and 'resistance' which changed dramatically the terms of the national debate. But I suspect that the volumes will be remembered mostly as the end of a road — as a last attempt to write a national social history in Australia. Of which more hereafter.

The Australian Historic Records Search *was* government funded. It was inspired by advisers who were mostly social historians, though archivists were involved in the execution of the project. Thirty-eight field officers were employed in all states over a period of about a year, together with eight project staff. Their task was not to collect records but to locate records in private hands, to describe them (or get their holders to describe them), and to list the descriptions in a central register, with details about access. Essentially the aim was to give private records the same status as public records — to make everyone's past part of the historical record.

I'm told that people who went around Australia talking about the project met hostile criticism from archivists in all states but Victoria. Archivists argued that it was silly to spend money on an untried enterprise when the big state archives were so starved of money that official records were deteriorating. They decried the insignificance of the records that could be listed in such a process, a mere drop in the bucket in comparison with the volume stored in people's wardrobes and basements across the nation. And they defended the first archival law of preservation — what was the point of listing records held in insecure keeping places, when a death in the family might consign the lot to the tip?

The outcome can be consulted in most big libraries — some 3500 entries on eight microfiche. The collection at Monash University is quite well used by postgraduate students and genealogists. What do you get when you slide in the microfiche? Take the example of the Swift and Rogers family records, from Wongan Hills in Western Australia. It is perhaps a fuller description than some, being written by a field officer and not by the family holding the records, but its contents are not unusual. The papers include family history records, a case of photographs, poems and historical notes on the early history of Wongan Hills, financial records and farm diaries, newsletters and programs from the local Rotary Club, scripts for radio talks on women's affairs, and letters relating to the Fremantle Court, the welfare of prisoners' families and abandoned wives, the Women's

Service Guild, the Women's Parliament and old age pensions. The collection would be useful to genealogists, local historians of Wongan Hills and of Fremantle, historians of Rotary, agricultural and economic historians, and historians of the Western Australian women's movement. Access to the records is restricted, and via the National Library of Australia; presumably one must go to Wongan Hills to read them. Perhaps it's time that historians got out of the cities.

A drop in the bucket the records listed in the Register undoubtedly are, but a very valuable drop. In addition to the family records, voluntary organisations are well covered, and especially women's organisations — the Woman's Christian Temperance Associations (WCTAs) in several states, the Women's Electoral Lobby . . . Welfare groups are also represented, and ethnic organisations; Aboriginal groups I think less well. So the Register should be an invaluable starting place for historical researchers. I fear it isn't. The National Library has just completed the exercise of confirming that all records are held as described in the Register (thus alleviating fears of rubbish tips), and has spent large sums of money advertising the existence of the Register to historians around the country. But few of my colleagues have heard of it, and fewer of their students. Probably only an ongoing project could generate sufficient interest to make itself generally known. Like the Victorian local history resource centres, the Historic Records Search Register was conceived as a pilot project, leading to a larger and longer lasting program. But governments are deaf once the celebrations are over.

What has been the legacy of 1988? It would be unfair to see the recession as a national hangover. But the overexposure of historical themes in publishing and television does seem to have created a kind of apathy or even distaste for our national past, presented as such. Australian content in film and television has become firmly contemporary. Australian history is in decline in the schools, and university students all over the country are turning their backs on the Australia-from-1788-to-1988 courses which were once the bread and butter of history departments. At university level, however, the decline has not spread to the specialist Australian history courses, courses on ethnicity, on women, on culture. It is the 'making of the nation' courses that students dislike.

At first sight this bodes ill for attempts to celebrate — or even to commemorate — the real founding of the Australian nation in the year 2001. But this judgement may be premature. Ten years ago the influence of social history and its anti-national themes was only beginning to be felt in academic circles. It may be too early to predict what will have replaced the orthodoxy of social history ten years from now. But there is emerging a new academic concern for political history, or rather for the history of political society. Courses are

appearing on 'women and the state' and 'the political manufacture of racism'. Maybe in ten years' time people will be ready to look again at the making of the Australian state. But it won't be through the single window of government records. The history of Australia now has to include private history as well as public: the history of the WCTU, the Melbourne Jewish Society and the Rogers family alongside that of the federal constitution.

I promised to try to draw some morals for archivists from all of this. It seems to point to the need for a different kind of professionalism among those practising archivy, a more flexible expertise that makes itself available to everyone in the community who is making history — in fact, to everyone in the community.

I doubt I'm telling you anything that you don't know already. Already back in 1981 the ASA conference had a session on 'Certain Archives concerning Ethnic Minorities' (though Charles Price was more concerned to count migrants than to find the sources for a migrant reading of Australian history). And now in 1991 your conference includes special interest groups concerned with different sorts of employers, and sessions looking at archivists' responsibilities in documenting contemporary movements like the Greens, and the AIDS crisis.

Though maybe my emphasis is different. Another session on 'Making Archives more user-friendly' suggests that rather than trying to educate users, archivists should try to understand how users think. I am asking whether it might be useful to modify some archival practices to suit the needs of the users, of the owners of the sources. Users? or owners? The language is suggestive. The conference has already heard that Aboriginal groups are claiming ownership of the records of their past, even to the point of destroying them.

Prediction is not the business of historians. But I'm ready to bet that in the 1990s community groups of all kinds will be more eager to manage their own records — though no more capable — and that governments will be less and less eager to pay for the centralised management of theirs. Political devolution — the ceding of power and responsibility from the centre to the peripheries — is a general process in our political culture, demanding a new flexibility from the servants of the state. The historical profession has already accommodated itself to a proliferation of non-academic historians, servicing many different 'users'. The result had been a loss of distinctness as a profession, but also a gain in employment opportunities for people trained in the discipline of history.

I think it may be the same for archivists. The great flagships of the profession, the state archives, may cease to grow, and maybe decline — unless they take on the task of overseeing the management of records in

many holdings and many locations. At the same time there is a greater need for archival skills outside the archives, in sites such as schools and hospitals and voluntary associations. Archivists in Australia have spent the last ten or fifteen years carving out a professional niche for themselves — a well-defined pigeon-hole in the public job market. The reshaping of that niche is alarming, but not catastrophic. Archivists have also carved out, like historians, a professional discipline based on a specific moral, methodological and intellectual training. The discipline transcends the structures of the profession. In the year 2000 archives and history departments may have changed radically, but history and archivy will be flourishing.

Oh — and nationality? I think that in 2000 the concept of nationality will be fiercely contested, a site for many competing claims to citizenship and cultural hegemony. History and archivy will be weapons in the battle, and maybe combatants.

Comment by Glen Schwinghamer

Marian Aveling's paper contains several interesting observations on the Australian Bicentennial Historic Records Search and its product, the *Australian historic records register*. Published discussions of the Search, and reviews of the *Register*, have been surprisingly (and disappointingly) lacking to date, given the criticisms aired by some archivists before and during the Search.

Some clarification of the involvement of the National Library after 1988 is in order. The Library accepted responsibility for maintaining the existing *Register* database (without adding new records to it) and for handling restricted access requests. Information about records described, their location, and details of ownership is updated on the database, which is publicly available on-line throughout the OZLINE network. There has as yet been no mass exercise to verify the accuracy of all 3514 records in the *Register*, though there are plans to do this. A project was, however, carried out in late 1989 to verify the accuracy of access conditions for all records in the *Register*. Because a very small number of errors were discovered, the Australian Bicentennial Authority agreed to fund a partial re-issue of the *Register*, which was released in 1990.

The advertising campaign referred to by Marian Aveling was carried out in 1990 over a period of six weeks, funded from a 'bequest' from the by then defunct Bicentennial Authority. The campaign covered every State and resulted in considerable newspaper and radio coverage for the *Register*. It was aimed at the general public and all types of researchers but as Dr Aveling illustrates with the case of historians, it has probably had little lasting impact. Use of the *Register* at the many libraries around Australia which hold a copy is hard to gauge, so it

proved difficult to assess accurately the effectiveness of all the publicity.

Dr Aveling affirms the importance of the *Register* as an invaluable starting place for historical researchers, but fears it is not receiving much use — at least among historians and their students. She suggests that an important reason is that the *Register* is not an ongoing project and accordingly lacks a sufficient profile. In fact, the *Register* might be considered 'ongoing' to a certain degree in that while it is not being expanded, it *is* updated. But whether ongoing or not, the *Register* is an important — unique — reference source in its own right. As such, it should take its place with other important references and be used accordingly by historians and other researchers, as well as by librarians and archivists, and promoted among their students and users.