

# ARCHIVISTS AND ABORIGINAL RECORDS

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*As Aboriginal and other Australians increasingly explore Aboriginal experience and history, the problems raised by the nature, the control and the use of archival records about Aborigines are demanding innovative and pro-active measures and solutions. The limited performance to date of archives institutions is highlighted, and suggestions made for improvement in such areas as finding aids, access policies and outreach activities. A shortened version of the paper was presented to the ASA conference in Sydney in June 1991.*

Archives are the memory of our society; the databank we rely on for our understanding of the past and its implications for today and beyond. As Sir Ninian Stephen so eloquently phrased it in 1984:

Without archives there would be little verifiable past and mankind would be left with no more than the fleeting present and the unknowable future; yet it is in the past that all the accumulations of human wisdom lie, all the past triumphs and defeats which mankind has experienced and in the light of which lessons can be learned.<sup>1</sup>

Yet what is the substance of that collective memory; what does the databank contain? Over 25 years ago, in the turbulent years of the mid-1970s, F. Gerald Ham the then President of the Society of American Archivists argued that:

Our most important and intellectually demanding task as archivists is to make an informed selection of information that will provide the future with a representative record of human experience in our time.<sup>2</sup>

Despite the streamlining and modernising of the procedures by which records are selected for archival retention and the re-examining of the tenets which underlie those procedures, the 'representativeness' of our archival collections has not greatly changed. The majority of archival agencies in Australia, as in other countries, guard the records of the key institutions of the modern day state and of prominent individuals associated with them: the legislature and the bureaucracy; finance, commerce, industry and the law; academia; the media and

publishers; the church; social, cultural and welfare organisations. There are of course many reasons for this: most Australian archives were established by such institutions primarily to serve as the corporate memory and responsibility towards the wider community is not a priority or an imperative. Those archives which are not directly responsible to a record creating structure rarely have the resources, and sometimes not the freedom, to examine, revise or change their collecting practices. Last but not least the lack of formal liaison and networking between Australian archival agencies means we have only haphazard knowledge about the content of the collective memory and we therefore do not have the very information which is crucial to national discussion and to planning for better quality documentation.

For those who need to delve into the past, the biased nature of the available sources is always a problem. Certainly, there is an abundance of institutional and administrative documentation in Australian archives and the person researching in such areas would appear to be well served. However, no researcher can ignore the fact that such documentation primarily reflects official or managerial viewpoints and interests. Alternative sources of information may exist but are often difficult to locate and are unlikely to be as voluminous or as comprehensive. For example, Michael McKernan, author of *The Australian People and the Great War*, found his information in many unlikely sources, despite the wealth of documentation about World War I and events in Australia at the time, because his aim

was to concentrate on the ordinary people; the difficulty, of course, was to find them. By definition 'ordinary people' do not leave their papers to libraries and archives . . . Nor do [they] write newspaper editorials, or read speeches into Hansard.<sup>3</sup>

The problems of documentary bias are even more complex in the case of national minorities. Australian Aborigines, like indigenous peoples elsewhere, have for a long time been administered and studied by non-Aborigines. The bulk of the records relating to Aborigines in Australian archives was created by or collected by the white bureaucracy, the church, scientific and academic interests. The archival holdings of records created by Aboriginal people themselves are by comparison a small component of the collective memory. The archives themselves employ or consult with few Aborigines and even fewer Aborigines in a managerial or advisory board position.

The consequence is that many researchers of the Aboriginal experience, including Aborigines themselves, principally have to rely on archival sources created or collected by institutions and individuals whose 'view of the Australian Aborigines has never been innocent, nor has it ever been neutral'.<sup>4</sup> The problem is especially acute when the period concerned is beyond the reach of peoples' memories. I

experienced this myself when researching for my *The Coming of the Strangers: Life in Australia 1788-1822* (Sydney, Collins and the State Library of NSW, 1988). Only scraps of evidence exist to indicate how Aboriginal people at that time felt about the invaders of their land; all else is interpretation of the words and drawings of the strangers, none of whom spoke Aboriginal languages and few of whom were favourably disposed towards the Aborigines.

Despite the documentary problems the last three decades have seen a major revival of interest in Aboriginal history,<sup>5</sup> especially the documentation and analysis of subjects ignored by Australian history such as white racism and violence and institutional and bureaucratic oppression,<sup>6</sup> the furthering of knowledge about and understanding of pre-contact history and of 'the other side of the frontier'<sup>7</sup> and the demolition of myths such as those of Aboriginal passivity and of their detachment from politics,<sup>8</sup> which have blinkered historical thinking.

Since the 1970s Aboriginal people themselves have begun to research and to write their own history. In the process they have inevitably confronted the bias of the available records. As Kevin Gilbert has written: 'The real horror story of Aboriginal Australia today is locked in police files and child welfare reports'.<sup>9</sup> For many Aborigines, the clues to their identity and their kin lie in such sources, produced by institutions which 'attempted to smash [their] cultural and family identities'.<sup>10</sup> The fundamental problem is not lack of evidence but the *type* of evidence. James Miller summarises his feelings in the introduction to his clan and family history, *Koori: A Will to Win*:

Unfortunately, there is no oral tradition of pre-European culture existing among today's descendants of the Wonnarua . . . The recorded history of my people began in the early nineteenth century when the white man invaded the Hunter Valley. The frontier violence of the contact period is well documented in official and private papers. However, all of these documents were written by white men, most of whom had anti-Koori views. Few white men had pro-Koori views. However, when the white men who held positive attitudes wrote about the Kooris whom they met, they interpreted events in their European way of thinking. When they wrote about injustices being committed against the Koori, they in fact wrote about British injustice as Englishmen would understand the term. Rarely is a Koori point of view found in the old documents . . . One of the main objectives in this book is to try to interpret history from the point of view of my ancestors and this has involved the difficult process of reading between the lines of countless documents written by whites.<sup>11</sup>

In the process of uncovering their own history, Aboriginal people have put it on record that that history is far more diverse and far more complex than the official or scientific record allows. It is a history about people with names, kin, life-stories, thoughts and feelings. It is a

history about people with the same common fate of domination and disruption but with different experience of it and different responses to it. It is above all the history of people who already had a history and continue to do so.

The documentation of Aboriginal history has accompanied its research and writing. Oral history in particular has been the means for recording not only traditional knowledge but also the events of recent times in the lives of individuals and of communities. Examples include the autobiographies by Jack Mirritji,<sup>12</sup> Peter Pepper,<sup>13</sup> Elsie Roughsey<sup>14</sup> and Ida West,<sup>15</sup> the Koori Oral History Program at the State Library of Victoria,<sup>16</sup> the work of Bruce Shaw in recording Aboriginal oral history in the Kimberley area,<sup>17</sup> the Warlpiri women's history project<sup>18</sup> and the Yarrabah mission project in Northern Queensland.<sup>19</sup> The compilation of genealogies has been the focus of other projects, such as the Aboriginal Family History Project in South Australia.<sup>20</sup> Often other documentation especially photographs arises from such projects: for the Garden Point mission anniversary book its compiler, Mrs Thecla Brogan, gathered a unique and extensive photographic record of its history;<sup>21</sup> she was also able to identify the people and events in the photographs, a copy set of which are now held by the Northern Territory Archives Service.

This is not to deny that much has and can be gleaned through critical use of non-Aboriginal archival sources or that Aboriginal sources of themselves necessarily tell the full story. Usually both types of sources are necessary: Barbara Cummings for example both interviewed fellow inmates and combed government archives sources for her history of the Retta Dixon Home in Darwin<sup>22</sup> and Aboriginal histories of for example the La Perouse community and of the South Australian Aborigines have been compiled from a diversity of sources.<sup>23</sup> Eric Willmot wrote about the Aboriginal warrior Pemulwuy on the basis of evidence 'in the unpublished records of his enemies, and in the minds of Aboriginal-Australians'.<sup>24</sup> Land rights cases in the Northern Territory depend both on the oral evidence of the Aborigines involved and on documentary archival evidence.<sup>25</sup> Non-Aboriginal historians and researchers likewise have found that the Aboriginal experience needs both types of evidence.<sup>26</sup>

While the value and importance of non-Aboriginal archival sources about Aborigines cannot be denied, the *fact* of bias, the particular bias of the majority of the available records, and the implications of this situation need to be acknowledged and confronted. It must also be recognised that our society values the written document above oral evidence so that documentary bias is not easily exposed when the Aboriginal evidence is primarily oral and expressed according to Aboriginal conventions and beliefs.<sup>27</sup> For example, at the Ingaladdi rock art site west of Katherine, Namarluk's giant footsteps and scenes

from his story are painted and engraved among depictions of the mythic beings who created the surrounding landscape; his story is part of theirs and he is one of them.<sup>28</sup> Europeans on the other hand remember Namarluk as an outlaw,<sup>29</sup> chased and brought to justice by the intrepid police to whom he is handcuffed in photographs and who recorded their story in the police journals of the day. Such examples abound. Quite simply they demonstrate that the use of archives for information about Australian Aborigines is much more fraught with dispute than the use of archives in other areas of enquiry because the record predominantly denies Aboriginal identity and Aboriginal history and assumes the right to determine who are and who are not 'real' Aborigines.<sup>30</sup>

The issue of identity enters the public arena principally at times of questioning and debate about national identity, such as the recent Bicentennial. The national identity Australia has inherited has been shaped by Anglocentric and assimilationist beliefs. As Nigel Parbury has commented:

. . . the historic and continuing debate about Australian identity, the recurrent and obsessive need for definition, and the related fear and loathing of an 'indifferent' landscape, all stem from the exclusion of the 'real Australians' from White Australia, symbolised and consummated by their ritual exclusion from the constitution and the census at Federation.<sup>31</sup>

But for Aborigines and other minorities who feel that their voice is not considered and their rights are at stake identity and history are central matters, of vital and on-going concern. And the stakes for Aborigines are high: their identity as Aborigines and as particular kinds of Aborigines, their rights to ownership and control of land, sacred sites and resources, compensation for the injustices which they have suffered and their right to manage their own affairs. Others too realise the stakes: it is no accident that the Northern Territory Government has bought the Strehlow collection which it sees as crucial to land rights and the development of mining in Central Australia and that the Bjelke-Peterson Government in Queensland embargoed Community Services Department records indefinitely. Increasingly and inevitably Aborigines, like indigenous peoples elsewhere,<sup>32</sup> are asserting a claim to a say in if not control over the way in which the materials relating to their group identity are guarded, used and controlled. To date the issues raised publicly have included skeletal remains, the ownership of traditional artefacts and copyright in artistic works. But archives are not and cannot remain unaffected. As Henrietta Fourmile has written:

In the context of Aboriginal sovereignty it is completely untenable that one 'nation' (i.e. European Australia) should have a monopoly and control of such a substantial body of information concerning another, the Aboriginal 'nation' . . . To be an Aborigine is having non-Aborigines control the documents from which other non-Aborigines write their version of our history.<sup>33</sup>

In the Anglo-Saxon tradition the archivist is the impartial guardian of the records. But we cannot maintain a neutral stance when dealing with Aboriginal records and we need to take positive measures to resolve the problems which they raise even at the cost of modifying hallowed practices. Other professions have had to re-examine or are revising their thinking,<sup>34</sup> but archivists have not paid much attention to the issue and few archival institutions have taken appropriate initiatives. We need to take swift action in Australia else we risk being caught unprepared.

For a start Aborigines should be encouraged and assisted to establish their own archival programs and collections, for both contemporary and traditional material. The comparative lack of Aboriginal documentation has many reasons. The importance of oral memory and of the visual record in Aboriginal society are part of the explanation but equally telling factors have been the white control over Aboriginal documentation, the removal of Aboriginal documentation far from its source, the distrust that many Aborigines feel towards non-Aboriginal institutions, the lack of Aborigines trained in or familiar with archival work and documents and the absence of necessary resources and facilities. It is more than somewhat ironic that the Federal Government's Treaty of Waitangi sesquicentenary present to New Zealand was \$1 million for the recording of Maori oral history while Government support on such a scale has never been available in Australia. Archival institutions can play a vital role in supporting Aboriginal managed programs as for example the South Australian Museum has done with the Aboriginal Family History Project, the Victorian Museum with the Koori Photographic Project and the Victorian State Library with the Koori Oral History Project. Such institutions are, however, usually located in the capital cities and are often not easily accessible to the majority of Aborigines.

Archivists and archival institutions need to outreach and to assist Aboriginal community programs through the provision of relevant materials, the training of personnel and assistance with information, resources and facilities. While Aboriginal community cultural endeavours are likely to focus on recording their own history and on the preservation of documents and artefacts in the community, there will inevitably be records in mainstream collections. Archival institutions can assist such endeavours by providing copies of relevant documents and photographs, as for example the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies does through its Cultural Resources program<sup>35</sup> and the John Oxley Library in Brisbane through its Aboriginal Community Access Program. Few Aboriginal organisations and communities have the funds to employ archivists or to pay for training although there is no doubt that there is a demand for the recording and safeguarding of their history: the Northern Territory

Library Service does not have the resources to meet the high demand for libraries from Aboriginal communities and organisations such as the Institute for Aboriginal Development in Alice Springs and Batchelor College regularly train and involve Aboriginal people in community oral history. Grant money is however available from the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and other sources for archives, Keeping Places and museums. Tangentyere Council in Alice Springs for example was able, with the assistance of the Northern Territory Archives Service, to employ Matthew Platt in 1988 and 1989 to establish its archive facility and procedures and to train staff in the maintenance of the system; this initiative will hopefully lead to the training of Aboriginal archivists and the development of Aboriginal archival services in Central Australia. Likewise archivists and archives institutions can assist Aboriginal communities with advice, equipment and training in basic care, conservation and disaster prevention and remedy measures. Suitable equipment and desirable environmental conditions are luxuries only the well endowed institutions can enjoy. A survey I conducted for the Northern Territory Branch of the Australian Council of Library and Information Services of all Northern Territory archives and libraries (including those in Aboriginal communities) in 1990 indicated that storage and environmental conditions were generally inadequate in both urban and rural areas and that many staff did not have the expertise and/or the resources to change the situation or to develop alternatives for dealing with it. The difficulties are likely to be similar throughout Australia and in Aboriginal communities in particular. Rather than ignoring these problems or treating them as remote, archivists and archival institutions should regard assistance as part of their professional responsibility. Involvement in community projects, the development of community oriented training programs and the devising of solutions to problems such as constructing environmentally sound buildings without air-conditioning or implementing disaster relief programs with minimal resources are challenges which should interest and excite archivists.

Within Australian archival institutions we need to employ Aborigines whether as regular staff, for particular projects (as South Australian State Records did for the compilation of its *Guide to Aboriginal Records*) or on work experience (as the Northern Territory Archives Service did recently with a cultural resource management student). Traineeships or other funding for such projects can be sought from sources such as the Department of Employment, Education and Training, the Commonwealth Employment Service, the Australian Traineeship System conducted jointly by Federal and State authorities, and the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Commission. Australian legislation permits the identification of Aboriginality as a desired job qualification and Aboriginal recruitment

and employment is consistent with equal employment opportunity. To ensure the effectiveness of such employment non-Aboriginal staff and supervisors need to be supportive and well-trained in cross-cultural awareness while the Aboriginal employees need carefully planned work programs which include projects related to their skills, knowledge and interests.

As well, Aborigines need to be involved in the management of archival records through appointment to management and advisory bodies. Many other advisory bodies such as the National Cultural Heritage Committee now require the representation of Aboriginal interests but there is no such legislative requirement for Australian government archives and, with the exception of the Council of the Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, there is no such representation on archival advisory bodies. This is a matter which can be taken up when changes in archival legislation are being proposed and/or when there are membership vacancies on such bodies.

Aboriginal records are held by a large number and a diverse variety of Australian archival collections. In 1988 the organisers of the *Documenting Multicultural Australia* Conference surveyed Australian archive, library, museum and historical collections; fifty-four of these specifically reported holding Aboriginal material but at least ten other respondents are known to hold such material. Many non-respondents and many collections not surveyed are, however, known to hold Aboriginal records.<sup>36</sup> There is a great need for an Australian equivalent of the recently published *Te Hikoī Marama: a directory of Maori information sources* (Auckland Public Library/National Library of New Zealand, 1991) in order to identify where Aboriginal records are held. The problems are many: material is located in archives, libraries, museums and historical collections: Donald Thomson's personal papers for example are in the Museum of Victoria but his reports as patrol officer in the Northern Territory are in the Australian War Memorial and Australian Archives. Material is also located in different kinds of archives, libraries, museums and historical collections (e.g. government, university, regional) and in different branches of institutions such as Australian Archives. The dispersal of Aboriginal records around the country and overseas not only makes them difficult to locate but also makes it difficult for those they concern to access them. For example, the bulk of material relating to northern Aborigines and to Torres Strait Islanders is in remote capital cities, in southern collections or overseas because of the affiliations of the agencies or individuals who collected the material and who saw no responsibility to provide copies to those they recorded or studied. It should be the responsibility of every archives institution to be familiar with guides for locating Aboriginal material, such as the *Handbook for Aboriginal and Islander History*<sup>37</sup> and *Looking for your mob* (Smith and



Halstead 1990) and with relevant research services such as the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies and the Aboriginal Data Archive at the University of Queensland. It should also be the responsibility of every archives institution to inform Aboriginal people about what records they hold and to assist them not only in locating relevant material but in obtaining copies of it. The Mortlock Library in South Australia for example is engaged in projects to make more readily accessible the Aboriginal records it holds as well as obtaining copies of Aboriginal photographic and genealogical material held in the South Australian Museum and other repositories less equipped to deal with such enquiries from the public.

There is also the problem of records in private hands. Neville Green for example worked with the Oombulgurri community in the north-west Kimberley on documenting their history through oral history and through tracking down and making accessible to the community the photographs taken by white people involved with the Forrest River mission station. As he writes

To the teachers, missionaries and casual visitors such photographs are the reminders of social experiences. However, such photographs may be the only pictorial record of the parents and grandparents of thousands of people on Aboriginal communities. Frequently I am told, 'When we were married Father . . . took lots of photos — but we've never seen them'.<sup>38</sup>

The Aboriginal material in archival collections raises a minefield of access problems. In traditional archival practice government records are subject to a 'closed period' and non government records are restricted according to the wishes of the donor or lender. But a large percentage of Aboriginal records are about people who were never consulted about their wishes in regard to access and which were created or collected by people whose right to judge or to determine such matters must be questioned. The language of such records is often offensive and demeaning, visual material is at times deliberately voyeuristic and the individuality and identity of people is all too frequently not acknowledged. The question arises whether in such cases the subjects of the records should be given a say in determining access. In recent times there has been greater readiness to determine Aboriginal wishes in relation to information which they have made available<sup>39</sup> but retrospective consideration of access decisions is not common and can be difficult when the people concerned are not known or cannot be contacted. Furthermore, Aboriginal criteria for determining access are complex. They are not necessarily fixed and immutable or uniform across all Aboriginal groups: definitions of sacred/secret vary and can change over time, there are great cultural variations in who can know, see or hear what, when and in what circumstances and Aborigines, like non-Aborigines, differ over what they individually consider private, offensive or demeaning.

The response of archival institutions to this situation varies. In 1988 I questioned fourteen major Australian archival institutions about their access policy on Aboriginal records. Most relied principally on the traditional closed period or donor restriction methods except that in three states the government agency responsible for Aboriginal affairs controlled access to specific departmental records beyond the closed period while another government archives embargoed those regarded as significantly invading privacy although there was no suggestion that Aborigines had been consulted about their views about the matter. Six institutions reported concern for sacred/secret information although most relied on non-Aboriginal people to determine access to it while only four institutions acknowledged concerns about otherwise sensitive material or had mechanisms for dealing with it. The results suggest that most archival institutions need to re-examine each collection which they hold and the adequacy of the existing access arrangements, to establish mechanisms for consulting with appropriate Aboriginal people and to establish guidelines for determining future access policy.

Access is not only about policy however. Guide entries, subject headings and photograph captions still often reflect past racist assumptions (and have an historic value for that reason). Few archives, however, advise their clients about the likelihood of sensitive material, take steps to correct insensitive practices when the opportunity arises as for example in the computerising of descriptive information, or involve Aboriginal people in archival tasks such as indentifying people in photographs and the circumstances of those photographs. Furthermore, detailed information about specific holdings can be hard to obtain: there are only a few published guides to Aboriginal records in Australian repositories<sup>40</sup> and guides to some of the major collections remain unpublished.<sup>41</sup> Other problems are people problems. Many Aboriginal people do not speak English as a first language and many have only basic literacy education but staff are not trained to deal with these problems or advised how to seek assistance when necessary. Aboriginal people have no historic reason to trust bureaucratic institutions and can regard archives access procedures as a means of denying them information to which they are legitimately entitled. Nor are staff often familiar with even the most basic aspects of Aboriginal history and experience or Aboriginal terminology for records which archives hold. To overcome the unease which many Aborigines report about using or contacting archives and libraries<sup>42</sup> all staff should receive cross-cultural public contact training and training in Aboriginal history. As well Aboriginal groups and individuals should be encouraged to visit archives, to use them and to feel at ease in them through workshops and other familiarisation programs.

The agenda I have proposed is not easy but it is necessary. History and the collective memory are important to everyone and in our

society that includes Aborigines. Aboriginal people testify continually to the importance of maintaining their identity and their history:

We will continue to survive and to prosper and will remain vigilant to ensure that history is never repeated.<sup>43</sup>

Aboriginal identity and history are important to us all since Australian national identity must incorporate Aboriginal experience as well as non-Aboriginal to be a meaningful concept in our contemporary society. As archivists we have a responsibility to facilitate and not to frustrate the process.

## ENDNOTES

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