

Australian Lesbian & Gay Archives

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Graeme Carbery is founder and Secretary of the Australian Lesbian & Gay Archives. He was involved in the Homosexual Law Reform Coalition and the Gay Teachers and Students Group in Melbourne in the 1970s and is author of the forthcoming ALGA publication *A History of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras*. He has qualifications in jurisprudence and education and teaches law related subjects at the Western Metropolitan TAFE, Footscray, Melbourne.

The article recounts the background to the formation of the Australian Lesbian and Gay Archives, describes the scope and rationale of its collecting activities, and covers its services, educative role and policies on access and privacy. ALGA is more a resource centre than an archives strictly speaking, and this is admitted and defended, as is its attitude to the role of public collecting institutions. The work of the State Library of New South Wales and the Noel Butlin Archives Centre is also acknowledged.

THE AUSTRALIAN LESBIAN & GAY ARCHIVES (ALGA) is a creation of the Gay Liberation era, having been established in 1978 at a forum of the homosexual movement to be the national repository for the records of the Australian lesbian and gay male communities.

The homosexual movement in Australia is generally considered to have arisen in 1970 with the formation of Campaign Against Moral Persecution (CAMP). CAMP formed in Sydney, and it helped spawn similar organisations in other states. The movement developed quickly, gaining an even higher public profile when Gay Liberation ideas arrived in Australia in 1971–72. However, by the mid-1970s, and for reasons that are beyond the scope of this article, there was a considerable decline in lesbian and gay political activism in Australia. Many of the organisations that had come into being had either disappeared or were barely functioning (there were important exceptions), few newcomers were getting involved, and for a period it looked as though the gay liberation movement in Australia would run out of steam.

It was against this background that I decided in 1977 to begin collecting material in a systematic way, to ensure that as much as possible of the record of the Gay Liberation era in Australia was preserved. Many activists, myself included, had spoken from time to time about the need to collect material for the permanent record, but for one reason or another nothing happened in an organised way. In January 1978 I visited the Canadian Gay Archives in Toronto, and was particularly inspired by their achievements (their thesaurus of gay terms remains to this day an important aid to ALGA's keywording). At the Fourth National Homosexual Conference in Sydney 1978¹ I moved a motion recommending the establishment of an Australian Gay Archives. The motion was passed unanimously and the Archives came into existence under the auspices of the National Homosexual Conference, which remained the only national forum for the movement until the mid-1980s. Later national conferences also gave in-principle and financial support to the Archives.

The Australian Gay Archives became an incorporated association in 1983 and changed its name to the Australian Lesbian & Gay Archives in 1991. In 1993 the Australian Taxation Office granted it tax deductibility for donations.

ALGA's main aims are to recover and preserve materials that record the lives and experiences of lesbians and gay men in Australia and to make them accessible. Our collection policy is inclusive. We collect any material produced by Australian lesbians and gay men, or any material which refers to homosexuality. This includes material written from an anti-homosexual viewpoint as well as material on which there are divergent views within the homosexual communities. As we are not in a position to know what will, or will not, be important or valued in twenty, fifty or one hundred years time, we collect everything we can. We do not see our role as censoring or filtering or sanitising information that may be seen as controversial within our own communities, or within the wider community.

ALGA is not an archive in the strict sense: we do not follow the principles of provenance and original order and could perhaps be more accurately described as a specialist, non-borrowing library or resource centre. Unless a donor requests that their material be kept separately it will be incorporated into the general collection which is filed by group of publication (newspaper clippings are filed chronologically). ALGA also embraces other roles as

- a resource for the lesbian and gay communities;
- a research library for lesbian and gay groups and individuals;
- a publisher of research tools; and
- a publisher of material for the education of society about homosexuality.

The collection consists of:

The printed word: newsletters, publications and ephemera (posters, leaflets, badges, t-shirts, theatre programs, letters, invitations, etc.) of lesbian and gay organisations and individuals across Australia.

The spoken word: oral histories gleaned from taped interviews with lesbians and gay men from all parts of Australia, particularly relating to pre-movement life.

The film record: videotapes and films about homosexuality, including sex education films and films by lesbians and gay men about homosexuality.

The literary and artistic record: the published and unpublished works of Australian artists, writers and poets; also, biographical researches of writers, past and present.

The photographic record: images of lesbians and gay men and their social life showing what it was like at all periods of history in Australia.

The law: how lesbians and gay men have been treated; precise records of their oppression, including documentation of arrests, trials, convictions and sentences resulting from so-called 'criminal' activity; also, documentation of family law matters involving lesbians and gay men and their children.

How lesbians and gay men have been viewed: newspaper and magazine clippings tracing changes in public acceptance and media treatment.

ALGA's collection of periodicals consists of about 700 separate titles (mainly Australian but quite a number of international titles) and in excess of 14 000 items. We have complete sets of many Australian publications, including many of the earliest ones. Our collection of newspaper clippings exceeds 45 000 and includes items dating back to the 1920s.

Documentation of the pre-Gay Liberation era is scarce, being confined to occasional media references to court cases or scandals, literary references, and individuals' personal diaries and correspondence. ALGA's oral history project is an ongoing attempt to supplement this by recording personal recollections of homosexual life before 1970. Interviewees can contribute on

a confidential basis if desired. Where practicable, interviews are transcribed with a view to making their contents more accessible.²

The resources of the Archives are open to all people, regardless of sexual orientation, although our policy precludes knowingly assisting research being undertaken from an anti-lesbian or anti-gay perspective. ALGA's policy on privacy is the same as any reputable archive. Donors are entitled to place access restrictions on their material and they are scrupulously followed. Some groups and individuals have deposited material with us for safekeeping on the understanding that if they want it back in the future we will return it to them.

While ALGA does not offer seven days a week access, visitors and users are able to access the collection at different times on five days of the week simply by making an appointment.

As an incorporated association ALGA is run by an elected Committee of Management. This legal structure ensures that ownership and control of the collection remains within the lesbian and gay male communities. ALGA is independent of any other lesbian or gay male organisation. This independence is essential if we are to maintain the support and goodwill of the diverse range of interests that our communities represent.

ALGA receives no government funding. Income is generated from annual membership subscriptions (\$15) and fundraising. Over the years ALGA has received donations from community groups which have been used to assist in the purchase of capital equipment.

Over the years, ALGA has been maintained by a small number of volunteers, none of whom have any formal training in archival or records management. Where necessary we have sought professional advice, particularly in the basic principles of preservation. Gay men have been a majority among ALGA's volunteers, although less so in recent years. The name change in 1991 was an attempt to redress this imbalance. Since its inception ALGA has sought to collect lesbian material, in keeping with its charter, and lesbian input has come through donations of material as well as liaison with lesbian members and organisations.

Public vs community-based archives

Some professional archivists argue that lack of expertise and resources are major reasons why volunteer community groups should rely on public institutions to preserve their records rather than attempting to do it

themselves. They also point out that volunteer community groups often have a short life-span making them a risky proposition as long-term repositories for archival records. While these arguments have some force, we believe that there is a special role for community archives that the public institutions are not likely to fulfil.

There is a widely held view in the Australian lesbian and gay male communities, although it is by no means unanimous, that any mature lesbian and gay male community should want to control the record of its achievements and cultural life. When the modern homosexual movement began in the early 1970s, many of its activists in Australia and elsewhere adopted as a guiding principle a statement by the German homosexual rights campaigner, Kurt Hiller, who said in 1921: 'The liberation of homosexuals can only be the work of homosexuals themselves'. ALGA's work is an expression of the view that Hiller's statement applies as much to recordkeeping as it does to any other form of activism.

To those who argue that the superior facilities of public institutions make them the only suitable repositories we say that enthusiasm and commitment to the task of collecting is also very important and that public institutions have no intrinsic commitment to lesbian 'herstory' and gay male history. It is not so long ago that public institutions were part of a conspiracy of silence on how lesbians and gay men really lived their lives. Many public libraries, for instance, were slow to reflect in their holdings the diversity of opinion on homosexuality, even when the weight of professional and public opinion began to challenge the sin/sickness model of homosexuality in the 1970s. Even today, the NSW State Library remains a rare example of an Australian public institution actively seeking out records of Australian homosexual life. Benign neglect probably characterises the stance of most collecting institutions to their lesbian and gay constituents.

This is not to say that the energy of lesbians and gay men in promoting more responsive policies in the public institutions is misplaced—quite the contrary—but it is to caution that exclusive reliance on the state is a risky strategy. In an era where public institutions are competing for increasingly scarce resources, the gay and lesbian communities would be unwise to entrust the preservation of its historical record to the benevolence of state, particularly when that benevolence has been demonstrated in such a limited way to date.

In addition, there is the perspective of the user. ALGA caters for a variety of users such as: academic researchers, teachers, media workers and script-writers at the 'professional' end of the spectrum as well as secondary school students, political activists and various interested individuals with an amateur

historian's interest in using the archives. State institutions, quite understandably, make demanding requirements of potential users before granting them access (references to confirm the bona fides of users). These sorts of access restrictions are likely to be perceived as obstructive, if not intimidating, to the less sophisticated user. The Archives would be more likely to be viewed as friendly turf to the uninitiated researcher on gay/lesbian matters.

ALGA is currently the only recognised community group in Australia which actively collects and preserves lesbian and gay material, and makes it readily accessible. The Women's Liberation Archive in Melbourne has a considerable amount of lesbian material but it is not freely accessible and at the moment the Archive is not actively collecting. There are a number of private collections in various parts of the country, some of them extensive, but these are not widely known, nor are they freely accessible.

National vs regional collections

Late last year there was a brief debate in the lesbian and gay press in Sydney about the most suitable repository for the records of individuals and organisations.³ The debate was initiated by the State Library of New South Wales and one of the issues raised was whether New South Wales material should be deposited in the State Library or with ALGA, which is based in Melbourne.

The NSW State Library is one of the few public institutions we know of that is actively collecting lesbian and gay material at present. It has been actively collecting New South Wales lesbian and gay material for several years and its collection includes the papers of individuals, and the records of organisations, some of whom played an important part in the development of Sydney's lesbian and gay communities. At the end of 1994 the Library received a boost when it acquired the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras Archives.

Being a national collection, ALGA will continue to collect New South Wales material, but not in competition with the State Library of New South Wales. We have established a good working relationship with the Library and have agreed to exchange information, including lists of each others holdings, and duplicate material. This relationship will benefit users of both collections and help to maximise accessibility to available lesbian and gay material.

ALGA is not in competition with any other library or archive: our primary concern is to ensure that the record of our lives be preserved. We support the

idea of public institutions collecting lesbian and gay material, but not as the primary repository when there is a community-based repository. It is disappointing that community-based lesbian and gay archives have not been established throughout Australia, but the reality is that over the years there has been little or no interest in the idea.

An obvious advantage of having access to a comprehensive national collection, and one that is often repeated by users, is the value of having access to so much material in the one location. The down-side is that people living outside Melbourne wishing to use ALGA's resources have difficulty in accessing material. This is a problem confronting all national collections and there is no simple answer. However, part of the answer is in the quality of the liaison between collecting organisations around the country, be they public institutions or community-based.

Archiving and AIDS

ALGA's collection inevitably includes much of relevance to AIDS, but it is not a specialist AIDS collection. This task is being undertaken by the National AIDS Archive Collection (NAAC) which has been established as part of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian University.⁴ The NAAC includes the personal papers of individuals working in the area of HIV/AIDS as well a broad range of materials, in all formats, on community, state/territory and federal HIV/AIDS campaigns to eliminate the transmission of the virus and to minimise the personal and social impact of HIV infection. There is also a multimedia collection which is supported by planning and evaluation documents and archival material.

Although much of the record of the lifestyles of lesbians and gay men in the post Gay Liberation era has been preserved in the ALGA collection, valuable material about this era is being lost. One of the tragedies of AIDS is that many of those who have died did not leave a will. Not only does such a situation have serious consequences for the partner of a deceased person, if there is one, but sadly it is not unusual for the family of the deceased to destroy any personal papers which relate to the deceased's homosexuality.

Educative role

Increased public awareness of issues of concern to lesbians and gay men in the wider community has led to a demand for more information. For instance ALGA receives many requests from senior secondary students and tertiary students for information on specific aspects of homosexuality. Often when a particular lesbian and/or gay issue is covered by the media we will receive

requests for information about it. Sometimes people visit the Archives and do their own research but often they ask us to post material to them. Our usual response to these requests is to search our holdings and gather together a representative collection of relevant material and send photocopied sets. In the past year for example we have gathered material on: the ABC's decision to televise the 1994 Mardi Gras; Tasmania's anti-gay laws and Commonwealth intervention; recognition of same-sex relationships; and lesbian and gay parenting.

ALGA has published a small number of indexes, e.g. a List of Periodicals which includes titles, description and issue numbers of ALGA's periodical holdings, and an annotated list of editorials in Australian newspapers relating to homosexuality from 1949 to 1991. In 1993 ALGA published a thirty-seven page history of Homosexual Law Reform in Australia and in May 1995 will publish a history of the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Mardi Gras.

Over its seventeen years, the ALGA collection has grown into a substantial record of the lives of Australian lesbians and gay men from 1970 onwards. Its strengths are its recognition within large segments of the lesbian and gay male communities as an important community resource, and its accessibility, particularly for researchers seeking a broad range of periodicals and ephemera on Australian lesbian and gay themes. Photocopying facilities are available on site. Anyone wanting further information about ALGA should write to: ALGA, PO Box 124, Parkville Vic 3052. Tel: 03 9499 6334.

Endnotes

1. National homosexual conferences started in 1975, the first being convened by the Homosexual Caucus within the Australian Union of Students, which then had its headquarters in Melbourne. They had been convened as a conscious attempt to invigorate a flagging movement, and to a large degree were successful in achieving that goal. The 1978 conference was noteworthy in many respects, not least that it helped galvanise the movement in the wake of the arrests at the first Gay Mardi Gras, only two months previously.
2. Published articles based on the oral history project include 'Some Melbourne beats: A "map" of a sub-culture from the 1930s to the 1950s', in *Gay Perspectives*, eds Robert Aldrich and Garry Wotherspoon, University of Sydney, 1992; and 'Melbourne in the 1930s', *OutRage*, no. 57, February 1988, pp. 22-24.
3. See for example the Letters to the Editor, *Sydney Star Observer*, 6 October 1994.
4. See Fabian Hutchinson and Jonathan Wraith, 'The National AIDS Archives Collection: Documenting the "HIV / AIDS Education", 1983-1993', *Limited Addition*, no. 3, October 1993, pp. 25-29.