

# History and Archives

*Dr Hilary Golder*

Dr **Hilary Golder** is an historian, who has described herself as a Record Junkie. Receiving her doctorate in the early 1980s, Dr Golder has researched in a number of search rooms and has experienced the changes that have occurred to the services provided by archival institutions. In 1994 she was the author of the then Australian Archives history '*Documenting a nation: Australian Archives the first fifty years*' and is currently a member of the Board of the NSW State Records Authority.

*This is the text of paper presented to the Australian Society of Archivists, New South Wales Branch in September 1999. The author takes a warts and all approach to exploring the relationship between researching and writing history and the role of archives and archivists in that process. Dr Golder's speech is reproduced below with kind permission.*

In preparing this talk I have been wondering exactly what the ASA wants or expects to hear, from a historian. I am guessing that I was invited to speak tonight because my practice of history touches on some issues which are relevant to you.

In my long and not-so-brilliant career I have trudged to and fro across the No-Man's Land between History and Archives. My remarks tonight will obviously draw on nearly thirty years using government records at local, state and federal level - from maps, plans, court records, convict indents, assessment books to Treasury minutes etc. I know that does not cover the archival range by any means. But I would describe myself as a recovering recordaholic. I once suggested to John Cross (former Principal Archivist of New South Wales) that I must be the longest surviving user of state government records. He thought for a minute and decided I was the longest survivor who was still comparatively sane. I owe those long luxurious hours in the archives to the fact I have spent most of my time outside the

academy. (This may also have something to do with the sanity.) I have been writing commissioned histories, doing the odd heritage report and even designing undergraduate academic courses utilising state government records. Which raises the question 'What is happening in the academy?' This is a question I will try to come back to.

While I am offering personal testimony, however, it is worth pointing out that one of my commissions was a Short History of Australian (now National) Archives. And at the moment I am the representative of the 'historical community' on the Board of the State Records Authority of New South Wales. All of which should have given me some insight into the problems, practices and philosophy of a modern archives. I hope it has cured me of the historians' irritating assumption that archives are all about and for them. Not to mention the even more irritating demand that everything should be kept — that our analysis of the Australian identity just cannot be complete without those Tasmanian dog licences. I did say I was a recovering recordaholic. In fact I am such a house-trained historian on the State Records Board that it sometimes worries me. Consequently I am not going to revisit past stoushes between historians and archivists, even though they were fun at the time. It seems to me that in the last few years the two groups have come out of their trenches, even exchanging the odd cigarette on Christmas Day. In fact we have made tentative common cause on issues like access guidelines under the new State Records Act and the implications of proposed Privacy legislation in 1998.

I would prefer to talk tonight about some of the things we have in common, which really means problems we have in common. I am sorry if this is a bit negative. I could be talking about wonderful historian-friendly innovations, like websites, computerised finding aids etc. Certainly the advent of subject-based searching will reduce the friction between archivists and those stubborn historians who never would learn to 'think administratively' about how and why records are created. But you all know more about those innovations than I do. I am going to harp on the problems instead. Perhaps I have just got an attack of millennial gloom, but it is hard to ignore the crises in confidence within my profession of history. And I suggest these crises do have implications for archivists. They affect the ways in which 'records of enduring significance' will be used and put into the public domain. In my really pessimistic moments I wonder if historians are losing their power to annoy archivists because we are losing our powers.

I apologise in advance for talking mainly about the records I know, that is government records. But I would suggest that one of our common problems is the sort of collective amnesia which comes with the outsourcing, privatisation and corporatisation of public functions. Is amnesia an unintended or

intended consequence of these developments? Some politicians and administrators seem unworried by questions of accountability as records disappear behind the harem veil of 'commercial in confidence'. The rest of us have unaccountability thrust upon us. Even when public functions remain in public hands, the structure and culture of the responsible agencies has been revolutionised. Apparently Australian public institutions are among the most enthusiastic downsizers in the world. What is happening to the collective memory of those institutions in the Orwellian world of the 'efficiency dividend' and 'streamlined service delivery'?

Downsizing and perpetual restructuring have serious effects on institutional morale and this is beginning to be documented. But they also have effects on institutional memory. I will use the example of Shirley Fitzgerald, Sydney's City Historian, to illustrate this point. When Shirley started working at Sydney City Council, she was able to draw on an enviable range of sources - from the city's archives to the city's built environment to the memories of long-time city employees. Of course there was often a creative tension between their memories of how things worked and the documentary record of how things worked. Now all the old-timers have disappeared and Shirley herself is, by default, the keeper of their unofficial memories.

It is worth remembering that the City Council is an exceptional institution, in that it not only has its own archives but does employ a full-time historian. Frank Sartor is a Medici of public history! Elsewhere in-house historians have been swept out with the tide, along with the record clerk who knew where everything was. Do lean mean institutions and agencies have memories? What are the consequences of these rapid administrative changes for the creation and appraisal of records, not to mention public access to them. At the Australian Historical Association Conference last year, I asked 'How do anorexic agencies appraise their records?'. It was a rhetorical question. But Steve Stuckey from National Archives answered anyway - 'With great difficulty'. You might be wondering if this sympathy for overstressed agencies is really an attempt to smuggle historians into the appraisal process. Which is always jealously guarded by archivists. Indeed the appraisal process has been one of the great sites of struggle between historians and archivists. But I am no longer so interested in sneaking the historians in through the back door. I told you I was housetrained. By using words like 'memory' and 'collective' I have already revealed myself as hopelessly out of date. In fact I am so old-fashioned that I believe in professional expertise: indeed I believe in distinct expertises. Like most historians I used to bridle when people like Steve Stuckey insisted that historians should keep out of appraisal and allow the archivists to deploy their particular skills. At that AHA Conference, he argued that we have no right to trespass into the

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analysis of the main functions of an institution and the identification of the most important records produced by that institution. I wondered wistfully why the archivists would not want our valuable input?

However, I found myself on the Road to Damascus at a COFSTA residential seminar in Canberra earlier this year. There was a session of and about 'stakeholders'. It is always useful for the full-time historian to be reminded of other record users, because we do tend to get a bit proprietorial about the past. By contrast archivists have to remember the bewildering range of public interest in 'significant aspects of Australia's culture, heritage and people'. And the range of special interests was truly bewildering. I began to see how the appraisal process could descend into anarchy. At the end of the seminar I was even prepared to accept what archivists have been saying all along, that the complexities of appraisal are your business and that historical/cultural significance is only one of the criteria in play.

So where does this leave us? Am I really prepared to give up my long-held belief that historians may have something useful to say to archivists, because of the wide range of archival and non-archival sources they employ? I still think that they might help to put the archivists' analysis of institutional functions into social and economic context. Well sometimes! But how is this more modest view of the relationship between historians and archivists to be negotiated? Steve Stuckey conceded at the AHA that historians and other record users could perhaps advise archivists on the 'philosophy behind the selection process'. This is a promising but problematic starting point. How is the boundary between philosophy and process to be defined and policed? How are such consultations to be organised? Will they be anything more than gestures? Or will they be just another chore for the hard-worked archivist? Indeed does the working archivist really relish the thought of advice on philosophy? I would bet there are some refuseniks among you tonight.

At the national level, the Australian Law Reform Commission Review of the federal Archives Act recommended advisory groups. This included a group on appraisal and disposal issues and this group would presumably include a historian. The word tokenism comes to mind. But is it possible that such groups could facilitate a more permanent, less fractious dialogue between historians and archivists? We cannot just come together whenever there is a bushfire like the Privacy Act. At state level I suppose the onus is on the ASA, and perhaps even more on the relatively new History Council, to explore the possibilities of a dialogue which has begun. There are archivists on the History Council after all. Perhaps historians need to inform themselves more fully about the 'hows and whys' of record keeping, in order to clarify their claims and contributions to the dialogue.

Perhaps we all need to focus on our common interest in preserving and interpreting evidence of past practices, past decisions, past lives in short. Because we both have to live in an economic, political and cultural environment which does not value this enterprise.

Which finally brings me back to the crises in confidence within history. Historians in particular are haunted by that prospect of collective amnesia. As Stephen Garton told the Sydney Morning Herald a couple of years ago, we could degenerate into a 'culture which is incapable of assessing its own meaning'. This was signalled by the collapse of history as a secondary subject. The Board of Studies noted that in 1980 50 per cent of HSC students took a history unit. By 1996 the proportion was less than 30 per cent. History has also been a victim of the Dawkins-Vanstone-Kemp revolution in tertiary education. History (as I studied it) is no longer useful or fashionable. Last year the Australian Historical Association surveyed the teachers of history in Australian universities and recorded a dismal tale of cuts and 'managed reductions'. At the University of Sydney, I believe, the History Department has been downsized and is about to be re-engineered and rebadged as part of a new multidisciplinary unit. (Which is not necessarily a bad thing)

Should these developments bother archivists? Do they really need historians anyway? In the past, even well-behaved historians like me have needled archivists by assuming that historians have some kind of privileged relationship to archives. But this is a position which is increasingly hard to defend. Who do historians think they are? It is a serious question. For a start I cannot go on any longer referring to 'historians' as if they were a homogenous group. The diversity of the historical constituency is brought home to me again and again when sitting on the State Records Board. It is impossible to wear all the hats. Of course elements of that constituency flourish while others wither. Family historians and genealogists thrive and continue to consume your records and services. And there has been a definite cultural revolution in the past few years as archives have invested in 'outreach' and the promotion of new kinds of record use. One of the best examples is the production of special guides to records relating to Aborigines. But have the more traditional archives users kept up with the pace? It all comes back to that crisis in history teaching and study.

This crisis is also reflected in a shift in publishing patterns. It is becoming harder to interest even the so-called academic publishers in academic monographs. When Cambridge University Press published Diane Kirkby's *Barmaids* a few years ago, they more-or-less told her 'This is it. If busy barmaids won't sell, we are giving up on Australian history'. At the same time there has been a mini-boom in public histories, which are commissioned and often subsidised publications. I am not saying that these are neither

intellectually respectable nor innovative. (I have written some of them myself!). A recent survey of commissioned histories suggests that the 'range of fields is impressive; apart from institutional and community and local history, work is also being done in the areas of Aboriginal history, oral history, medical history, sports history, labour history, religious history, transport history and urban history'.

All of these projects make demands on your services. So perhaps archivists can afford to be complacent about the changes within their historical constituency. Do you really need a diverse clientele as long as there are bums on seats in the search rooms? In particular do you need academic historians and their students? As a public historian, who has sometimes been on the receiving end of a certain kind of academic snobbery, I would still answer 'Yes'.

I have always argued the smallish 'cadre' of full-time historians bring something valuable to that dialogue with the archivists. They might not be the primary users of records in terms of volume. But they often use records intensively, creatively and surprisingly. They should open up new avenues for other researchers (and make life difficult for the archivists!) In addition I have always assumed that this cadre will include academics, students and public historians. Because they work outside the academy, often on short-term projects, public historians tend to tackle all kinds of projects and tap all kinds of sources. Having spent so long defending their creativity against that academic snobbery, I have been slow to appreciate the significance of the crisis in history teaching. I should stress that I have not taught in universities for several years. So what follows are the observations of a fairly sympathetic outsider. If the numbers of Australians engaged in teaching and studying history continue to fall, this must have serious consequences for archivists. It is possible to demonstrate or dramatise this issue in a number of ways. I am going to concentrate on the Strange Case of the Disappearing Student. I was struck by a question that Robert French, of National Archives, asked at the AHA Conference. 'Where have all the students gone?' Then a few weeks ago I was working in the Melbourne Archives Centre and, as I looked round, I realised I was the youngest person in the room. It has since been pointed out to me that some of my fellow readers may well have been postgraduate students. It is not just the academic population which has been greying lately. As archivists you must be seeing students from the increasingly popular postgraduate courses in applied history. Many of them are also mature.

Now I would be the last person to argue that the middle-aged record user cannot be innovative! But I do think the archival and historical communities need a number of young Ph.D candidates who have the time and energy to be reflective and even cause a bit of trouble. They should be the 'cadre of

the cadre'. Their reflection and troublemaking should have a catalysing effect on the rest of us, on the ways in which history is perceived and practised even, and perhaps especially, in the age of the internet and CD Roms. I know they are out there, but are we getting enough of them?

Where are the students of yesteryear? Let us not get too sentimental about the good old days of the 1970s and 1980s. Remember what a nuisance we Ph.D students were! The kind of history we practised then was labelled the 'new social history' and 'history from below'. It was all about recovering the lived experience of marginal and deviant groups who found no expression in conventional political history. Women, convicts, lunatics etc. And it was built upon primary sources - lots and lots of primary sources, everything from the records of births, deaths and marriages to census enumerators' books, to court cases, to land titles to patient records. We were driven by a conviction that if we just worked a bit harder and chomped our way through more records, then those forgotten people could be reinstated in history. Their experiences could be recovered. It was all profoundly political. It also made for fairly abrasive relations with archivists. The new social historians were not just demanding, they could and did lecture archivists on appraisal. We knew what to keep. We knew where history was heading. The wise archivists decided it was just a phase that history was going through. And they were right.

All our assumptions and methods have since been subjected to devastating critique. This must have affected not just the number of history students, but the kind of research they undertake. Archivists used to joke that social historians wanted to keep every scrap of paper, even those Tasmanian dog licences. Now the joke is that students prefer to analyse the rhetorical strategies deployed in a single dog licence. There is an element of truth in both gags. Empirical projects, utilising those lovely long record runs, are unfashionable. Many students, quite justifiably, do not share our old enthusiasm for 'primary sources'. Nor do they share our uncritical faith in the recoverability of past experience. Indeed some sophisticated students, fresh from departments of philosophy, linguistics and cultural studies, doubt the viability of historical enquiry. It is possible that students are not just leaving history because the employment prospects of history graduates are limited. Perhaps the best and brightest would not be caught dead in a history common room, let alone an archives search room.

This is another aspect of the crisis in confidence, as historians struggle to define and defend their practice. Perhaps this is a debate that archivists should buy into, or at least they should be aware of its relevance to their own practice. After all there is something worse than a gang of bumptious students invading your search rooms. And that is no students at all. This is

a point which is picked up in a 1994 book by three American historians, Joyce Appleby, Lynn Hunt and Margaret Jacob, who chose the kamikaze title of *Telling the Truth about History*. Of all the recent contributions to the historians' struggle/debate, this is one which also addresses the archivists directly.

Appleby, Hunt and Jacob worry that academics and students are being silenced by the more extreme philosophical critiques which call into question the viability of any historical enterprise. (And these critiques must also call into question the intellectual investment which archivists make in appraisal?) They address the contentious 'concept of a once-lived reality in the past and its relation to historical representations'. In doing so they describe historians working to develop a practice which is informed by the critiques, the new understandings of the ways in which knowledge is created. They try to revive historians' confidence in new ways of going about their business, that is the interrogation and interpretation of a vanished past which has left physical traces. Those traces are, of course, your business. So archivists have some interest in the debates surrounding such attempts to rehabilitate 'casual analysis and social contextualisation' in historical research. You can follow the critical responses to Appleby's 'practical realist' approach in the scholarly journals, but I am going to leave you tonight with a relevant quote from the book:

The archives in Lyon, France, are housed in an old convent on a hill overlooking the city. It is reached by walking up some three hundred stone steps. For the practical realist—even one equipped with a laptop computer — the climb is worth the effort; the (extreme) relativist might not bother.

Whatever you think of the Appleby prescription, the book does at least diagnose our common problem. How are we going to get those bright young sceptics up the steps?