

Review Article

The Diary: Social Phenomenon, Professional Challenge

Michael Piggott

- *The Diary of a Vice-Chancellor; University of Melbourne 1935-1938; Raymond Priestley*. Edited by Ronald Ridley. Melbourne University Press, 2002
- *Captain's Diary 2002*. By Steve Waugh. HarperSports, 2002.
- *The Diaries of Donald Friend. Volume I*. Edited by Anne Gray. National Library of Australia, 2001.
- *Meanjin*, Vol 61 No 1, 2002. Theme issue on Biography. Meanjin Co Ltd and the Australian Centre, University of Melbourne.

Purely on their own terms, the published diaries under notice, and those reviewed in the special issue of *Meanjin*, reward attention as packaged information supporting micro studies of documentary form and recordkeeping behaviour.

Donald Friend was one of Australia's leading twentieth century artists and writers. His varied life included time in Nigeria, England, Sri Lanka and Bali, and a period of service during World War II as a gunner and war artist. He knew many renowned painters, Russell Drysdale being one of his closest friends. He wrote 12 books, but as a writer, he (as with others such as John Olsen and Judy Cassab) is best known for his lavishly illustrated diaries. Begun when he was 14, the diaries cover 40 years and run to 49 volumes of daily inscriptions plus delightful and occasionally ironic and erotic illustrations.

The National Library is now sharing selections of its holding of 44 of the diaries, the first of four volumes covering 1929-43 appearing in 2001. Through diary reflections, Friend himself – and the editor of this volume, the eminent art historian and curator Anne Gray, via her multi-part introductory commentary – tell us much about the 'itch to record'.

Raymond Priestley's 15 diaries, held by the University of Melbourne Archives, cover only four years of the 1930s while Vice-Chancellor at Melbourne, and have been selected by academic historian Professor Ron Ridley into a single volume. His biographical introduction stresses Priestley's background as a geologist and Antarctic exploration, noting his participation in Shackleton's 1908–09 and Scott's more famous 1911–12 expedition. From the latter came his diary based published account of the fate of the Northern Party, *Antarctic Adventure*. Other war and academic experiences and duties before Melbourne are also highlighted for their recordkeeping relevance.

The 2002 diary of the Australian Test Cricket captain Steve Waugh, his ninth published since 1993, covering both test and one-day overseas tours and domestic series, is one of a growing number from the celebrity sporting arena. Others include the swimmer Shane Gould and in recent times Aussie Rules footballer James Hird. Waugh's diary is a blend of illustrated travel diary, insider's version of the team's experiences, justification for decisions and actions, and extracts from his newspaper columns. It ends on 31 August because of 'printing deadlines' (p. 231) – which cynics would correctly translate as meaning the Christmas sales. In short, the diary has become marketing vehicle, supporting his brand name and charities.

As for *Meanjin*, it is one of a bracket of cultural/literary journals that repay archivists wanting to understand contemporary issues in the cultural scholarly arena. This theme number on biography or 'life writing' as editor Ian Britain preferred is especially worth studying. It includes reviews of published diaries and memoirs (by Neal Blewett), several pieces on diaries and fiction (by Helen Garner and Adrian Caesar), and other relevant pieces by Janet Frame's biographer Michael King and John Gregory on Howard Arkley's artist's notebooks.

All are indicative of a sustained diary boom in Australia. It has seemed 'another day, another diary' for some time in fact. This is evident from even the most orthodox indicator – library and commercial publisher judgments – that there is a strong market for diaries, particularly covering sport, war, politics and the arts. We might also point to *The Australian* newspaper's year-long reproduction throughout 2002 of extracts from war-related 1942 diaries; the online diary of the terminally ill euthanasia advocate Mrs Nancy Crick; the decision of children's publisher Scholastic to begin a new 'My Story' series of fictional historical diaries; Paul Cox's latest film 'The Diaries of Vaslav Nijinski'; and news of a BBC production team working here on 'The Diary of a Welsh Swagman'.

While I want to confine this to local reflections, it is worth noting that in recent years the diary phenomenon finds many overseas parallels. In Europe and North America, it has covered film ('Bridget Jones'), fiction (Sue Townsend, Alice

Hoffman), anthologies (by editors Blythe, Brett and the Taylors), numerous published editions (Kurt Cobain, Edwina Currie, Jeffrey Archer, Alan Clark), and websites (Anne Frank, 'Bridget Jones'). Of course the Pepys industry continues to flourish, books and websites proliferating and about to become even more evident with the tercentenary of his death this year. Plans have already been announced by the Samuel Pepys Club to launch a biennial cash award and a medal for a book which 'makes the greatest contribution to the understanding of Samuel Pepys, his times or his contemporaries'.

What should archivists make of all this? The volumes under notice raise all manner of questions.

The diary ranks with occasion photographs, birth certificates, tax returns and perhaps census records as among the top half dozen record types widely known within Australian society. For many children and teenagers, they are the very first records created and kept.

This very high recognition factor represents quite an opportunity for a profession the public has hardly heard of and whose role it barely understands. Certainly they provide a better point of departure in answering the predictable taxi driver's or party goer's question than cutting straight to replies such as 'I present dirks workshops' or 'I actively shape societal memory'. No other record is so well known and so often published.

It is a pity then that the Australian archival profession pays diaries so little attention. By contrast, Australian academics such as Katie Holmes, Andrew Hassam, Patricia Clarke, Dale Spender and Sasha Grishin have found them worthy of study in their own right; as of course have diary editors. Even diarists themselves have made quite insightful comments on the process.¹ The case for our interest should hardly need making. Baiba Berzins called diaries 'one of the most individual and intriguing forms of personal recordkeeping', and one which challenges generalization because they are 'so personal and so multifunctional'.² Occasionally libraries and archives publish them (print or online) to showcase and share collection treasures,³ but neither publishing houses nor journal and newspaper editors look to us as possessing the relevant discipline's expertise to review them or edit and write scholarly introductions to them. There are very few exceptions, naturally headed by Paul Brunton, described recently by John Thompson as one of the 'reigning doyens' of Australian manuscript curatorship.

Within our own professional discourse, the phenomenon of diaries has all but been ignored. Looking at the span of our literature, the conference proceedings, listserv debates, the Australian textbooks, and nearly 50 years' worth of *Archives and Manuscripts*, we find very little direct consideration of diaries. There have

been one or two reviews,⁴ and a few indirect if tantalising asides by Adrian Cunningham, Verne Harris and Sue McKemmish while debating weightier issues.⁵ We have no equivalent of *Archivaria's* series of 'studies in documents'. We have not yet explored Luciana Duranti's view that 'documents expressing feelings and thoughts and created by individuals in their most private capacity', such as love letters and diaries, would probably reveal little through the diplomatic study of their documentary form.⁶

Diaries well might be widely known, but there is little agreement as to what they are. In preparing an exhibition on diaries last year,⁷ I was struck by the certainty with which professional colleagues asserted that diaries and journals were, or were not, different. The author of a classic study of diaries, Thomas Mallon, thought opinion was so 'hopelessly muddled' that he effectively gave up trying to distinguish the differences, and John Batts found in Canada the definition of what constitutes a diary was 'persistently problematical'.⁸ Many of our glossaries avoid the challenge, and international descriptive standards leave it to local practice to guide what goes into standardized elements such as 'form' and series and file level 'title'. Interestingly, ISBD(G) lists diaries *and* journals as examples of form distinguished by common intellectual characteristics. Thirty years ago Kevin Green quixotically compiled an Australian list of record types, but there has been little enthusiasm here since for definitions at this level.⁹

The diaries under review coincidentally show just why it is difficult to define them. Each is a daily, or more or less periodic, account; but added in are photos, illustrations, notes, lists, correspondence, newspaper cuttings and so on. Of Donald Friend's diaries, Anne Gray wrote 'they are a patchwork, containing fictional, biographical and historical elements, as well as aspects of scrapbooks and artists' journals'. All three diaries are in fact mini-filing systems in their own right,¹⁰ and part-narrative, given the way photos and letters are interwoven with text. Part-memoir too, for Priestley could not resist – any more than could the great war correspondent and historian C E W Bean – adding corrections and additions decades later. Friend and Waugh did the same, in effect, the former choosing what would appear in the published selection of his wartime diaries as *Gunner's Diary* (Ure Smith, 1943), and the latter working with his editor and marketing people to select the right extracts. Such overwritten 'diaries' would fail the Kevin Green test, but raise a Sue McKemmish question, are diaries ever actual?

If difficult to define, they are difficult to categorise too. 'Personal' diaries are hardly just instances of personal recordkeeping, as McKemmish and Upward tried once again to show two years ago in this journal, despite its title and despite the dualism implied in writings of some overseas archival thinkers. Raymond Priestley's

in particular demonstrate how artificial is the dichotomy between personal and corporate recordkeeping. As the University of Melbourne's first salaried Vice-Chancellor between 1935–38 during a critical (and controversial stage) in its development, his diary's content and function were inevitably a blend of personal and official, reinforced by his inclusion of work notes and official correspondence. Boundaries blur with Steve Waugh too: his personal diary quickly becomes a composite account and a corporate product.

These titles can also tell us much about the social life of diaries and the human psychology behind recordkeeping. 'Evidence of me' rapidly transforms into 'evidence of us' when the recording is so overt. No group, be it a cricket team (Waugh), Army unit (Friend), management team (Priestley) or Cabinet (Blewett) can remain unaffected when there is a self-appointed diarist and photographer/illustrator in its midst. Clyde Cameron's open note-taking unsettled the Australian Labor Party caucus in Canberra in 1977 – as did Richard Crossman's in the Wilson Cabinet in London in the 1960s. Even so, he saw his diary telling both his personal story *and* functioning as 'a biography of the Leader and a number of others who played important roles in the Party'.¹¹ Of course it is mutual capture, judging from the diaries under notice. Knowing one's diary is being read, shared, stolen or soon to be published, shapes the recording. And shapes the silences too, as Friend admits (c.f. entry for 6 June 1943, p. 244) and reviewers of Waugh's latest diary, and that of another sportsman, James Hird, have noted.¹²

Publication itself also hastens the 'evidence of us' process. Pluralising (in the records continuum's fourth dimension) occurs not only through the aggregation of collected archives and the consequences of good recordkeeping regimes. Sometimes, as in the case of diaries, their publication accounts for a much stronger reinforcement of collective, historical and cultural memory than their meagre 'use' via reading rooms, footnotes and exhibitions. In Australia particularly, we would emphasise publication of wartime diaries (think of 'Weary' Dunlop or Stan Arneil) and diary extracts (for example, through many editions of and spin-offs from Bill Gammage's *The Broken Years*). The combined weight of Steve Waugh's nine published diaries has also had its accumulative impact on our constructed memory of him and what he represents.

There are many other aspects of diaries our review titles raise, such as the tiresome debate about diarists' motives regarding intended audiences, and the so-called life writing practices of 'journaling' and 'scrapbooking'. For now, it is worth noting what these three diaries, and those of politicians, writers and artists referred to in *Meanjin*, are not. They were not posted and illustrated online, nor recorded in hand held personal digital assistants. Nor did they operate as corporate

appointments diaries networked to facilitate scheduling meetings. Nor are they now preserved and made accessible on line. Nor are they the focus of specialist websites, as operate for Anne Frank, Samuel Pepys and Anais Nin. Even Steve Waugh's digital camera photos, and daily musings on tour, remain firmly analog as a print publication.

For collecting archivists particularly, the challenge of Australian diaries and the Internet awaits a serious and coordinated response.¹³ I allude partly to phenomena such as the high rating Channel Ten reality TV series *Big Brother* and its related website, which some have regarded as a continuous 'diary'. As self-styled documenters of society, archivists and recordkeepers also need to consider those who instantly share their diaries with the world. There are now hundreds of thousands of 'bloggers' posting thoughts and reports to personal spaces on host websites. Increasingly via digital cameras and webcams they are also illustrated, a trend to please scopophiliacs popularized in the mid 1990s by global 24/7 Pepyians such as Jennifer Ringlet (of 'Jennicam' fame) and now by many others such as the evidently unself-conscious Natacha Merritt.¹⁴ In Australia, geographical patterns and communities ('webrings') of online diarists are already discernable, recalling those of early modern England as well as of Raymond Priestley's early twentieth century Antarctic.¹⁵ Christopher Isherwood's 1930s explanation in *Goodbye to Berlin* of his fictional/actual role as a diarist, 'I am a camera with its shutter open, quite passive, recording, not thinking' was remarkably prescient. His extensive diaries, of course, are preserved and published. The challenge of new kinds of diaries requires new answers, but one hopes a wider interest in diaries as personal and social records will be there too.

ENDNOTES

1 Of our three main diarists, Donald Friend stands out, his reflections plus Anne Gray's complementary introduction highly recommended. Of the articles in *Meanjin*, the roles are combined in ex-academic and politician Neal Blewett's review ('No Secret Selves?', pp. 4-19) of nine recent politicians' autobiographies, memoirs and policy essay-narratives, plus his own *A Cabinet Diary* published in 1999.

2 Baiba Berzins, review of Katie Holmes, *Spaces in her Day: Australian Women's Diaries of the 1920s and 1930s*, Allen & Unwin, 1995, in *Archives and Manuscripts*, May 1998, pp. 132-34. For an excellent overseas example of the case for studying diaries/journals, see Richard Cox's review of Adam Sisman's Boswell's *Presumptuous Task: The Making of the Life of Dr Johnson*, Farrar Straus and Giroux, 2000, in *American Archivist*, vol. 65, no. 1 Spring/Summer 2002, pp. 138-42.

3 Publishers of diaries and diary studies aside, the National Library of Australia stands almost alone in trying to stimulate interest in diaries and letters. In 1996 it hosted a generally

focused seminar, and in 2001 another on Donald Friend and his diaries. For libraries' publication efforts, see, for example, www.nla.gov.au/epubs/wills and www.slnsw.gov.au/flinders/manuscripts (both accessed 8 March 2003).

4 In addition to the Berzins review, see also George Nichols' assessment of Robert Warner's *Diary of a Dream: a History of the National Archives Independence Movement, 1980–1985*, Scarecrow Press, 1995, in *Archives and Manuscripts*, November 1995, pp. 354–56.

5 See Sue McKemmish, 'Evidence of me...' and Adrian Cunningham, 'The Mysterious Outside Reader' in the Personal Recordkeeping theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23, no. 1 May 1996, and Verne Harris, 'On the Back of a Tiger: Deconstructive Possibilities in "Evidence of Me"', and Sue McKemmish and Frank Upward's response, 'In Search of the Lost Tiger, by Way of Sainte-Beuve: Re-constructing the Possibilities in "Evidence of Me"', both appearing in the May 2001 issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*.

6 See her 'Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science', *Archivaria*, no. 28 Summer 1989, pp. 7–27, at p. 15.

7 See www.lib.unimelb.edu.au/collections/archives/publications/diaries.pdf.

8 Thomas Mallon, *A Book of One's Own; People and their Diaries*, Tickner & Fields, 1984, p. 1; John Batts, 'Seeking the Canadian Pepys: The Canadian Manuscript Diaries Project', *Archivaria*, no. 9 Winter 1979–80, pp. 125–39, at p. 130.

9 Kevin Green, "Some comments on 'Record Types'", *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 5, no. 5 November 1973, pp. 115–23. For 'Diaries' he wrote, 'Daily record of events = journal, n.b. an account written in the form of a diary not contemporaneously is not a diary'. For 'Journal', he noted, '= diary' and added the standard range of financial meanings.

10 The British politician Tony Benn represents an extreme instance, compiling five different kinds of diaries, which sat like indexes at the centre of compiled daily dossiers of speeches, diary notes and press reports. See his 'The diary as historical source', *Archives*, no. 89, April 1993, p. 4–17.

11 Clyde Cameron, *The Cameron Diaries*, Allen & Unwin, 1990, p. 63.

12 For example, see Michael Winkler, 'Dear diary, no marks for Hird; brickbats for Waugh'. The *Sunday Age*, 24 November 2002, p. 10. Hird, a high-profile Aussie Rules footballer who plays for Essendon, published his diary of last year's season as *Challenging Times*, Slattery & Lothian, 2002.

13 I would not want to diminish existing efforts (eg the website/diary of the above-mentioned Nancy Crick, and a number of others, have been preserved by Pandora (see www.pandora.nla.gov.au/pan/24513/20020424/www.protection.net.au/nancycrick/index.htm; accessed 10 March 2003), but I am concerned to stress the dimension and complexity of this online challenge.

14 For Natacha Merritt's photo-journal, *Digital Diaries*, see www.digital-diaries.com/intro.html (accessed 8 March 2003). See also John Mangan, 'California's controversial digital diarist does Melbourne', *The Melbourne Age*, 27 April 2002, p. 16; for Ringlet's site, see www.jennicam.org/ (accessed 8 March 2003), and Libby Copeland, 'O what a tangled web she weaves', reproduced from *The Washington Post* in the 'Today' section of

The Melbourne Age, 31 August 2000, p. 3. There is already a considerable literature on blogging and the continuous online public diary. For recent summaries in the popular press, see Julie Szego, 'Camgirls', *The Melbourne Age*, 1 February 2003 (Saturday Extra), pp. 1, 4; Bernard Lane, 'Exposed: my life as a blog', *The Australian*, 17 September 2002, p. 9, and Joanna Mareth, 'The humble blog brings freedom to the Internet', *The Melbourne Age*, 17 June 2002, p. 9. Academic interest is already evident too, particularly from RMIT University scholars Kerry Hempenstall and Meredith Badger.

15 On the distinctiveness of Melbourne webrings, see Jenny Sinclair, 'Blogging on', *The Melbourne Age*, 'The Culture' section pp. 1, and 3; see also Elaine McKay, 'The Diary Network in Sixteenth and Seventeenth Century England', *Eras*; School of Historical Studies Online Journal, edition 2, November 2001, at www.arts.monash.edu.au/eras/edition_2/mckay.htm (accessed 8 March 2003), and Ron Ridley, *op cit.*, xiii–xvi.