

Review Article

Archivists and historians; archives and history*

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* For comments on this article I thank Helen Morgan and Dr Sigrd McCausland, both of whom have successfully combined roles of archivist and historian during their careers. However opinions and errors are neither theirs nor my employer's responsibility. The origins of interest in the subject date back to my first teacher, Bob Sharman and in particular his 'The Archivist and the Historian' which appeared in this journal in February 1972. My own first attempt at understanding the many interconnections of history and archives was 'Archives and Australian History', *Bulletin of the Australia Historical Association*, June 2000, pp. 4-11.

- Richard Cox, (ed.) *Lester J Cappon and the relationship of history, archives, and scholarship in the golden age of archival theory*. Society of American Archivists, 2004.
- Robert Manne, (comp.) *The Stolen Generations: A Documentary Collection* <<http://www.themonthly.com.au/Documents/stolen.pdf>>.
- John Thompson *The Patrician and the Bloke; Geoffrey Serle and the Making of Australian History*. Canberra, Pandanus Books, 2006.
- Inga Clendinnen *The History Question; Who Owns the Past?* Quarterly Essay Issue 23. Black Inc., 2006.
- National Archives of Australia *Vrroom: Virtual Reading Room* <<http://www.naa.gov.au/vrroom-splash/index.html>>.

Historians are one of a number of users of archives, which in turn are one of a number of sources they (and others) use to produce histories. Among those who make and manage archives, archivists are perhaps the most prominent and self-consciously professional, and they do this primarily through specialist programs and organisations. In some countries, such organisations were established largely through the efforts of historians. In Australia, where historians share midwife accolade with librarians, archival institutions were, and to a degree still are, staffed and managed by archivists with backgrounds or formal qualifications in history.

Is that more or less it? Just bland generalisations and half-truths, plus a need to define one's terms? Melissa Sharkey has written of the 'complex relationship' and 'shifting, opaque boundary' between the two disciplines.¹ Views on their practitioners range from Hilary Jenkinson: 'the Archivist is not and ought not be an Historian', to Lester J Cappon: 'By and large, the archivist is at heart an historian'. The titles under notice provide an opportunity to review the relationship against today's professional and cultural environment; and additionally, because of its enduring importance, an opportunity also to introduce a new generation of recordkeepers to an old debate.

Cappon

The modern debate about the archivist-historian relationship was triggered by an article by Canadian George Bolotenko in 1983 in a hardline lament of the weakening of the archivist's scholarly historian role. It drew strong responses and rejoinders, mainly in *Archivaria*, for most of the 1980s, with reactions too from Australian and US archivists.² Richard Cox led the main US commentary, drawing on the writing of Lester J Cappon, a leading American archivist from the prewar American scene.

Cappon (1900-1981) was a tireless advocate for more 'archivally-minded' historians; he believed archivists had an obligation to prepare, publish and edit thoroughly researched administrative histories, documentary editions and guides to explicate one's holdings and to foster use by historians. If he had an Australian equivalent, taking into account length and variety of career, interest in the history-archives nexus and advocacy for a strong independent national archives, breadth of professional interests and history background, it would be Bob Sharman.

Cox's long interest in and regard for Cappon shows in his editing for Society of American Archivists Archival Classics Series of *Lester J Cappon and the relationship of history, archives, and scholarship in the golden age of archival theory*. It reproduces twelve of his published articles on archival theory, collecting, the archivist-historian relationship, and documentary editing. I have some quibbles about the volume, beginning with the title ('golden age' of theory?) and its lack of a bibliography, but I accept the editor's case, presented in its long introductory essay and elsewhere,³ for Cappon's insightfulness and continuing international relevance. This is warranted despite his being typical of his era on issues such as the archives and records management dichotomy, and justified despite the lesser involvement of Australian historians in the history of local archival developments and minimal arrangements for and practice of editing and publishing of archival documents.

For me, the most thought provoking aspect of this selection of Cappon's writing concerns documentary editing - a subject rarely discussed now in our own publications and conferences. At various times he held an appointment as Editor of Publications, was President of the Association of Documentary Editors, produced a two-volume edition of correspondence between Thomas Jefferson and John Adams, and came

to feel documentary editing best represented combined archival and historian roles. His 1950s views on editing reveal a sophisticated appreciation of the importance of providing provenance and a broad archival and historical context to the documents being published. He was very aware too that editing-mediation was a form of co-creation, though it was not his exact term.

Archivists in Australia have all but abandoned documentary editing, yet we 'publish' as never before via digitisation. We also honour a key pioneer in this field, Frederick Watson, through an annual Fellowship program, although it neither explicitly encourages documentary publications nor to date has attracted such projects.⁴ Equally ironic is the silence in our literature and conferences about editing and publishing archives; for years it amounted to passing notices of the latest Australian Joint Copying Project handbook, the project that succeeded Watson's Historical Records of Australia.⁵ When it is done at all now, it is mostly left to independent and academic historians, and the results vary enormously.⁶

Manne

A case in point is Robert Manne's *The Stolen Generations: A Documentary Collection*. A Melbourne based academic specialising in political history and one of our most prominent public intellectuals, Manne has been one of a group of historians who have documented frontier violence, child separation and other aspects of indigenous/white relations from the beginnings of British settlement in 1788.⁷

Manne's documentary collection comprises 184 pages of transcribed extracts, arranged by state, and drawn from publications, official reports, memoranda and letters, which he made available via *The Monthly* magazine's website, to support his presentation for a debate with newspaper columnist Andrew Bolt⁸ at the Melbourne Writers' Festival in Melbourne on 3 September 2006 on the question of the stolen generations. A set of the transcriptions was personally handed to Bolt on the night. The debate was a culmination of a series of bitter and ugly exchanges between them conducted via books and newspaper articles in Melbourne's two dailies *The Age* and the *Herald Sun*. Thus:

Bolt has dismissed the testimony of stolen children as 'lurid anecdotes'. In our recent debate at *The Age* Melbourne

Writers' Festival he described documents as 'bits of paper'. It is from eyewitness testimony and from documents that all history is written. There is no other way. By discounting all such material, Bolt's form of denialism is more absurd, more resistant to reason, than that of [Keith] Windschuttle. Even David Irving does not call documents 'bits of paper'.

[Robert Manne]

The tragedy is that while people such as Manne insist that even saving syphilitic 12-year-olds was 'stealing' and racist, we refuse to rescue children just like them today. The consequences are tragic, as news reports confirmed again last week: some Aboriginal children today are left to be raped or even killed because of Manne's 'stolen generations' myth.

[Andrew Bolt]⁹

There is something sad but heroic about the faith Manne showed that archives might change opinion. That aside, judged from archival, historical and documentary editing viewpoints, the online transcriptions are totally inadequate. For example, there is no information providing citations and locations for the original documents, no annotations or editorial interventions of any kind, and no references to the published research providing historical context. There is no warning that one will encounter terms such as 'half-caste' and 'quadroon' which may cause offence, and it seems unlikely Manne was aware of our protocols regarding treatment of potentially offensive material. It is unlikely too that *The Monthly*, whose editorial board he chairs, has measures in place to ensure the preservation of the transcriptions as a digital asset, and I could not find it selected for 'preservation' in the National Library's Pandora system.

But these Web-published documents have a larger truth, one we should carefully note. Firstly, what does it say about the Australian archives sector that Manne felt he had to create his own online resource from scratch. In 1997 a coordinated archives approach was foreshadowed in the Cultural Ministers Council's *Indigenous Australians; A report of the Archives Working Group of the Cultural Ministers Council*, and an enormous amount has since been done under the broad banner of the *Bringing Them Home* taskforces. Yet despite all the guides, bibliographies, link-up, indexing and oral history programs, despite all the individual

institutions' digitised content and heartbreaking exhibitions, there is 'no guide that covers both government and non-government collections in the one source',¹⁰ and, as Manne's actions showed, there is no consolidated national set of 'stolen generation' documents accessible online from our collective holdings to argue his case. His seeming ignorance of what actually is available, and yet the correctness of his conclusion, recalls Cappon's lifetime of urging of archivists to better inform historians and of the latter to better understand archives.

Serle

Secondly, the tenor and significance of the Manne-Bolt clash and related polemics which have surrounded the 'history wars'¹¹ of the past two decades help provide the setting of two of our remaining titles. For the moment however, we turn to consider John Thompson's study of the Melbourne based academic historian Geoffrey Serle (1922-1998), best known for studies of Victoria's colonial history, a biography of General Sir John Monash and national editorship of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. If Cappon was an historian-archivist, Thompson is a former historian-manuscripts librarian turned independent scholar with a particular interest in Australian cultural and intellectual history.¹²

Thompson is careful to stress his work is restricted to Serle's formation and standing as an historian, but it can be placed with many other recent biographies of and autobiographies by Australian historians worth our attention, particularly those interested in the history of records and archives. Of special value here is its coverage of Serle's role as something of an archivist-historian organising several surveying and collecting trips into country Victoria in the 1950s, prompted by the example of colleague Margaret Kiddle and more generally by what he termed 'ignorant incendiarism', by paper drives for salvage during World War II and by the meagre collections at the State Library of Victoria to support the postwar flowering of Australian history research. The Preface notes that this was an important pioneering contribution, and it is mentioned several times throughout the book, but treated directly in just a couple of paragraphs. One would have liked more.¹³

Inside this Serle story, there is a second archivally relevant and equally tantalising case study, and it concerns his biography of the famous World War One general, John Monash. Firstly there was Serle's exclusive use of

the vast Monash archive released into his custody by the family and National Library where it had been placed. (Once he had hired a truck to collect and drive the manuscript boxes from Canberra to Melbourne, it freed Serle of many constraints, enabling him to enjoy a pipe as he read, as the book's cover illustration confirms!) There was also his restraint regarding references to Monash's mistress; his treatment of Monash's recordkeeping practices; and his struggle with what Humphrey McQueen called 'archivitis', ie trying to avoid being overwhelmed by the abundance of papers.

Clendinnen

According to Geoffrey Serle, the legitimate aspiration of the historian was 'to improve the national memory', an intent not so far from a key element of our own mission reproduced opposite the contents page of this journal. His near contemporary at the University of Melbourne History Department, Inga Clendinnen, a retired Australian academic who specialised in Spanish-Aztec and Maya encounters, would agree. In the past decade, she has published essays and monographs of memoir and addressed subjects ranging from the Holocaust, indigenous/white interactions and history as a contemporary political issue.¹⁴ As with John Thompson's study, my comments regarding *The History Question* are highly selective; for an overall assessment we might simply note Barry Jones' recent response is representative - 'entirely worthy of her: luminous, penetrating, generous and timely'.

The History Question's purpose, like Manne's stolen generations website, is polemical. Clendinnen's targets include politicians who want a single national story (she partly supported and partly criticised the Prime Minister's desire for improved teaching of Australian history in secondary schools which is 'an objective record of achievement') and novelists such as Kate Grenville who write archives-based historical fiction and claim historical understanding superior to historians' history. The essay also illustrates a theme developed and illustrated in her other writing, namely the crucial importance of understanding the significance and limits of that archival evidence, and the need to understand 'the record's exclusions, deformations and silences'; its 'ambiguities, omissions and evasions'. We would do well to note her words as we compete with our collections sector partners for the scholar's time, the public's attention and the government's funds.

The central value of Clendinnen's essay, however, is her articulation of the value of historians' efforts in attempting 'to recover the density of a past actuality from its residual traces' and to produce 'a reasoned reconstruction of the past rooted in research'. They must challenge the story-spinners and retrieve the counter-stories, because:

Historians of whatever culture are at once the custodians of memory - the retrievers and preservers of the stories by which people have imagined their personal and civic lives - and the devoted critics of those stories.¹⁵

Clendinnen's 2006 essay had a postscript. It began: 'This manuscript goes to the publisher today. In a few days' time I will be attending the History Summit on the reformation of the teaching of Australian history in schools called by the federal Education Minister, Julie Bishop', and ended 'Wish me luck'. The summit spectre and the ideas about history, education and 'culture wars' articulated by ministers of successive Howard governments during the past eleven years,¹⁶ provide crucial background to our final review.

Vroom

Vroom (Virtual Reading Room) is a flexible extensible resource for secondary school students and teachers providing online access to packaged digitised documents and photos held by the National Archives of Australia. It was launched in Melbourne in November 2005, following two years of development and debate,¹⁷ including consultation with primary and secondary teachers and a research project between the Archives and Swinburne University. *Vroom's* own advertising was matched by praise from history teachers at the 'soft launch' in September 2004, from then relevant Minister Senator Kemp at the beta launch in October 2005, and by its initial response ('the best educational resource on the web, in the world' one teacher was quoted as saying). During the first half of 2006 further student input was obtained, and it continued to be promoted at forums and conferences for school librarians, Web resource developers, and history teachers.

But in mid 2006, the site was pulled. The front page explained that the site was 'being enhanced in collaboration with The Learning Federation' and that it would return 'with added educational value for teachers and students'. As of late March 2007, it remains down. *Vroom* had run

headlong into concerns about bias (not least about its selection of documents covering themes such as the White Australia Policy and the Vietnam War) so sensitive and difficult to fix as to require no alternative to immediate closure.

That such an apparently valuable, widely praised site of a national cultural institution could be taken down so soon after launch and in the middle of the school year is interesting to say the least. The full story has yet to be told, although a comparison of *Vrroom's* content (a Commonwealth record and thus available in due course, unless you kept your own copy before mid 2006) and new *Vrroom* will enable conclusions to be drawn. What is clear is that the Archives would hardly not have known that history education in secondary schools was potentially fraught,¹⁸ and had advice to this effect available to it via an Advisory Council membership with relevant connections, professional expertise and familiarity with contemporary ideological and educational debates.¹⁹ Publicly, during the second half of 2006 it continued to speak positively about *Vrroom* (eg accepting an Excellence in Publishing Award, being interviewed by *CIO* magazine, addressing the Collections Council Digital Collections summit) as if nothing had happened. Offline, however, it established a professional historians panel to look at historical balance, asking its members to say, within their specific specialisms, if the documents selected for *Vrroom* enabled multiple interpretations of history and if they thought there was undue emphasis on a particular viewpoint.

Conclusion

So. Jenkinson or Cappon? Historian *manqué*; or scholar's servant, as Schellenberg put it, hewing their wood and drawing their water? We archivists start with the record; we research and write histories of the record; and via appraisal and description and digitisation and promotion, we wrap it in contextual, mediated stories. In doing so, we consult historians more than any other user; and we encourage them and commission them, to the point of complicity in their findings. We sponsor fellowships and annual lectures and prizes to remember them and foster their work. Historians, on the other hand, typically start with a story, a theory, a hunch or a counter argument, and wrap it in a range of evidences - among which our currency is primary. When our collections and holdings are inadequate, some, such as Geoffrey Serle, themselves

help remedy the gaps. And sometimes, they too start with the record and wrap it for documentary publication in historical context stories.

And if, following Clendinnen, historians are the custodians of memory - the retrievers and preservers of the stories, then in many ways so are archivists. Because of this, we *both* are players in political drama and politicised history, especially in times when great national debates appeal to the past, real and imagined. In her explanation of *Vrrroom*, Catherine Styles wrote prophetically 'the Archives collection is a key resource for the practice of critical citizenship'. In *On History*, Eric Hobsbawm wrote 'Our studies can turn into bomb factories', a jolting thought which for me recalls a reviewer's description of Queensland government files used by Rosalind Kidd in her book *The Way We Civilize*: 'ticking away like a dusty time-bomb'. How different are we, then, apart from the professional standards displayed when historians archive and archivists 'write' history? We both know the record will always be 'incomplete, contradictory and deceiving'; yet even so, we both would be worried when a very influential Melbourne journalist dismisses records as 'bits of paper'. When she suggested 'It could be argued archivists don't write history but in fact we do', perhaps Anne Picot was onto something.²⁰


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Endnotes

¹ In her review of the Cox/Cappon title, *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 33, no. 1 May 2005, pp. 222-4.

² Although in Canada and Australia issues arising from the relationship were aired earlier, the debate began with George Bolotenko's 'Archivists and historians: Keepers of the well', *Archivaria*, no. 16 Summer 1983, pp. 5-25. In Australia, Jan Brazier ('The Archivist: Scholar or Administrator?', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 16, no. 1 May 1988, pp. 9-14) engaged with the Canadian debate, while Alison Pilger ('Archivists and Historians: The Balance Beam of Professional Identity', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 20, no. 2 November 1992, pp. 227-236) provided a reasonable summary. In a sense, Glenda Acland's minor classic 'Archivist - Keeper, Undertaker or Auditor', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 19, no. 1, May 1991, pp. 9-15, is also a response. The main US reaction was Richard Cox, 'Archivists and Historians: A View From the United States', *Archivaria*, no. 19 Winter 1984-85, pp. 185-190.

³ Richard Cox, 'Rappin with Cappon: Reflections on the Career and Scholarship of Lester J Cappon', address to Newberry Library, Chicago, 27 January 2005; at <<http://www2.sis.pitt.edu/~rcox/RappinwithCappon.htm>> accessed 5 February 2007.

⁴  <http://www.naa.gov.au/About_Us/FrederickWatson/biography.html> accessed 12 Feb 2007. The obvious contrast is the Historical Documentary Editing Fellowships of the National Historical Publications and Records Commission operating under the auspices of the US National Archives <<http://www.archives.gov/nhprc/announcement/editing.html>> accessed 13 February 2007. Needless to say Cappon was strongly supportive of the NHPRC.

⁵ The original *HRA* project was resumed in 1997, with minimal archival involvement at the initiative of historians led by Peter Chapman and with support from the Parliament and several large Australian Research Council discovery grants. See Peter Chapman, 'The resumption of the publication of the Historical Records of Australia project', paper distributed at launch of vol. IX of *HRA* resumed series III, 11pp, November 2006. Copy in author's possession.

⁶ An (archives) exception, and a good example of how documentary editing has evolved in the digitised online world, is <<http://www.foudingdocs.gov.au/default.asp>> accessed 23 March 2007.

⁷ For a recent appraisal of Manne, see David Marr, 'A Common Humanity', *Meanjin*, vol. 64, no. 3, 2005, pp. 67-73. His best known writing on the subject are Robert Manne, *In denial: the stolen generations and the right*, Black Inc, 2001, and Robert Manne, (ed.), *Whitewash: on Keith Windschuttle's fabrication of Aboriginal history*, Black Inc, 2003. He also conducted interviews for the National Library's oral history program in 2000-2001.

⁸ For samples of Andrew Bolt's views on the stolen generation and related issues, see the anthology of his Herald Sun columns, *The Best of Andrew Bolt; Still Not Sorry*, Southbank, Vic., News Custom Publishing, 2005, ch. 6 The 'Stolen Generations' and his blog <<http://blogs.news.com.au/heraldsun/andrewbolt/>> accessed 21 February 2007.

⁹ Robert Manne, 'The cruelty of denial', *The Age*, 9 September 2006, p. 9; Andrew Bolt, Letter to the Editor, *The Age*, 12 September 2006, p. 12.

¹⁰ See generally Dani Wickman, 'The Failure of Commonwealth Recordkeeping: The Stolen Generations in Corporate and Collective Memory', pp. 127-128, and Emma Toon, 'Finding Stories of Stolen Lives: The Work of the Victorian Koorie Records taskforce', pp. 129-140, in *Comma*, 2003.1. The quote is from Toon, p. 137.

¹¹ The 'history wars' have been noted via reviews in this journal, Piggott, November 2003; Picot, May 2004. For a journalistic summary of its Australian

manifestation, see Stuart Macintyre and Anna Clark, *The History Wars*, Melbourne University Press, 2003, and for a broader treatment, Chapter 11 of Ann Curthoys and John Docker, *Is history fiction?* UNSW Press, 2006. Now there even seem to be wars about the history wars: some Australian historians, such as Inga Clendinnen and Janet McCalman, find the whole debate a tiresome sideshow to the central challenge of history.

¹² See 'John Thompson returns to academe', *Gateways*, August 1999 at <<http://www.nla.gov.au/pub/gateways/archive/40/p22a01.html>> accessed 26 February 2007.

¹³ See John Thompson, *The Patrician and the Bloke*, 2006, xxi and pp. 284-5. The only relevant published research, which is not referenced, is Don Boadle, 'The historian as archival collector: an Australian local study', *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, vol. 34, no. 1 March 2003, pp. 14-31.

¹⁴ See Morag Fraser, ed., *Inga Clendinnen; A Celebration*. Friends of the National Library of Australia, Canberra 2005. Other titles by Clendinnen directly relevant to this review are *Agamemnon's Kiss; selected essays*, Text Publishing Company, 2006, and *True Stories; Boyer Lectures 1999*, ABC Books, 2001.

¹⁵ *The History Question*, p. 43. The quotes from the preceding paragraph are from *ibid.*, p.44 and *Agamemnon's Kiss; selected essays*, pp. 104, 151, 155.

¹⁶ The basic facts on the History Summit of 2006 are at <http://www.dest.gov.au/sectors/school_education/policy_initiatives_reviews/key_issues/Australian_History_Summit/> accessed 3 March 2007. There is a vast literature now on the impact of John Howard's decade, a fair degree of it partisan. The online and print media aside, there have been many relevant commentaries in leading conservative and left intellectual journals such as *Quadrant* and *Overland*. Monograph length analyses include Nick Carter (ed.), *The Howard Factor*, Melbourne University Press, 2006, Kevin Donnelly, *Dumbing Down*, Hardie Grant, 2007; Clive Hamilton and Sarah Maddison, (eds.), *Silencing Dissent; How the Australian government is controlling public opinion and stifling debate*, Allen & Unwin, 2007; Robert Manne, *The Barren Years; John Howard and Australian Political Culture*, Text Publishing, 2001, and Robert Manne (ed.), *The Howard Years*, Black Inc. Agenda, 2004. George Megalogenis's *The Longest Decade*, Scribe, 2006, covers only the first two Howard governments, but is well worth consulting.

¹⁷ For explanations of the two competing approaches, see Klaus Neumann, 'Probing the Past; ideas for a Web-based learning resource about the White Australia Policy', *Southern Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. 33-49 and Catherine Styles, 'Vrroom Fever; Inducing a Passion for Archives', *Southern Review*, vol. 38, no. 1, 2005, pp. 50-62. In deference to our own history, we should note that the production of educational material has been happening for years. See for instance Chris Murray, 'Archives Document Kits', reviewing two Archives

Authority of NSW efforts, in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 7, no. 5, November 1979, pp. 284-5.

¹⁸ 2006 opened with a much publicised 'Australia Day' speech by the Prime Minister which included a very clear statement (one of many he has made since 1996) expressing his views about Australian history and Australian history education. See 'A sense of balance. The Australian achievement in 2006' at <<http://www.pm.gov.au/media/Speech/2006/speech1754.cfm?>> accessed 5 March 2007. The Archives would not have been unmindful too of the controversy surrounding the National Museum of Australia during the previous six or more years. For a sample of the relevant literature, see Bain Attwood, 'Contesting frontiers; history, memory and narrative in a national museum', *reCollections*, vol. 1, no. 2, September 2006, at <http://recollections.nma.gov.au/issues/vol_1_no_2/> accessed 23 March 2007; Dawn Casey, 'The context in which we operate', address to the 2004 ASA annual conference; see <<http://www.archivists.org.au/events/2004%20Conf/casey.doc>> accessed 23 March 2007, and Hamilton and Maddison, *op cit.*, ch 8, esp pp. 168-171.

¹⁹ Aside from the required balancing of parliamentary representation, the Advisory Council usually enjoys appointments of very senior government officials. Others are drawn from appropriate fields: for example the Australian National University political historian Ian Hancock. There was also the retired historian Patrick Morgan, who spent three years (plus extension) on the Council from 1999; had been a member of other public committees and authorities such as the Australia Council; and who was a well-known contributor to conservative publications such as *Quadrant* and *IPA Review*. In the latter, in December 2003, he published a critique of the new draft syllabus for VCE Australian History in Victoria entitled 'Current Affairs as History'.

²⁰ The 'incomplete, contradictory, and deceiving' phrase is from Janet McCalman, 'Mapping Aboriginal Victoria', *Meanjin*, vol. 65, no. 1, 2006, pp. 213-218 at p. 213. See also Anne Picot's review of Robert Manne, ed., *Whitewash...*, *op.cit.*, in *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 32, no. 1, May 2005, p. 158.