

UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Program

Summit Meeting on Documenting Australian Society, December 2018

Background paper for delegates

What is the problem we are addressing at the summit?

At the present time in Australia, documentary heritage collections are built with, at best, limited self-awareness of the greater whole. Collection development is often reactive and uncoordinated.

What are the consequences of this lack of coordination? What picture does the total stock of Australian documentary heritage present? How representative is it in terms of our historical experience, our changing population, localities and multiple national characters? Are we making the best use of the limited resources that Australia is prepared to devote to the cause of preserving and providing access to documentary memory?

A vast quantity of documentation is created and destroyed every year in Australia. Indeed, with the advent of digital technologies, the world now creates more data every year than it has the physical capacity to store and keep. Only a tiny sliver of this vastness is able to be preserved for use by future generations. Only a tiny sliver is worth the effort and expense of preserving. But what documentation needs to be included in this sliver? Are there wasteful overlaps and concentrations? Are there gaps and silences? Are we keeping the right stuff? Are there time periods, issues, communities, minorities and phenomena which urgently need targeted documentation strategies? Are there important aspects of life in Australia for which inadequate documentation is created in the first place and which need to be proactively documented before all memory of those activities disappears forever? In short, what documentation does Australia really need to make, keep and use to enable current and future generations to understand, explain, debate and account for our national collective experience?

Such questions of national collection coverage are fundamental, and go beyond matters of funding, digitisation and online discovery - vital though they are. If a specific issue remains unrecorded, a community undocumented or a nationally significant individual's recollections not captured, downstream processes like digitisation and metadata tagging are irrelevant.

The aim of this summit is to canvass the problem with key stakeholders, commencing a conversation and (hopefully) a process or set of processes for a coordinating response to the challenge. This summit is only the start of a process, not a means for reaching definitive conclusions and solving all of the issues that constitute the terrain.

Scope and definitions

The scope of our interest here is 'documentary heritage'. This is identical to the scope of the UNESCO Memory of the World Program. The Guidelines for the UNESCO Memory of the World Program provide the following definitions:

*A **document** is an object comprising analogue or digital informational content and the carrier on which it resides. It is preservable and usually moveable. The content may comprise signs or codes (such as text), images (still or moving) and sounds, which can be copied or migrated. The carrier may have important aesthetic, cultural or technical qualities. The relationship between content and carrier may range from incidental to integral.*

Documents are the result of a deliberate intellectual act and come in numerous forms:

***Text items** such as manuscripts (of any age), books, newspapers, posters, correspondence, business records, computer files etc. The textual content may be recorded in ink, pencil, paint, digits or other medium. The carrier may be paper, plastic, papyrus, parchment, palm leaves, bark, stone, fabric, hard disk, data tape or other material.*

***Non-text** items such as drawings, maps, music scores, plans, prints, diagrams or graphics. The recording medium and the carrier may be similarly diverse.*

***Audiovisual** items such as sound discs, magnetic tapes, films, photographs – whether in analogue or digital form, however recorded and in any format. The physical carrier may be paper, various forms of plastic or celluloid, shellac, metal or other material.*

***Virtual digital** documents, such as websites, which may be an assemblage of data from a variety of sources on a single or multiple computers, or from one or more data carriers on a single computer.*

***Documentary heritage** comprises those single documents – or groups of documents – of significant and enduring value to a community, a country or to humanity generally, and whose deterioration or loss would be a harmful impoverishment.*

The work of documenting society is carried out by a wide range of organisations, institutions and initiatives that are committed to enabling the long-term preservation of and access to Australia's documentary heritage or the documentary component of our national estate.

A vision for success

In 2014 Canada's Laura Millar outlined a vision for a coordinated and effective national system for archives.¹ With some editing and minor amendments for our Australian context, this vision is presented for consideration by Summit delegates:

I want to live in an enlightened, civilised society that is democratic, respectful, and self-aware. I believe that for a society to be free, democratic, respectful, and self-aware, it needs a recorded memory – a collective consciousness born out of unfettered access to the evidence of the communications, actions, and transactions of its members, in all their plurality and diversity. Open and easy access to documentary heritage supports democracy, transparency, and accountability, and helps to foster a sense of personal and collective identity. Documentary heritage helps people know themselves, by offering appreciable proof of their lives and work. Archives, records, books, films, audio recordings, stories, pictures and other document forms help people and societies understand and value themselves and each other, fostering identity and memory. Documentary heritage helps people remember and understand – themselves and each other; good and bad – generating pride, humility and honest reflection by reminding them of the efforts and experiences of their predecessors, from distant ancestors to contemporary acquaintances.

We would add to Millar's vision by also saying that we regard the identification, ongoing preservation and enabling the use of documentation of Australian society to be a collective responsibility exercised by a multiplicity of institutions, initiatives and programs where the focus of individual efforts may be national, regional, local or community-based. In our vision of success these various efforts should coordinate with each other to ensure that the best possible use is made of the limited resources that are available in Australia to preserve and provide access to documentary heritage. Collectively, the aim should be enabling easy ongoing use of a distributed corpus of documentary heritage that provides representative evidence and memory of the most significant aspects of life in Australia – those things that make Australia distinctive and that help to define the Australian experience in all of its ever-evolving complexity and diversity.

The current landscape

At the present time in Australia, the collective stock of documentary heritage is preserved and added to primarily by publicly-funded, university, community and other libraries, archives and related institutions. Material of unknown quantity and significance is also held in private hands, including in company and organisational archives that may or may not provide public access.

Of these sectors, government archives and libraries have the largest holdings and budgets, and operate under legislative remits, arts policies, understandings about jurisdictional collecting interests and protocols for the treatment of estrays. Complementing these are over three thousand local library and local museum collections, historical societies, halls of

¹ Laura Millar, 'Coming up with Plan B: Considering the Future of Canadian Archives', *Archivaria* 77, Spring 2014.

fame, mechanics institutes, oral history groups, heritage centres, universities' archives and special collections, pioneer associations and keeping places.

For example, the recently updated Australian Society of Archivists *Directory of Archives in Australia*² lists some 300 different archival programs, institutions and initiatives categorised into a variety of different archive types, localities and thematic focuses. Museums usually have collections of documents and archives that document, relate to or support research into the objects preserved and/or displayed by the museum.

Overall, these sectors and their members operate with a very limited sense of contributing to the national documentary heritage estate, and there has been nothing to foster it either. There is no overarching system, national plan, single mind or leadership nurturing a sense of being part of a nation building enterprise.

Discussion about collection building has tended to happen within, not across sectors, professions and regimes (e.g. Meeting of Cultural Ministers, CAARA, NSLA, CAUL), and occasionally between institutions (e.g. before an auction). Occasionally national laws (such as copyright and exports) and programs (such as the Commonwealth's Cultural Gifts and Community Heritage Grants schemes) have prompted thoughts which in theory span our national documentary heritage patrimony. Occasionally, a documentary need is perceived (e.g. Prime Ministers' papers etc) and a set of eclectic solutions evolve. Sometimes, national campaigns have targeted formats at risk (e.g. nitrate film; manuscripts in private ownership), funding shortfalls (e.g. for Trove) and discovery needs (GLAM Peak's digital access to collections).

Since the demise of the Collections Council of Australia, arguably the only entity now embracing Australia's total documentary heritage landscape is the UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee.

Previous attempts at tackling the issue in Australia and some good things we can build on

Since the 1990s, institutions such as the National Library (with active promotion by the now defunct Australian Council of Libraries and Information Services - ACLIS) have conceived of a 'distributed national collection'. Individuals within the Australian Society of Archivists have tried to think nationally and holistically about 'documenting Australian society'. On occasion the National Archives has been invited to activate a long-ignored section of its legislation allowing for archival leadership across government and non-government sectors alike.

There have been occasional, albeit stuttering attempts to engineer national coordination in areas of archival activity. During the 1990s there was an Archives Working Group of the Cultural Ministers Council which carried out some excellent and valuable work, particularly in relation to records relating to Indigenous Australians. In 1999 the National Scholarly Communications Forum ran a round table at the NAA in Canberra on 'Archives in the National Research Infrastructure', which was a national summit in all but name and which

² Australian Society of Archivists, *Directory of Archives in Australia*, 2018. <https://directory.archivists.org.au/>

agreed on a set of recommendations that served as a 'to do' list for national leadership for many years. At that round table Michael Piggott delivered a paper entitled 'A National Approach to Archival Appraisal and Collecting', which in turn inspired the November 2001 theme issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* on Australian documentation strategies. In 2002 the National Archives hosted another summit examining options for developing a National Online Archival Network, efforts that eventually came to nothing, but which nevertheless demonstrated some interest in national systems and collaboration. In 2006 the NAA hosted a 'mini summit' on Digital Archiving in the 21st Century in preparation for a national cross-domain digital collections summit that was run by the now defunct Collections Council of Australia. Long-forgotten resolutions from these summits set out action agendas, but unfortunately little real progress has ever been made. In summary, aside from a small body of published writing, nothing of any real substance or durability has eventuated.

Nevertheless, we have achieved a great deal collectively over many years. The high international standing of the Australian documentary professions as innovators and standards setters testifies to this. The National Library of Australia has a long and proud track record of exercising national leadership of an Australian library system, through initiatives such as the Australian Bibliographic Network, Conspectus, the Distributed National Collection, the Community Heritage Grants Program and, most recently, Trove. We are not unused to cooperating for the greater good, with an awareness that we share common interests and a recognition that the whole can be greater than the sum of its parts. The particular flavour that Australia, perhaps unlike Canada, can bring to this endeavour is an inclusive view of the world of records, where historical archives are not disconnected from current records but are viewed holistically as the indivisible records continuum.

In the area of organising records, we have a variety of national and international standards for metadata, recordkeeping systems design and archival intellectual control, even if our track record in implementing these standards is patchy at best. For keeping records, we have made considerable progress in the area of digital preservation, while for access we have the aforementioned Trove system. For many years the University of Melbourne's eScholarship Research Centre (previously the Australian Science Archives Project) has done exemplary work in documenting and supporting access to the distributed national collection of archives relating to science and technology. Similar efforts and achievements can be seen in the Australian Women's Archives Project.

From time to time Royal Commissions into hot societal issues such as the 'stolen generations' and forced child migration have highlighted gaps in the available documentation. This in turn has mobilised resources and collaborative action to fill these gaps through initiatives such as oral history and indexing projects. While these efforts have inevitably been somewhat piecemeal, they do show what can be done when there is a collective recognition of the need to do a better job of documenting Australian society.

Arguably, the main achievement of the now-defunct Collections Council of Australia was its publication of *Significance 2.0* in 2009. This manual, which has government endorsement within the context of national arts policy³, provides an agreed methodology for assessing

³ <https://www.arts.gov.au/what-we-do/museums-libraries-and-galleries/significance-20>

the significance of heritage collections and items. This is an important and useful tool for assessing the value and utility of existing documentary holdings and potential future additions to the distributed national collection against the context of the wider documentary universe and society's need to remember, understand and account for itself.

So, while we have to be realistic about our ambitions and our past failures, we do have some useful foundations to build on and an enviable track record of collaboration and innovation. This positions us well to identify some modest proposals for making progress towards the vision articulated above.

What are the main issues that constitute the overall problem?

- Deciding what must be documented, identifying high-risk areas that need attention, setting priorities and who to involve/engage in the process?
- What schema/categorisation system(s) should we use to frame our thinking (e.g. ANZSIC categories; topic/subject lists; geographical; etc)?
- How to build a clear understanding of the current state of things (existing initiatives, collections, institutional mandates, collection development policies)?
- Mapping the current state against an agreed desired state – what are the main gaps/risks?; areas of duplicated or low-value effort?
- Enhancing community awareness of the issue and advocating for support/resources
- Having inclusivity and flexibility in our models, frameworks and mechanisms – enabling, encouraging, acknowledging and tracking community effort
- Identifying mechanisms, systems, entities for coordinating effort and taking responsibility for progressing particular initiatives

What are some existing models, both internationally and within Australia (e.g. sector/topic-specific initiatives; geographic/jurisdictional efforts), that could inform/inspire our efforts?

At this summit we will hear about efforts in Canada and New Zealand that may inspire or provide models for action in Australia. We will also hear about some sector/location/topic specific initiatives in Australia where coordinated action is or has been taken. These include coordinated documentation initiatives relating to: science, Tasmania, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders, multicultural communities, and gay/lesbian communities. There are, no doubt, many other models and initiatives that it would be good to hear about, so please be prepared to share your knowledge and ideas of such things at the Summit.

Possible next steps

- Agreement on issues that require further research and who will lead and participate in conducting the research or developing research proposals
- Which entity or entities will have overall carriage of this work going forward (UNESCO Australian Memory of the World Committee; who else??)
- How might we seek to influence national policy in this area?
- Should an overarching strategy or plan be developed? If so, who should endorse it?
- Other resolutions/action items?

Annex – something from 1998 that shows that the issue is an old one!

The following is an extract from an article published by Adrian Cunningham in the journal *Lasie*, called 'From Here to Eternity: Collecting Archives and the Need for a National Documentation Strategy'. This 20-year old article discusses the issue in relation to collecting archives (a subset of the documentary heritage universe), but the issues can easily be extrapolated out to the wider documentary heritage context.

The second problem ... is the lack of a cooperative and coordinated national system for identifying and bringing under archival control an adequate and representative selection of private archival *fonds* documenting national identity. It is probably an understatement to assert that, at a level of national aggregation, there is plenty of room for improvement in the way that Australia's collecting archives manage to document life in our nation. Hitherto, there has been very little in the way of national coordination of the efforts of the various collecting archives. Individual collecting archives determine their collection policies in relation to their own institutional objectives and mandates. Sometimes these policies take account of the activities of other archives working in the field and sometimes they don't. Occasionally, pairs of archives may agree formally or informally on ways of dividing up territory where there is potential for overlap. Rarely, does anyone stop to think of what important documentary evidence may be being ignored because it falls outside of everyone's collection development policies.

Of course, Australia is not unique in this. Back in 1984 Phillips lamented in *The American Archivist* that "sporadic, unplanned, competitive and overlapping manuscript collecting has led to the growth of poor collections of marginal value". (1984: 31) More recently Graeme Powell has surveyed the holdings of Australia's collecting archives and found that the national collection of private archives is alarmingly lopsided in its documentation of society. (1996) Richard Cox has argued that collecting archives waste a worryingly high proportion of their limited resources collecting material which, to put it bluntly, is junk. (1996) What can we do about this situation? Elsewhere I have advocated the adoption in Australia of a version of the Canadian "total archives" approach to the archival endeavour. (Cunningham, 1996c)

Certainly, collecting archivists are not the only archivists who have a responsibility to document society. We need not only to cooperate amongst ourselves, but across the entire archival spectrum to ensure that we achieve our societal mission. Of course, in Canada such cooperation is easier because there is not the split between "archives" and "manuscript repositories" that exists in Australia and the USA. Nevertheless, the nature of the Australian scene is no excuse for not pursuing a holistic and cooperative approach to the archival endeavour. In fact, what I believe we need to develop in Australia is a hybrid between the "total archives" approach and the approach pursued within the Australian library community that has become known as the Distributed National Collection. I am not the first to think of this. As far back as 1979 Canadian Terry Cook argued that the "total archives" concept needs to be developed to include a notion of networked repositories so as to establish "an institutional system of archives . . . to ensure that the records of all significant human endeavour are preserved". (1979: 141-142)

More recently of course Australians have become familiar with the related but quite different concept of "distributed custody". In a recent piece in *Archivaria* titled "Thinking globally, acting locally", Christopher Hives (1994: 38 *LASIE* March 1998 159) stated the case far

better than I ever could: We must shift our focus away from individual repositories and towards a more holistic approach which embodies a collective or shared responsibility for the preservation of private records . . . we must look for opportunities to pool our collective resources in the acquisition of private records . . . [ensuring that] whatever resources we have available for this purpose are used in the most judicious, effective and efficient means possible. The preservation of private records must be viewed as the collective responsibility of the archival community as a whole, not the individual responsibility of any one repository.

In an era of shrinking real funding bases, publicly funded collecting archives can no longer afford to waste resources in duplicating the efforts of others or in controlling and preserving material that is of little, if any, long term national value. Encouragingly, Australia does have at least one working model for the kinds of distributed, coordinated responsibility for archival documentation, namely the Australian Science Archives Project (ASAP). For over a decade now ASAP has successfully pursued its vision of a national documentation strategy for Australian science, a vision which now needs to be adapted and pursued across all areas of Australian social and intellectual activity. In order to pursue a nationally coordinated approach to our documentation mission we need to, in the words of David Bearman, “focus our appraisal methods on selecting what should be documented rather than what documentation should be kept”. (1989: 14-15)

To do this properly we need to conduct research in order to develop a better understanding of the societal warrants for historical documentation and recordkeeping. We need to develop a nationally agreed agenda setting out those activities, functions, relationships and entities that need to be documented. We need to reach national agreement on the allocation of institutional responsibilities for documenting particular aspects of Australian life and we need to ensure that such a national system minimises duplication of effort and maximises the coverage of agreed priority areas. In the words of Richard Cox, we need to identify the most “salient and important features of contemporary institutions and society” (1994: 24) and do our level best to ensure that adequate documentary evidence of these features is captured and preserved by archives. Nor should this be an entirely elitist exercise. Also, in the words of Richard Cox, “Part of this documentation has to be sensitive to the under-documented and often powerless elements of society”. (1994: 29)