Changes and Choices

1994 to 2004

By Hilary Golder

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THE INTERNATIONAL SYMBOL OF ARCHIVISTS, the two faces of the god Janus, usually signifies a responsibility to past and future. For a national archive, the familiar logo also represents its two – sometimes competing – administrative and cultural roles. Rebalancing its dual responsibilities was a particular challenge for the Australian Archives (as the National Archives of Australia was then known) in 1994. For much of its history, the organisation put the majority of its resources into servicing government agencies, advising them on basic records management and authorising the disposal of records reaching the end of their administrative life. The Archives looked inwards to a government constituency and, during the late 1980s and early 1990s, its identity as an unobtrusive central service agency was reinforced by a location in the Department of Administrative Services. In this role as government housekeeper, the Archives continued to take custody of agency temporary records, which were no longer needed for current business, but were retained for specified periods and might be consulted for administrative or evidential purposes. However, the *Archives Act 1983* had clarified the organisation's unique responsibility for those records that had *enduring* legal, administrative or historical/cultural value. The legislation explicitly required the Australian Archives to 'encourage, facilitate, publicise and sponsor the use of' those records which constitute the 'archival resources of the Commonwealth'. In other words, the Archives had to look outwards to a broader public constituency and promote the cultural significance of its collection.

The Archives was slow to take up this unfamiliar perspective as the core business of record management consumed its resources during the 1980s. But in the early 1990s the organisation reset its priorities. One early sign of these seismic changes was the

Janus, the god of archivists, with one head looking into the past and the other looking into the future. This image is from a Roman coin dated after 211 BC. Courtesy the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, UK.

creation of Public Programs in 1993. For the first time the Archives was inviting attention through exhibitions, publications and other outreach activities. In the following year, the Australian Archives was moved into the Department of Communications and the Arts. Given that the agency had been shuffled between ministers for much of its existence, the fact that the Archives remained in this portfolio for the next 10 years signified its emergence as a national cultural institution. At the same time, the decentralisation of the public service and, more importantly, the revolution in electronic recordkeeping redefined the organisation's relationship with other government agencies. From the late 1980s, the public administration environment in which the Archives operated changed radically. The 'domestic economy' principles that had dominated the postwar period, in which the provision of services to the machinery of government was centralised, changed to 'rationalist' devolution, in which price signals were meant to guide agency managers towards efficient and effective use of taxpayers' resources. The Archives adapted its policy and operational practices progressively as these changes were introduced, successfully making the transition from a central service agency that provided 'free' warehousing of bulk records for all federal agencies to a standards-setting adviser and guide to modern best practice recordkeeping. Embracing the concept of the 'records continuum', the Archives took an increasingly active role in ensuring that the creation, management, appraisal and disposal of government records met the imperatives of economy and efficiency, but also the demands of democratic accountability and – in the case of records of archival value – of public accessibility. In short, the Archives became more visible inside as well as outside government. As the organisation renegotiated relations with both its constituencies and the pace of change accelerated, Janus was whirling like a weathercock.

This brief account of the years 1994 to 2004 concentrates on the Archives' new public profile. Because its dealings with other government agencies revolved around the question of managing electronic records in the long term, a detailed analysis of the Archives' initiatives can be found in the article *Looking Back to the Future: 30 Years of Keeping Electronic Records at the National Archives of Australia* by Simon Davis.[1]

From Warehouse to Treasure House

In 1994–95 temporary records took up 173,615 shelf metres in the Archives' network of repositories.[2] They were a legacy of the organisation's historical willingness to warehouse bulk records, such as personnel records. In 1995, however, the government housekeeper began some vigorous spring-cleaning, when the Australian Archives advised agencies that it would no longer accept short-term records (scheduled for destruction within 30 years). From this point agencies had to make their own arrangements, although the Archives did develop standards for the storage of such material. Until 2000 the Archives continued to take custody of longer-term temporaries, such as veterans' medical files which, although destined to be destroyed, lived at least as long as their subjects. But by 2003–04 records of temporary value occupied only 65,802 shelf metres.[3] During the same period the Archives reviewed and reduced its holdings of 'unevaluated' records, which had been transferred into its custody without appraisal. Not to put too fine a point on it, much of this material had been

dumped in repositories when there were shelf metres to spare.[4] By the 1990s space was at a premium, so the Archives could no longer afford to house and service so many temporaries and cast-offs.

The 1994 *Strategic Directions* paper signalled the Archives' primary commitment to the identification, preservation and presentation of 'higher value records'. *Strategic Directions* also insisted that making those records known and available was not an optional activity, but grounded the Archives' claim to be a cultural institution on a par with the National Library of Australia or the National Gallery of Australia. Market research suggested that Australians treated archives rather like wilderness areas – not many of us went to see them but we liked to know they were there. Public Programs' brief was to translate this passive acceptance into more active engagement. Because the Archives held records that document the rights and entitlements of individuals, it could also satisfy Australia's growing enthusiasm for family history. Over half of the 32,294 research inquiries handled in 1993–94 came from genealogists or people checking their personal details in the records.[5] Even so, the organisation was only reaching a tiny fraction of the population, who concentrated their research on a small proportion of its holdings.

Exhibitions were the best means of reaching new audiences, to promote the range and diversity of the collection. They had the potential to recruit new record users and a visit to a well-curated presentation in itself constituted a valid public use of archives. The exhibition *Between Two Worlds: The Commonwealth Government and the Removal of Aboriginal Children of Part-descent in the Northern Territory* was a case in point. The exhibition opened in Sydney in 1993 and toured extensively. By September 1994 it had attracted more than a quarter of a million visitors. As an introduction to archives, *Between Two Worlds* was both accessible and sophisticated. It made the point that family history can also be social and political history, while raising questions about why government records are created and how later readers/viewers may interpret those records in ways that would be surprising to the originators.[6]

Memories, Meanings and Identity

An exhibition opened in the Treasures Gallery at the Archives, Canberra in 1999 featuring the personal archives of three famous men – a footballer, a singer-songwriter and a journalist who share the name Paul Kelly.

The three Paul Kellys try to decide, 'Who is Paul Kelly?' (l to r): Paul Kelly the footballer, Paul Kelly the singer/songwriter and Paul Kelly the journalist.

It explored the memories and meanings that we invest in personal records such as photographs or diaries, and the ways in which they help to construct our individual identities. The exhibition also touched on the role of official records in stabilising those identities, and clarifying the rights and entitlements of the multiplying numbers of Kellys, Smiths and Ngs in the Australian population.

Stolen Generations

Recommendation 53 of the Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody required all Australian governments to make relevant records accessible to people affected by the policy of past governments to remove Aboriginal children of part-descent from their families in order to help reconnect them to their families and communities. In 1997 the Archives signed a Memorandum of Understanding with the Northern Territory Stolen Generations Combined Reference Groups, KARU Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency and the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency. The first of several MOUs with Indigenous organisations, it gave 'accredited' researchers access to records that would otherwise be withheld, on the ground that their release constituted 'unreasonable disclosure' of personal affairs under section 33 of the Archives Act.

In the same year, in response to the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from Their Families (the *Bringing Them Home* report), the federal government granted the Archives $2 million to make records relating to Indigenous people more accessible and to facilitate reunions. Over the next four years, teams of indexers in Darwin, Canberra and Melbourne checked over 20,000 records, identified over 388,487 individuals and entered over 300,000 names into a searchable database.[7]

BRINGING THEM HOME

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Raising the Archives' profile highlighted the need for a new headquarters in Canberra, with improved facilities for research, education programs and exhibitions. The transition from warehouse to treasure house could not be achieved without a proper home. Archives management gave up the dream of a purpose-built palace by Lake Burley Griffin, and in 1997 agreed to take over East Block in the Parliamentary Triangle. Appropriately, this building was an administrative landmark; along with Parliament House and West Block, it had been designed by John Smith Murdoch when the federal government began its move from Melbourne to Canberra in 1927. Since then it had accommodated generations of public servants in several departments including the Post Office, the Australian Security Intelligence Organization (ASIO), the Department of Post-War Reconstruction and the Prime Minister's Department. As a result of this rich administrative history, it was rather the worse for wear. To restore East Block, however, the architects were able to use one of the Archives' most famous series: the Mildenhall photographs of early Canberra. The Archives, which had been a decidedly reticent service agency, was beginning to strut its stuff.

A purpose-built Archives building had been planned since 1970. Sites were discussed and design competitions held, but the project was endlessly postponed; in the history produced for the 50th anniversary of Australian Archives, the imaginary building was compared to the Alice Springs to Darwin railway, 'continually promised but never built'. But both nationally significant projects were resurrected within a few years of each other. The Asia Pacific Consortium began construction of the new rail line and the first freight train (pictured here) ran between the two cities on 15–17 January 2004. (Courtesy AustralAsia Railway Corporation)

View of East Block, Queen Victoria Terrace from Old Parliament House. This picture is part of the Mildenhall collection of photographs of early Canberra. The photographs were taken by William James (Jack) Mildenhall (1891–1968), a Commonwealth public servant. Mildenhall identified a need for an official photographer for the growing national capital in 1921 and offered his services to the Department of Works and Railways. His offer was quickly accepted. Often working in his own time, and on an ad hoc basis alongside his full-time clerical position, Mildenhall continued in this role until 1935, when complaints about his monopoly of departmental photography resulted in an inquiry that brought the arrangement to an end. (NAA: A3560, 7788)

Before the Archives moved into East Block, its new national headquarters, the building needed a major fit-out that began in 1997.

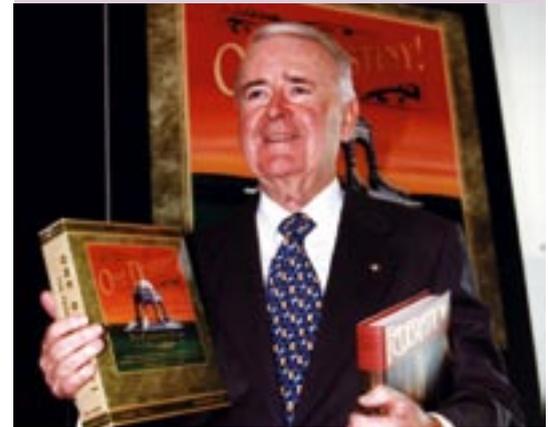The new building ready for Archives to move in.

New Name, New Profile

The name change from the Australian Archives to the National Archives of Australia was effected in February 1998 and confirmed that the organisation was staking its claim as 'one of the key group of national cultural institutions'.[8] The new headquarters for the National Archives in Parkes ACT was officially opened by the President of the Senate, the Honourable Margaret Reid in September 1998. It had spaces for permanent and temporary exhibitions to showcase the collection, facilities for school tours and community groups as well as a reading room designed for agency and public researchers.

The new name also looked forward to the Centenary of Federation, which was guaranteed to draw attention to records documenting the history and workings of Australia's national government. The Archives was involved in several Federation-related projects, many of them funded by the National Council for the Centenary of Federation. February 1998 also saw the publication of *Federation: The Guide to the*

The Governor-General, Sir William Deane, displays Federation: The Guide to Records *and the CD-ROM* One Destiny! The Federation Story *at their launch in Parliament House at Canberra on 9 February 1998.*

Records, a listing of relevant material in archives, libraries, museums and galleries throughout Australia. Recognising that Federation would be a 'must do' school project, the Archives also launched an educational CD-ROM, *One Destiny! The Federation Story* and a teachers' kit, *1901 and All That: A Federation Resource Kit.*

Unlike Americans, who are drilled in their nation's revolutionary break from Britain, Australians tended to be cheerfully amnesiac about Australia's origins. This strengthened the Archives' commitment to promoting the memory of the foundation of Australia's democracy. The organisation collaborated with all State archives and the Northern Territory Archives Service to create a website that reproduced and interpreted the 'constitutional instruments', or founding documents, of Australia's several governments.

Documenting a Democracy: Australia's Story was launched with events in every capital in June 2000 (www.foundingdocs.gov.au).

In January 2001 the Prime Minister, John Howard, opened the Archives' Federation Gallery with its permanent exhibition of seven key documents, including Queen Victoria's *Royal Commission of Assent 1900,* which outlined Australia's constitutional development.

This was the first visit by a serving Prime Minister to the Archives, an indication of its success in raising its profile. In November 2002 Mr Howard returned to the National Archives to launch the *Australia's Prime Ministers* website, a portal that informs researchers about archives and libraries, in Australia and overseas, holding records on prime ministers (primeministers.naa.gov.au).

The website was one product of the wider Prime Ministers' Papers Project, which involved the improved arrangement and description of relevant records in National Archives' custody, the digitisation of several thousand records as well as the production of both hard copy and online guides to the records of individual prime ministers.

These projects involved cooperation with other institutions and the products identified records in both archives and libraries around the country. Technology

At the opening of the Federation Gallery in January 2001, Prime Minister John Howard inspects one of the treasured documents with his wife Janette (right) and Kylie Scroope from the Archives.

Former Prime Minister Gough Whitlam and Prime Minister John Howard meet at the launch of the Australia's Prime Ministers *website in November 2002, together with Heather Henderson, daughter of former Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies.*

At the opening of the new North Melbourne reading room in 2004 (l to r): Ross Gibbs, the Director-General of the National Archives; Alex Somlyay, a Member of the National Archives Advisory Council; Ross Latham, Director of the Melbourne Office of the National Archives; Muriel Cadd, Chief Executive Officer of the Victorian Aboriginal Child Care Agency; and Paul Santamaria, Chair of the National Archives Advisory Council.

facilitated the broad scope of these projects, but it also reflected a cultural change within the Archives. Originally a part of the National Library, the organisation had fought hard to define a separate identity. This meant stressing the complex (some said inscrutable) structure of its record holdings. At the turn of the millenium the Archives took the lead in collaborative development of subject-based, user-friendly finding aids. Other developments during this 10-year-period also broke down institutional barriers. As part of the Howard Government's cultural networking initiative, the National Archives, with other government and non-government archival organisations, developed a website (www.archivenet.gov.au) that served as a starting point for exploration of their various sites, collections and services. And in 1997, in the 'real' world, the Archives and the Victorian Public Record Office opened a joint reading room in Melbourne. This cost-effective arrangement made it easier for researchers to comprehend the allocation of functions and records between state and federal levels of government, and to pursue their chosen topics through the maze. In 2004 the joint reading room moved to the Public Record Office's new premises in North Melbourne, consolidating the close relationship between Commonwealth and State archives in that city.

Access and Accessibility

All these initiatives were part of the new commitment to 'enhancing the availability of the archives of the nation to the public'.[9] In the decade leading up to 2004 relations between the Archives and its external constituency were transformed. Perhaps it would be more accurate to refer to external constituencies because outreach activities increased the variety as well as the number of demands on the organisation. From 1995 the development of the Archives' website recruited remote researchers and virtual visitors (www.naa.gov.au). In its early days, visits on this site were registered in thousands, but by 2002–03 the site recorded 2,577,071 unique visits and the number of such contacts continued to climb quickly.[10] During this period there were radical changes in the demand for, and delivery of, records in Archives' custody. Traditionally, government agencies had been the organisation's major 'customers'. Because the Archives stored records which still had administrative uses, a busy government lending service dealt with far more items than were issued to public researchers. This pattern shifted as the Archives warehoused fewer temporary records, encouraged

agencies to 'self-service' the ones still in its repositories and invited wider public use of archival resources. In 2002–03 the Archives received 147,790 reference inquiries from, and made 160,016 record items available to, its public customers. The profile of those customers also changed dramatically, as off-site or 'remote' researchers began to heavily outnumber those visiting reading rooms. By 2002 more than three-quarters of reference inquiries were lodged via email, telephone, fax and even regular mail. A study of off-site customers found that the word 'remote' could, in many cases, be taken literally: 45 per cent of them lived in regional and rural areas beyond easy access to Archives' offices in Canberra, Darwin and state capitals.[11]

Decentralisation – the location of records as well as reading rooms in capital cities – had always been a distinctive feature of Australia's management of national archives. The Internet enabled further democratising of public access to the records. And in April 2001 the Archives introduced a new service, digitisation on demand, which was designed for remote record users. They could ask the Archives to put digital copies of selected material into its online databases, RecordSearch and PhotoSearch, making them available to all researchers. At the same time, technology allowed the Archives to centralise some of its reference services. From 2001, remote inquiries, including applications for digitisation, fed into a single processing system before being allocated to the relevant state or territory for action. The reception of these inquiries was further streamlined by the establishment of a national line for phone, fax and email requests.

The general question of accessibility includes the more precise legal and administrative issue of access. Before the mid-1990s, access had been a matter of tension, or at least confusion, between the Archives and record users. The Archives Act ratified the public's right to inspect records over 30 years old, subject to specified exemptions, while providing for internal review (by the Archives) and external appeal to the Administrative Appeals Tribunal (AAT) regarding exemption decisions. AAT rulings could themselves be reviewed by the Federal Court. But the liberality of this access regime was undermined by the practical problems of access examination, especially

as most agencies delegated the responsibility to the Archives. The organisation held a huge backlog of unexamined material and did not have the resources to pre-examine all the records coming into the 'open period' during the 1980s.[12] Certain high-profile series, notably Cabinet records, were screened in advance of requests; otherwise a researcher requesting uncleared material triggered an access examination. The Act stated that this process should take no longer than 90 days. This largely reactive system remained in force in the early years of the twenty-first century, but was working fairly smoothly despite the increasing number of applications. From the mid-1990s, at least 90 per cent of access applications were handled within 90 days, well over 80 per cent were finalised within 30 days and many took less than a week. The majority of applicants had quite specific requests, often for a single record item. There was, for example, a heavy demand for individual service dossiers from both world wars. The last batch of 1939–45 service records was transferred to Archives' custody in 2002 and the November launch of the Department of Veterans Affairs World War II Nominal Roll received unprecedented media attention.

Access examination of such records was generally completed quickly. And in most years more than 95 per cent of the records involved in access applications were opened without exemption. These improving statistics reflect changes in access examination as the Archives substituted sampling techniques, which facilitated the release of blocks of records, for the painstaking folio-by-folio inspection that had once been the norm. The declining number of reviews and appeals also suggest that much of the heat went out of the access question in this period, although a small minority of applications (mainly dealing with the records of security agencies) still generated delays and disputes. The majority of new researchers probably did not realise that access had once been 'the *enfant terrible* of the Australian Archives'.[13]

Not that the record users were free from problems and grumbles. The 'searchability' of the collection remained problematic despite technical advances. At the beginning of the 1990s researchers could use two computerised finding aids in Archives' reading rooms. The Records Information Service System (RINSE) held descriptions of record

Looking at the World War II Nominal Roll, launched at the National Archives in 2002: (l to r) Tom Morris (veteran and former prisoner-of-war), Danna Vale (Minister for Veterans' Affairs), Madeline and Abby Higginson (Tom Morris's granddaughters), General Peter Cosgrove (Chief of the Australian Defence Force) and Ian Cartwright (Director of Nominal Rolls, Defence Links Branch, Veterans' Affairs).

series along with contextual information about the agencies that created and/or controlled them. It allowed tenacious researchers to track the history and movement of government functions, activities and records. A second database, ANGAM II, stored information on record items. Although these only represented a small fraction of the whole collection, it could be searched intuitively via keywords and most researchers preferred it. By 1998 RINSE and ANGAM had been loaded (separately) onto the Archives' website. But this was only a holding operation, because in 1996 the Archives had embarked on a major project to integrate and redevelop all computerised databases into a common system, automating its transactions. This project, which was driven by the need to integrate the Archives' intellectual and physical control systems, had implications for public access to the collection.

The new integrated database combined the functions of rigorous RINSE and accessible ANGAM II. Called RecordSearch, its 'search and retrieve component' was launched in reading rooms in July 1999 and on the web in the following March. Using RecordSearch, a researcher beginning with a keyword (including family name or place name) could not only locate a relevant item, but also place it in context. Information about the series containing that item (including the reasons for creating the series) was only a mouse click away. More data on agencies and related series was also available. However, recent surveys of remote researchers and reading room customers suggest that few currently take the opportunity to go beyond the item-level entry. Even fewer are ready to take the old RINSE route and search hierarchically from function to agency to relevant series to multiple items. Confident researchers who used 'all the avenues available to them…admitted their research proficiency was won after several years of trial, error, and persistence'.[14]

Some archivists may regret that the full potential of RecordSearch is not being exploited because researchers prefer and rely on simple keyword searching. But this is a good example of the way technology is changing researchers' interactions with the Archives. Through the Internet, researchers have ready access to 5.7 million items on RecordSearch, constituting roughly 10 per cent of the Archives' holdings.

Penguins on shore line at Heard Island, 1948. One of the images held in the Archives' photographic database. PhotoSearch was first put on the Archives' website in 1998. By 2003 it contained over 470,000 descriptions of photographs and over 60,000 digital images. (NAA: A1200, L10028)

In response to record users' clear preferences, the Archives is committed to increasing the number and proportion of item descriptions on RecordSearch. The fact that this centralised database is built around item-level control and description means that more easily searchable records are becoming accessible to future researchers. As for current record users, many have precise requirements and do not want or need to be inducted into the complexities of archival research. The National Archives has recognised this reality by providing web forms that allow the public to order war service records without venturing into the database. This kind of service – and the emphasis on meeting user needs – sometimes leads to accusations that archival organisations may degenerate into 'drive-thru' fast-food record outlets'.[15] But the National Archives of Australia, which achieved a 'world first' by enabling online access to information about its entire holdings, is working to promote wider use of that information. Fact sheets and subject guides, available in both hard copy and online, also direct researchers to selected record series and items.

In this automated age, the Archives has not forgotten the importance of the informed and helpful human being. It has an ongoing commitment to a professional development program for reference staff.[16] Making the collection available is a Janus-like exercise, which entails accommodating and educating the preferences of researchers.

The Revolution
in Appraisal

In 1999 the National Archives of Australia held more than 255 shelf kilometres of records classified as permanent, while the comparable organisation in Canada held only 150 kilometres. Archives staff argued that these statistics reflected a history of 'over-retention' and that records of 'doubtful quality' had been retained and enshrined as 'archival resources of the Commonwealth'.[17] Appraisal – traditionally viewed as the process that determines the size and structure of the Archives' collection – came into focus during this period as the organisation revised its methodologies and criteria. Under the 1983 Act, the Archives regulates the disposal of Commonwealth records, and it had customarily intervened in the management of those records as they came to the end of their immediate administrative utility. In 1998, the Australian Law Reform Commission published *Australia's Federal Record. A Review of the Archives Act 1983,* where it argued that the legislation left too much initiative with the agencies. Although agencies could not dispose of their records without authorisation by the Archives, the organisation could not compel them to begin the necessary work of

appraisal and sentencing 'in a timely way'.[18] Even without this statutory power, the Archives has taken primary responsibility for identifying records of lasting value, for legal, administrative or research purposes. It had achieved widespread disposal coverage by the late-1990s, negotiating disposal authorities with agencies that set retention periods for classes of records.

This relatively leisurely system was unsustainable at the end of the twentieth century. The 'late intervention in the life-cycle' model presumed that agencies would manage their records autonomously and efficiently before that intervention, but the Law Reform Commission found that standards of recordkeeping, across a decentralised, downsized public service, were 'parlous'. Above all, the existing model was designed for paper records; dog-eared but durable, they could pile up for years on agency premises and remain available for appraisal. But the volatility of electronic records demanded a more holistic approach to ensure that government actions would be documented and that records would be 'systematically created and maintained to a standard appropriate to their future use, including accessibility to future generations'.[19] Adopting the organising concept of the records continuum, in the 1990s the Archives took a leading role in the development of systems, setting standards and providing technical advice to agencies. The organisation was involved in establishing an innovative Australian records management standard (AS 4390), published in 1996 and subsumed in the 2001 international standard, ISO 15498. In 2000 the National Archives published a comprehensive set of recordkeeping standards, policies and guidelines under the e-permanence banner. The 'foundation document' was *Designing and Implementing Recordkeeping Systems: A Manual for Commonwealth Agencies* (the product of a collaboration between the National Archives and the State Records Authority of New South Wales).[20]

New records management strategies require agencies to define and document their role and purpose, and to analyse their business functions, activities and transactions. They must 'identify the requirements for evidence, including legal and public obligations affecting each business function, activity and transaction that must be

During the 1990s the privatisation of government agencies raised questions about the status of records created before such changes. In 1995 the Archives Act was amended to clarify the fact that these records remained Commonwealth records, and ratified Archives' control over their disposal. The Archives negotiates with the former government agency and the inheriting agency to identify Commonwealth records and facilitate transfer and access arrangements for them. This image of a construction worker excavating the power station site at Munyang comes from records transferred to the Archives by the Snowy Mountains Hydro-Electric Authority in 1999. (NAA: A11016, 1577)

satisfied through recordkeeping'.[21] This functions-based approach has implications for appraisal along with every other aspect of records management. In 1998 the National Archives decided to identify classes in future disposal authorities on the basis of functions performed by agencies. The ramifications of this change were explored in *Appraisal Guidelines for Commonwealth Records,* which was released in 2000. In essence *functions* rather than records became the focus of appraisal. This meant that agencies had to undertake the analytically rigorous task of constructing a business classification scheme – a hierarchical taxonomy of their functions and activities – which was central to the new appraisal methodology. Such schemes allow retention decisions to be made on the basis of the functional context of the records. This involves identifying numerous records disposal classes within each function. Although the Archives would no longer undertake comprehensive appraisal review of records, functional appraisal conclusions could be (and currently are) confirmed through random sampling of actual records.[22]

These changes raised questions among researchers, especially historians (who tend to be over-retentive by temperament). Indeed, at the end of the 1990s, appraisal seemed to be replacing access as the site of mutual incomprehension between the National Archives and some of its constituents. The changes to appraisal were hard to understand because they were radical, highly technical and sometimes expressed in impenetrable managerial language. Archivists appreciated the retrospective and prospective potential of the new functions-based approach. First, it promised a more rigorous review of the paper record. Agencies were expected to produce new disposal authorities, which would include retrospective analysis of functions to frame decisions on records still in their custody. Some of these dated back to the 1960s, when the number of Commonwealth public servants grew and they began their long love affair with the photocopier. Disposal authorities, incorporating historical-functional analysis, would also enable the Archives to review certain records already in its custody. In theory, functions can be analysed back to Federation. Indeed the model *Administrative Functions Disposal Authority*, produced by the Archives in

2000, gave comprehensive and consistent disposal coverage back to 1901 for a whole range of administrative support records across the public service. When it comes to their specific functions and records, however, many agencies have lacked the incentives and resources to adopt this approach. Instead they have chosen to analyse functions as far back as is necessary to deal with the records they currently hold. In general, it is taking time for agencies to assimilate the intellectually challenging and labour-intensive appraisal methodology and to produce new disposal authorities. The revolution has hit a few speed bumps.

In recognition of these difficulties the Archives has streamlined its appraisal methodology, learning from the experiences of the past five years to focus on what is most important and give less emphasis to the more expendable aspects of the work. In addition, the Archives is moving away from a 'one size fits all' approach to working with agencies. There is growing recognition that different kinds of agencies require different approaches and that some functions are more significant and/or higher risk than others and thus are more deserving of detailed analysis and documentation.

The Collection Review Project

The changes in appraisal methodology coincided with the start of a large-scale review of 'permanent' records in the Archives' custody. Numerous files, some dating back to the beginnings of the postwar 'paper explosion', were effectively inaccessible. Although they had apparently been appraised and classified as permanent, they had never been arranged and described or consulted by researchers. Archives staff argued that the accumulation of problematic permanent records was the product of hasty appraisal and/or poor decisions about how long to keep individual items in the collection, the process known as sentencing. Also the category 'retain permanently' was too elastic, so that records needing to be kept for long periods, for administrative purposes, became permanent almost by default. In 1999 therefore, the Collection Review Project began with a 'Domesday Survey' of records in all Archives repositories. On the basis of this preliminary review, project staff initiated more detailed surveys of specific holdings, such as Army non-personnel records. In addition, they began reappraisal of selected series, including bankruptcy and National Service case files. The real work of the Collection Review Project, however, consisted in the painstaking re-sentencing of record items under new or existing disposal authorities. It was sometimes represented as a ruthless pruning of defenceless records for financial reasons, given that storage space means money. The Archives responded that the systematic examination of largely unknown material was reducing the volume of records, but was also making the remainder accessible (as more and accurate item descriptions were loaded onto RecordSearch).

This debate reflects the continuing tension around the whole question of over-retention. But the Collection Review Project was also caught up in other controversies. Although it was distinct from earlier actions on temporary records and from the progressive reduction of unevaluated holdings in Archives' repositories, the project inherited practical responsibility for the final stages of this process, which saw 'records of unknown value' reduced from 192 shelf kilometres in 1992 to 15 kilometres by June 2001. At that time, changes to the Archives' property portfolio brought such statistics into the public arena. The Australian Government's policy during the 1990s of selling special-purpose real estate meant that repositories were leased rather than owned by the Archives, and the organisation had the opportunity to vacate large and sometimes outdated facilities when leases ended. In Adelaide and Brisbane, for example, operations were moved to smaller, more central premises. However, the increased accessibility provided by the new arrangements was offset by the fact that they would involve accelerated reduction of temporary/unevaluated records and the relocation of others (including selected permanent records) from one State repository to another. All these changes sparked alarmist headlines about selling off – or even destroying – the nation's heritage. The Archives had to scramble to explain that, in line with longstanding policy, records of lasting administrative, legal or research value would generally be held in the States where they originated. Most of the records being removed from repositories did not qualify as archives. The explanations, however, triggered some responses along the lines of 'It might be unevaluated junk to you, but it's *our* unevaluated junk', which was an unexpected side effect of the Archives' new public profile.

The refurbished offices in Adelaide (above) and Brisbane (below) , September 2004.

The fate of future, largely electronic, records is also the subject of debate between agencies, the Archives and researchers. Recordkeeping systems designed around functions should streamline decisions on the creation, capture, maintenance and disposal of records. The idea that they could be sentenced at or even before birth was repeated with relish in archival literature, but these overtones of predestination struck something of a chill into the hearts of researchers. They wondered how effectively these systems – geared to agencies' current recordkeeping needs – would identify functions generating records to be retained as national archives. How would that identification, which remains the responsibility of the National Archives, be built into the design and implementation of recordkeeping systems? Would appraisal by function be unacceptably broad and lead to 'under-retention'? Sentencing at birth works well in relation to functions/records at both ends of a significance continuum. Obviously records of high-level decisions must be created and retained, while those documenting minor housekeeping functions are destined for speedy extinction. What about the middle ground, where researchers like to graze? While it seems comparatively simple to integrate decisions on retention, for legal and administrative purposes, into recordkeeping systems, pre-determining the research value of functions/records is problematic. Of course, the research value criterion for identifying national archives has always been problematic; archivists argue that its shifting subjectivity promoted over-retention under the old appraisal regime. During this period the National Archives was making its selection criteria more precise and stringent.

The new selection objectives set out in a recent Archives publication, *Why Records Are Kept,* include criteria which are historical and cultural. The National Archives acknowledges an obligation to 'preserve records that have substantial capacity to enrich knowledge and understanding of aspects of Australia's history, society, and culture and people'.[23] This raises key questions. Research and cultural value is not always apparent at birth, so how will recordkeeping systems accommodate the longer view? One aspect of the construction of an agency's business classification scheme is the identification of stakeholders with a business or research interest in its functions or records. The Archives is currently working to enlist stakeholders, including the

Australian Historical Association, to comment on agencies' classification schemes and the research potential of their records. The new appraisal methodology also leaves open the possibility of revisiting a records disposal authority in the light of changing community views about the historical value of records relating to a given function. But there will always be a risk that agencies will already have disposed of such retrospectively valued records.

Preservation Initiatives

From 2001 the National Archives has received preservation funding to extend the useful life of its collection. In 2002–03 this specific appropriation amounted to $15.3 million. These funds have been directed to high-value, high-use and especially high-risk records. Service dossiers from World War I are being digitised to prevent wear and tear on the much-in-demand originals. In general, however, the Archives' preservation program has targeted records that – because of their physical deterioration or the technological obsolescence of their formats – are rapidly becoming inaccessible. Paper records, which constitute more than 90 per cent of the Archives' collection, are the least vulnerable although the poor quality paper used between 1920 and 1950 will not stand up to heavy use. Postwar migrant selection documents are particularly fragile, so their life span and accessibility have been increased by the restoration, repackaging and listing of files on RecordSearch. Large format records, which present particular preservation challenges in retrieval and handling are being described, repackaged, stabilised and copied. Photographic negatives affected by 'vinegar syndrome' are also being copied and repackaged.

Approximately half of the preservation budget has been dedicated to the rescue of audiovisual materials. Although by quantity these represent only 6 per cent of the collection, the complexity of these records and the high costs of creating, storing and copying them makes effective preservation a priority. By the late 1990s many of these were deteriorating fast and/or were recorded on outdated

formats. Acetate-based film is prone to 'vinegar syndrome', while the same hydrolysis decay affects audiotape. The chemical instability of audiovisual records is compounded by problems of accelerating technological obsolescence; early videos, for example, were becoming unplayable in the 1990s for lack of compatible equipment. The Archives consequently upgraded the 'sight and sound' facilities at its Chester Hill repository in Sydney. A low-temperature vault was designed to store affected acetate film and photographic negatives, retarding their deterioration and preventing contamination of other material. Opened in January 2004, this state-of-the-art 'isolation ward' for sick records has the capacity to store 40,000 film cans and over 250,000 negatives. Chester Hill's film preservation area was extended, with a new film-sound suite and video studio. The Archives has also invested in new digital recording equipment as part of an upgrading of Sydney's existing sound studio. These facilities have greatly improved the organisation's capacity to examine, repair, clean and copy audiovisual records. In 2001–02 the Archives initiated a five-year copying program, which involves the creation of a preservation copy, duplicating copy and reference copy for thousands of individual audiovisual items. Because those items are listed in RecordSearch, preservation will eventually promote accessibility. Although much of the actual copying is outsourced, contractors work to standards set by the Archives in cooperation with other institutions, notably the National Library of Australia and ScreenSound Australia. The preservation program is constantly and rapidly evolving. Copying, for example, is not seen as a once-and-for-all solution, and information will have to be migrated progressively to new technologies.

Digitisation, which is a preferred strategy for ensuring continued accessibility of brittle paper documents or deteriorating audiotapes, presents new problems of management, delivery and sustainability. For born-digital records, the Archives has developed internationally innovative software, known as Xena, which facilitates the transfer of digital records from agencies into a digital repository, converting them into standardised and accessible formats independent of the agencies' original hardware and software.[24]

Preservation staff from the Sydney office work on the audiovisual collection in 1997.

Conclusion

The resolution of these difficult questions – along with other aspects of the appraisal revolution – remains a work in progress. The same comment applies to all aspects of the National Archives' complex operations. Over the past 10 years the organisation has worked to meet, indeed to anticipate, the challenges of technological innovation and radical change in public administration. While taking an increasingly active role in setting and auditing government recordkeeping standards, the Archives has publicised its collection, recruited new record users and conducted many of its transactions with them online. Because of its early and innovative response to the problems of electronic recordkeeping, the National Archives of Australia has much greater visibility in the national and international archives communities.

The next decade will present challenges requiring the Archives to develop and change its relationships with government agencies, the archival profession, the recordkeeping industry and its many public audiences. Given the organisation's capacity to adapt to a rapidly changing environment, the National Archives will continue to lead the way in adopting creative approaches to its administrative and cultural responsibilities.

In May 2004 the Archives produced its *Corporate Plan* for 2004–2006 (naa.gov. au/Publications/corporate_publications/corporate_publications.html) setting out the organisation's goals and objectives for the next three years. In his introduction, Director-General Ross Gibbs explains his vision for the Archives.

The National Archives of Australia is an essential part of our democratic system. The collection we care for documents the relationship between the Australian Government and the Australian people. We work closely with agencies and industry to assist them to create and manage Commonwealth records that support accountable government.

This Corporate Plan highlights our objectives and strategic priorities for the next three years. Building on our past achievements, we shall continue to preserve and manage the nation's archival collection so that it is accessible and used by all who need it. We shall also support good recordkeeping throughout the Australian Government so that the right records are created and kept.

New technology presents all archives with major challenges. The National Archives has conducted extensive research on electronic recordkeeping and digital preservation to enable us to provide expert advice in this field. Ensuring that recordkeeping standards are set and assisting agencies to implement them within a volatile electronic environment is a significant responsibility for the Archives. Implementing our approach to preserving digital archives so that future generations can use them will be an essential task over the next few years.

As Australia's national archival organisation, we play a vital leadership role within government, the cultural industry and the archival profession. This is a high priority for the organisation. We shall also collaborate closely with partners around the country and across the world to increase people's understanding of the value and importance of archives.

We plan to make effective use of our network of State and Territory offices which provide the Archives with excellent opportunities to reach audiences all over Australia, particularly in regional and remote places. Making full use of information technology will enable us to carry out our work efficiently and to communicate effectively with our audiences and between our offices across the country. New approaches to staff learning and development are also essential if we are to keep pace with the rapid rate of change facing us today.

Endnotes

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3   Between 1999 and 2004 the Archives' total holdings reduced from 445,910 to 355,358 shelf metres, notwithstanding new transfers.

4   Senate Standing Committee on Education and the Arts (Reference: Archives Bill), 1978–79, *Official Hansard Transcript of Evidence*, pp. 34–35.

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7   AA, *Annual Report,* 1996–97, pp. 6–7; National Archives of Australia (NAA), *Annual Report*, 2002–03, p. 22.

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9   AA, *Strategic Directions,* Canberra, 1994, p. 10

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18 Australian Law Reform Commission, *Australia's Federal Record: A Review of the Archives Act 1983* (Report No. 85), Canberra, AGPS, 1998, pp. 301. For online access to this report see www.alrc.gov.au.

19 Australian Law Reform Commission, 1998, p. 27.

20 NAA, *Annual Report,* 2000–01, pp. 26–8.

21 AS 3690, cited in Kelly, pp. 76–7.

22 AS 3690, cited in Kelly, pp. 75–8.

23 NAA, *Why Records Are Kept: Directions in Appraisal*, March 2000, p. 7.

24 For more information, see Simon Davis, *Looking Back to the Future: 30 Years of Keeping Electronic Records at the National Archives of Australia*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, published online at ourhistory.naa.gov.au/library/.