

ARTEFACTS OF MEMORY

ORAL HISTORIES IN ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS

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ARCHIVAL INSTITUTIONS AND MEMORY

“A National Library,” according to Pierre Ryckmans, “is a place where a nation nourishes its memory and exerts its imagination — where it connects with its past and invents its future”.¹ It is the artefacts of memory which provide the means for this connection with the past, in the collections of contemporary archival institutions. Spoken views and recollections held within these institutions as recorded oral histories — more often in libraries, than in archives or museums — have become increasingly important as a research resource, and as a way of understanding the past and its influence on the present and the future. More precisely than other collected items, they have become artefacts of memory.

Some of the most significant memories of recent times are at present being documented through the National Library of Australia’s Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, over a four-year period to conclude in mid-2002. This collection will illuminate and honour the removal experiences of separated Indigenous Australian children and their families, and others directly connected with these events, which occurred over a period of several generations. It is our common task to ensure that these memories become collective memories, and to reflect upon how that is best achieved, within the archival institutions of our times.

These institutions have generally been identified and organised around the artefacts in their care, and the specialised skills required to create access to them, and care for them.² Public libraries were initially charged with the

custody of books and other print media, and sometimes pictorial material. Museums on the other hand, have historically fewer collection boundaries, but developed over time — as either specialist or generalist institutions — a commitment to the display of three-dimensional objects. Archives collect documents, specifically the records created by governments or other organisations. Unlike libraries, as repositories for bibliographic material already created in its entirety, the documentary material in archives has been given meaning as it is accessioned, through an elimination and arrangement process, and attempts to second-guess which material might be important enough to keep.

It is clear nevertheless, that boundaries between these different types of archival institutions have always been to some extent blurred. In addition to bibliographic collections, libraries have kept manuscripts and other documentary material; museums are repositories for an infinite array of objects, which might include books and documents (and even living objects like plants and fish); and archives contain much material which libraries and museums might collect, including diaries, photographs or even three-dimensional models. All of these institutions, despite their emergence as specialist collecting establishments from the “undifferentiated collections of seventeenth- and eighteenth-century rulers, aristocrats and scholars”³ retain the imprint epitomised by the Closet of Curiosities from which the Ashmolean Museum at Oxford originated. This collection of John Tradescant towards the end of the seventeenth century included various objects

related to natural history and antiquities, as well as a library and a chemical laboratory.⁴ Curiosity was a favoured impetus of the period, for collecting rare and exotic objects of various kinds, and for expanding knowledge of other cultures and of the past. As collecting institutions developed differentiated collecting roles, so societies developed a dependence on these institutions, for retrieval of information and access to records.

As part of the evolving history of archival institutions themselves, collections have expanded, accumulated and moved into the province of consolidated and collective memory. At the same time, they have undergone various transformations, not only into differentiated and classified bodies of material and information, but into collections which provide references to local and contemporary life and activity. These two aspects of museum function — memory and contemporary activity — are linked. As the accumulated past in archival institutions expanded to become collective memory, the community became increasingly interested, implicated and involved: the presence of the community inevitably brings the community's present to bear, and community activity now readily occurs in conjunction with that of museums and other such institutions. The instructive influence of the museum, as reformists of the mid-nineteenth century conceived it, was to bring an appropriately 'civilising' model into the life of the community.⁵ However, its present mandate is much more likely to include the capacity to reflect, and to reflect upon, the life of the community in which it is situated.

All forms of archival institution have taken on display activities, making stored materials accessible through exhibitions and further blurring the boundaries established with such enthusiasm during the mid-nineteenth century⁶ as museums became part of the public sphere. Further contributing to the increasing ambiguity of archival institutional function, is the emergence of collections of audio, video and multimedia material, now accessible and retrievable, along with other

elements of collections and the research underpinning them, in ways never imagined by former generations of museum or archival workers. Information technology and digitisation have revolutionised the way objects, bibliographic material, audio material or even archival records, can be accessed. Digitisation, as Rayward has observed, "eliminates physical distinctions between types of records and thus, presumably, the need for institutional distinctions in the management of the systems within which these records are handled."⁷ Such questions as "What is to be collected, by whom and under what circumstances of preservation, availability and access",⁸ whilst not being intrinsically new, require fresh approaches in any attempt to find relevant answers.

At the audience/user end of the spectrum, digitisation provides the opportunity to 'create ever-changing virtual "cabinets of curiosities" at will'. All collecting institutions making use of the opportunities presented by digitisation might then be termed, for practical purposes, museums, as the original mobility and scope of institutional collections is reinstated. It is a mobility which implicitly welcomes the addition of objects, technologies and approaches arising from contemporary frameworks of knowledge, activity and expectation.

The notion of a collection of sound, with its overtones of ephemerality, synthesises well with these new dynamics. The technology which makes such a collection possible is a relatively recent arrival. It has heralded the development of oral history as a discrete discipline and contemporary phenomenon, and has enabled its inclusion in collections — and also in the displays and retrieval mechanisms — of libraries, archives and museums. The analogous evolutions of oral history as a discipline, information technology as a support mechanism, and of the museum as a phenomenon have come to a meeting point, or perhaps a crucible, wherein many cultural elements now have the opportunity to amalgamate.

ORAL HISTORY

Oral history — the recorded memoirs and reflections of people who become during the course of an interview, memoirists, narrators or interviewees — is an increasingly validated discipline. Its development, along with the expansion of oral history collections, has occurred in parallel with the broadening role of museums and other collecting or archival institutions. As with the conservation of expanding collections of three-dimensional objects, the safekeeping of sound archives has developed as a separate discipline, and audio-engineers in archival institutions are likely to be as concerned with sound preservation as they are with sound quality. Memory has been given a technical guise, as collections of spoken sound have accumulated, and the individual and collective memories of various communities have been laid down, first on magnetic, and more recently, on digital tape.

The significance of these collections of spoken memoirs is far-reaching, for paradoxically, memory relates to the past, but is significant only for the present and the future. Our understanding of the past, dependent on written and oral accounts of the time, is used to illuminate the present and the future. Anticipation, hope, desire, vision — all these states of projection into the future are impossible to experience without memory and a sense of the past. Oral history collections play an important role as the keepers of memory, with the increasing diversity, size, mobility and accompanying disjunction of contemporary communities. With a sense of the importance the past as a presence, Ann-Mari Jordens, an interviewer for the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project writes:

As an interviewer I am a conduit, allowing
the interviewee to speak to living
Australians and those yet to be born. I am
an ear for the future.⁹

In the context of increasingly unwieldy bodies of knowledge, and complex interrelationships within and between communities,

the importance of communication (both speaking and listening) is amplified, and Jordens' 'ear for the future' is of particular interest and consequence. Ronald Grele, an historian whose work was significant in shaping the methodology of the recorded interview as it is approached today, highlights two views on oral history — one which sees it as a way to 'flesh out the record, to get more history for the historian' and the other, as a way to bypass the historian and hear the real voices of the people and the past — to get beyond history. Grele believed that neither view should prevail, but that the collaborative work of the historian and the interviewee in creating a sound document should be recognised.¹⁰

During the early 1960s Allan Nevins established the Oral History Research Office at Columbia University, in the USA, to record participation in the political, cultural and economic affairs of the nation, of Americans who had lived significant lives. The outcome of the tape-recorded interviews conducted was not the same as the oral history record as it is known today — usually an unedited master sound recording, accompanied by verbatim transcript. At Columbia at this time, the tapes were edited and might eventually be erased, after changes to the written material — often worked on by both interviewee and historian — except for a small example retained as an illustration of delivery and style.¹¹

ORAL HISTORY AT THE NATIONAL LIBRARY OF AUSTRALIA

The early development of the oral history collections of the National Library of Australia were influenced by the work carried out at Columbia University under Nevins. From 1970, interviews were commissioned (as distinct from those initiated from enthusiasts external to the Library, such as Hazel de Berg) by the Library, to record the views and histories of Australians prominent in politics, journalism or the public service. The main purpose of these interviews was to augment the manuscript collection, which held the

papers of significant contributors to the community, and to uncover insights into important processes and events. The coordinated establishment of a broader based collection of interviews from a wide cross-section of the community, recommended in the report commissioned during the 1960s by the Library's then Assistant Librarian, Harold White, was not to occur until the early 1980s. Finally, in 1983, a social history component was officially written into the Library's collection development strategy, providing a context for numbers of interviews already in the collection, of people who did not fall into the hitherto favoured category of 'eminent' Australians who might have been persuaded to deposit their papers with the Library.¹²

THE BRINGING THEM HOME ORAL HISTORY PROJECT

This new development also provided a springboard for many other initiatives, some of them national in scope, such as the Cultural Context of Unemployment project which recorded the memories and reflection of more than 500 unemployed people across Australia. Such a project is the Bringing Them Home Oral History Project established with an allocation of federal government funding as a response to the report of the Australian Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families. This project is arguably one of the most significant oral history initiatives to be undertaken in Australia, grappling as it does, with issues which affect all Indigenous Australians, and which have become part of an uncomfortable dialogue across all communities in Australia, through media coverage and political action. Its scope is both broad and comprehensive, by virtue of the range of views to be sought, the numbers of interviews it aims to record, the degree to which it aims to resolve the processes inherent in recording and archiving oral histories, and not least, the amount of funding which has been made available in order to carry it through.

Through the recollection and reflections of those involved, government policies and practices which resulted in the separation from their families of many Indigenous Australian children, will be considered. The extent of the dislocation which occurred, the resulting disintegration of that collective memory linked with family and culture and language, and the painful collective loss of a sense of identity, are only now being realised, and the effects only now being reckoned.

The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project is therefore recording the highly personal accounts of those who were directly involved in separation events as children, parents, close family, adoptive or foster parents, as well as the recollections of those who worked with the children professionally. A wide variety of roles were played by non-Indigenous people as school teachers, religious and welfare workers, policemen and patrol officers, hospital matrons, staff in children's homes, and also as government administrators and policy makers. The range of their experiences is extensive. Many believed they were acting in the best interests of the children involved, and tried to do their work to the best of their ability. It is important that these stories are also heard, so that future generations understand the complexities of this history.

A significant aspect of this project is the role it will play in making previously inaccessible information available to all, on the public record. Interviewees are therefore encouraged to give permission for their interviews to be on open access, although some interviews — or sections of them — are embargoed for particular periods of time, where appropriate.

Some relevant recordings will be held by state or large regional libraries as co-repositories, and in appropriate community keeping places, if the interviewee is agreeable. This distribution of tapes will ensure that the material is accessible to a much wider audience than if the material is held only in the national capital — although it should be emphasised that the National Library's stated goal is that "all Australians, at their place of choice, have

direct, seamless access to print and electronic sources of information".¹³ Also planned as part of making the material accessible, is a major publication which will include interview excerpts. Unlike the Human Rights and Equal Opportunities Commission Inquiry, which made a commitment to keeping all interviews confidential, this project aims to allow wide community access to the stories of all those who were personally and directly affected by the separation of Indigenous children from their families.

Bringing Them Home interviewers operate individually in their own regions, usually far from the National Library in Canberra, but the project trains and establishes support links between interviewers, creating an inclusive and cooperative network. The collaborative contribution of technical staff, coordinators, researchers, historians and importantly, the memoirists and interviewers who interface directly with them and with their unfolding stories, is inestimable and reflects a multi-disciplinary approach within the project. This can be linked to Grele's optimism in the 1970s about contemporary trends in oral history, in narrowing "...the gap between history, and folklore and anthropology".¹⁴

Many Indigenous people are able to describe so eloquently how identity and memory are interleaved, and how fractured memories have resulted in lost and fragmented families and the struggle for reclamation of identity. It becomes ever more apparent, as these particular interviews unfold, that identity and history both live in the memory.

IDENTITY AND MEMORY

Shared memory contributes to an understanding of both individual and collective identity. Although it is often to strangers that life-stories are told, the unspoken memories of a family or community group held in common imply a shared identity, which empowers the individual to act effectively within the context of the present or to plan for activity in the future. All action is contextual, and depends to some degree on the past — on heritage.

Lowenthal¹⁵ refers to the growing inclusivity of the term 'heritage' and its importance in bestowing collective identity and by implication, individual identity. Included in the term 'heritage' are such intangibles as legend, language and history, and Lowenthal remarks on the worldwide similarity of concerns with precedence, antiquity, continuity and coherence, despite their being expressed in distinctive ways by different cultures. He also points to the prevailing global interdependence which makes heritage increasingly universal, though reflecting personal or communal self-interest.

The notion of heritage and identity can be linked to the concept of commemoration, or ritualising memory.¹⁶ Taking an example used by Rosenzweig and Thelen, the battle described from a colonial Western perspective as Custer's Last Stand, is known as an equally heroic event by the Oglala Sioux people, and other Native Americans, as the Battle of Little Bighorn. General Custer, Sitting Bull and Crazy Horse are part of a convergent history. The divergent heritage bestowed by their actions however, may be interdependent, but is certainly not shared.

THE POWER OF THE SPOKEN WORD

Some concern may be felt by the findings of Rosenzweig and Thelen, that Americans in general are interested in history, especially that which personally affects them, or their families, but are bored by and do not trust many of the time-honoured methods of imparting historical information which historians have come to rely on. Far more trustworthy than books, the local history teacher or even the professor of history at a tertiary institution, are museum displays and eyewitness accounts.¹⁷ This view was even more emphatically held by the groups of Native American peoples canvassed by Rosenzweig and Thelen. Here, a divergent heritage is also at work. Historians trained in the Western scholarly tradition will tend to be mistrustful of oral accounts because they are based on memory and coloured by personal



Margaret Robinson with Rosemary (L) and Rhonda (R), taken in 1959 in Broome.
Below: **Margaret's parents, Regina Maria Roe b. 1902 and Edward Roe b. 1900**, taken in the early 1950s outside the family home in Broome WA. Photos courtesy Margaret Robinson.



MARGARET ROBINSON — A 'BRINGING THEM HOME' STORY

Margaret Robinson was born in 1924 in Broome, Western Australia. She was delivered in her family home by a doctor who took payment in chickens or eggs as Indigenous people were not allowed to give birth in the hospital at that time. Margaret remembers the Second World War and the bombing of Broome and can remember being evacuated several times. It was during one of these evacuations that she was picked up by Native Welfare officers and put on a plane to Perth where she was placed in Sister Kate's home. She was then sent out as a domestic to work at a floristry farm in Kalamunda. While there she wrote to her father in Broome who organised to have her brought back home.

MARGARET REMEMBERS:

Margaret recalls working at the Club Hotel in Derby, her uncle and brother were also there. She was told her mother and father were coming to collect her at 4am, so they wouldn't get evacuated, but Native Welfare and Police officers came and picked her up along with another girl and put them on a plane (a DC-3) to Perth. She was fifteen years old.

She "stayed the first night with the Salvation Army, then Sister Kate's, then to Kalamunda to the Davies' ". She was in Sister Kate's 2-3 months and was told she couldn't return to Broome.

She wrote to her father while in Sister Kate's who arranged with Colonel Gibson to get her home. He flew her home to Broome (1944) and locked her in the Hotel room with a guard. "Paddy Torres stayed guard because there were 3000 troops in Broome at the time."

Biographical material written by Marnie Richardson, Bringing Them Home interviewer.

experience. Native American historians such as Angela Cavender Wilson¹⁸ however, point out that the oral traditions of the Dakota people are the result of skills learnt and passed on in a disciplined way, as a task. Repetition, praise, critique and other devices were used to ensure that training was rigorous, skills were learned and accurate information was delivered and archived. As Wilson says:

...the Dakota definitions of oral tradition is based on the assumption that the ability to remember is an acquired skill — one that is acutely developed or neglected.¹⁹

These observations may be applied — in their own cultural context — to the oral traditions of other Native American peoples or to the oral traditions of Indigenous Australians. In these cultures, the function of oral traditions is not confined to the transmission of history, but also to the delivery of a wide range of information which might be as important in providing moral guidelines as in passing on practical knowledge about food sources.

To Indigenous Australians, the recording of oral 'histories' (or memories, or personal visions and reflections) is a highly significant activity, which provides not only an archive, but a connection with their own definitive ways of articulating heritage. The Bringing Them Home Oral History Project, particularly, provides opportunities for sharing collective memories, and for the heightened sense of identity which follows. It also creates opportunities for communicating with others and for participation in a more democratised version of history.

MUSEUMS OF SOUND AND MEMORY

Those versions of history which might be termed democratised, take account of the input of various people, not least those who have been part of the history. Democratisation might also refer to the input of those who wish to access history — those who appreciate the opportunity to engage actively

with objects and their histories and create their own relationships with them. Bennett²⁰ points out that unmediated contact with an object is not possible in a museum context, and that the same interpretive layers surround it, as might be produced by a book or a film. The artefact, according to Bennett, becomes a rhetorical object as soon as it is placed in a museum, and when viewed as part of a display or exhibition, takes on the character of a 'signifier'. This view of the museum and the objects it holds may be accurate, but according to Rosenzweig and Thelen,²¹ many members of the public would not agree — books and films and history teachers are regarded by a surprising percentage of the American public as unreliable filters, and objects in a museum and the eyewitness accounts of people who were actually present at an event provide the best means possible for actually getting to the truth of the matter.

This implies that the public does not favour layers of interpretation, although perhaps the general viewing audience is not quite aware of how omnipresent this can be in a museum. In a museum context however, the interpreter/curator/selector/researcher, unlike an author, film-maker or teacher, is not only talking about an object, but placing it in view. The power of the object is that it has a life apart from its museological context, including the life ascribed to it by a viewer, who is an active participant in the exchange, and may select — as the curator has done — which objects to include in their own experience of a display, and what meanings to ascribe to that object, from their own range of experiences. This is a valid activity, insofar as it remains a private activity — since it does not take into account the very real concerns felt by those to whom an object may culturally belong, and who may wish it to be understood in that context.

These observations bring to mind the role of the museum as a custodian of many kinds of memory. Every object is infused with the memory of the person/s to whom it belonged before it made its way to the archive. The

memories of those who selected it for exhibition and created interpretive text also become part of its reality, as do the memories brought to bear by the viewer. A displayed object serves as a tangible reminder of the journey travelled from origin to museum display, as well as being a reassurance to the viewer of the reality of that journey as well as its own history. As Morton points out, there are several consequences which arise from an object-centred approach to history, the primary one being that "if there are no objects available, it becomes very difficult to mount a museum display".²²

Sound collections of oral history, as non-material phenomena, may provide the same assurance for the museum visitor that he or she is directly in touch with experienced history, as an object does. Reliance on sight as the 'I saw it with my own eyes' phenomenon, is analogous to the 'I heard it with my own ears' confidence in oral eyewitness accounts. Both utilise senses which are of major importance to individual interpretation of the daily environment. The oral histories archived in various (but usually library) collections are, like collections of objects, tips of the collection iceberg stored out of sight. Oral collections are more accessible however, through bibliographic retrieval systems which have made the information held in libraries so accessible, and their storage facilities so transparent. In many ways, these collections are constantly on display — virtual catalogues have opened the doors and windows, allowing audiences to see inside and make instant selections. Further advances in technology will allow effortless access to online sound.

These developments will emphasise both the similarities and differences between museums and libraries as archival institutions. Collections of sound accommodate easily to the idea of the virtual museum. However museums are constrained by ideologies of selection which do not apply to libraries. Libraries work under obligations and charters to facilitate access to information held within their collections, and from this perspective

may continue to be more appropriate repositories for sound collections. Until further blurring and coalescing of boundaries between archival institutions occurs, the virtual museum of sound and memory sits comfortably within its present bibliographic confines. Artefacts of memory, such as those within the Bringing Them Home collection, await this further diffusion of boundaries before their status as virtual objects is formally conferred.

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Endnotes

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- 21 T. Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum*, p. 146.
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