

Collecting Canberra: Issues in collecting the documentary heritage of Canberra

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At least twenty cultural institutions located in Canberra accept archives into their collections. 'Collecting Canberra' involves a complex web of legislative responsibilities and institutional collecting policies which overlap and evolve. Where the archives of particular Canberra people or organisations might be found depends on when those archives became available for collection, the prevailing policies at the time, and the judgement, if not the whim, of individuals. It is not uncommon for Canberra people with 'many hats' to be represented in a number of archives as a result of their multi-faceted roles and the overlapping collecting policies of institutions, but of more concern are the gaps between those collecting policies.

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As University Archivist here at the Australian National University, I am responsible for a national collection, the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, collecting business and labour archives from throughout Australia, and a university collection for the Australian National University: just one Canberra institution. The primary responsibility for 'collecting Canberra' mostly falls to others but as an archivist working in Canberra for the last 30 years I hope I can provide a perspective on the issues.

There are at least twenty cultural institutions located in Canberra which accept archives into their collections. Canberra's national cultural institutions, whether primarily archives, libraries or museums, all include archives in their collecting policies: the National Archives of Australia, the National Library of Australia, the National Film and Sound Archive, the National Museum of Australia, the National Gallery of Australia, the Australia War Memorial, the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies, and the Museum of Australian Democracy. While their focus is national, the fact of their existence here and that this is the national capital, invariably means that they collect Canberra, even if their focus is national.

Canberra is also home to national collections of business and labour archives (the Noel Butlin Archives Centre), literary archives (at the Australia Defence Force Academy and the Lu Rees Archive at the University of Canberra), digital archives (the Australian Data Archives at the Australian National University), scientific archives (the Basser Library at the Academy of Science) and religious archives (St Marks Theological College).

Territory institutions, in particular the ACT Archives and the ACT Heritage Library, are responsible for the management of ACT official and non-official records, then there's the Canberra and District Historical Society and the Heraldry and Genealogical Society of Canberra (whose collecting extends beyond Canberra) and in-house archives such as those of the Australian National University, the Catholic Church Archdiocese of Canberra and Goulburn, and the Canberra Church of England Girls Grammar School whose collecting focus is narrowed to those particular institutions in Canberra.

'Collecting Canberra' involves a web of legislative responsibilities: the Commonwealth Archives Act, the ACT Archives Act, the National Library of Australia Act, and overlapping and evolving institutional collecting policies. The ACT Heritage Library does not operate under legislation but has primary responsibility for collecting non-government material about Canberra.

Where the archives of particular Canberra people or organisations might be found and who collects them depends on a variety of factors. One important factor is when the archives became available for collection and what 'collecting' facilities were available at the time: not just the storage facilities, but also the professional staff with an awareness of the need to collect. Records of early settlers like the Campbell family are held in the Mitchell Library in Sydney, an institution which collected records relating to this region when it was part of New South Wales. It was not until 1927, when the National Library relocated from Melbourne to Canberra, that any institution collected archives in Canberra, and for many years it was the only one.

Ian Maclean, the first archivist to work in Canberra, arrived here in October 1944, one person dauntingly responsible for all Commonwealth government records. He was appointed as the Archives Officer at the Commonwealth National Library. In 1968 the Commonwealth Archives Office, which he headed, separated from the National Library, as did the National Film and Sound Archives later on.

On 6 June 1984 the disposal provisions of the Commonwealth Archives Act came into force – as a result Commonwealth records could not legally be placed outside Commonwealth custody or destroyed without the approval of the National Archives. Up to that point, the National Library had collected official records from former Ministers and public servants but now had to comply with the access and disposal provisions of the Archives Act.

Until ACT self-government in 1989, the records of 'municipal and territorial' functions relating to the ACT were held by the National Archives as records of the Department of Territories and successive departments. These are rich sources because in the early days of Canberra's development there is constant correspondence between Melbourne and Canberra. These are now the responsibility of the ACT Archives though the initial process of deciding which records documented 'national capital' functions and which 'municipal'

or state functions has needed further refinement over the years. The National Library also once collected records of Canberra organisations and people but the responsibility has now passed to the ACT Heritage Library.

Meanwhile the Noel Butlin Archives Centre was collecting business and trade union archives, some of which related to local businesses, pastoral stations in the local region, and local branches of trade unions. The Australian Defence Force Academy was collecting literary papers from local writers.

In 1998, the Australian National University appointed its first University Archivist: the University had been established in 1946 and had over those 50 intervening years inherited the functions and records of the Mount Stromlo Observatory and the Australian Forestry School (records dating back to the 1920s), the Canberra University College (1930s), the Canberra School of Music (1960s), and the Canberra School of Art (1970s). So up until 1998 the University was not actively collecting its own records in an organised and professional manner. As a result, in this period, the papers of many Australian National University administrators and academics were acquired by the National Library.

The lack of a University Archives was not the only reason for this: institutional collecting policies overlap and Canberra people can wear many hats. The National Library's 'person of national significance' may also be the Chancellor or Vice-Chancellor of the Australian National University, they may simultaneously be an academic and a fellow of the Academy of Science, they may be a Commonwealth public servant, and then become a local political, business or community representative. These multiple roles mean that a person's papers may well fall within the collecting policy of two or three or four Canberra collecting institutions. While archivists prefer not to split collections, sometimes the decision is out of our hands as we are only offered a portion of a collection. Just to mention a few Canberra examples where papers can be found in several institutions: Charles Studdy Daley, Sir John Crawford, Nugget Coombs, Margaret Reid and Frank Fenner. There are many more.

There have also been some individuals whose passion for collecting has introduced competitiveness into Canberra collecting: in 1957 Harold White (as he then was) visited the newly-appointed Director of the Research School of Social Sciences Sir Keith Hancock to argue against the University's collecting of business records. I'm pleased to say that this competitive streak appears to have waned in recent years. For example, the Australian National University and the National Library have a draft Memorandum of Understanding which recognises our specialised and our common collecting policies, and there is generally consultation with other institutions about where material is best placed.

The personality of collectors also has a bearing on what is collected: as much as one might try to undertake archival appraisal objectively, invariably the decision

of what to collect and what to discard within the boundaries of an institutional collecting policy will involve a personal judgement of 'worthiness'. As an archivist negotiating a transfer of records one may not say it aloud but no doubt you will be thinking questions like: Will anyone ever write a biography of this person? Do this person's personal papers add anything to the record of their publications? Are this poet's drafts worth keeping? Is the research undertaken by this academic significant? Do we really need the appointment diaries of this Deputy Vice-Chancellor?

There are deliberate, and sometimes necessary, absences in the records as the decision to collect and retain archives 'forever' cannot be taken lightly. What follows is a commitment to preserve and make those records accessible for a very long time. If the records are not hard-copy: if they are digital or audiovisual then the cost of that decision multiplies as copies also need to be managed and made accessible.

There can be a cultural bias in these decisions also: as Michael Piggott once asked in another context: 'Who is documenting the sex industry, biotechnology companies, pre-war delicatessens, Cochlear, developers of the famous bionic ear implant, and 'fringe' enterprises such as the Polygot Puppet Theatre and the Flying Fruit Fly Circus?' In the Canberra context, we might ask: 'Who is documenting Summernats, the Raiderettes, and Mooseheads?'

In the University archives, there is copious documentation of the decision-making of Council and its Committees and the physical presence of the campus; the challenge is documenting 'student life'. We collect the records of the Students' Association and of University societies, but I'm not confident that the experience of being a student is something that can be easily captured. What we know of Kevin Rudd's time as a student here is what is recorded on his student file. There's the academic record of credits and distinctions, changes to enrolment in particular courses, and changes of address, but did he take part in demonstrations protesting student fees? Did he raft down Sullivan's Creek? Participate in Orientation Week pub crawls? More generally in the context of Canberra, how well have archives captured the experience of the common man or women: postwar immigrants relocating from Bonegilla to Gorman House? Public servants staying at Gowrie and other government hostels?

Earlier this year, the online exhibition 'From Lady Denman to Katy Gallagher: A Century of Women's Contributions to Canberra' was launched, a product of the Australian Women's Archives Project. My contribution to the project was research into Canberra women who had a connection with the University. Given the overwhelmingly male dominance of the institution in its earlier years there were only a few female academics to be researched: Hanna Neumann, Dymphna Clark, Dorothy Green, Hope Hewitt, Helen Hughes and Ethel Tory, one Deputy Vice-Chancellor Sue Sergeantson and one Pro-Chancellor Pauline Griffin. The University's policy is to retain staff files for Professor and above, and this caused a

structural absence of sources: very few women were promoted to professorial positions. Gwen Woodroffe and Joyce Fildes may have worked in the John Curtin School for Medical Research for decades as Research Fellows but they did not become Professors; Ruth Lane Poole, Jean Mulvaney and Ruth Arndt may have been married to University men (Ruth was also a Council member) but there are few sources that document this role. Each of these women took on a role of hosting and organising social events and volunteering in community organisations, keeping them outside of formal recordkeeping structures.

Often in the past records have survived because they were valued by the institution itself, sometimes because the organisation stayed put for many years and had the storage space for the records, but also because the records were hard-copy. A pressing issue in the collecting of Canberra's documentary heritage in the present age is that many records are created electronically (such as email and their attachments) and so are invisible, not needing to take up space in the storeroom. In not creating a 'storage problem' they are often not around to be collected without prior knowledge of their existence and active intervention. This is an issue for collecting institutions and society more broadly: the sheer volume of electronic communication and the ease with which it can be deleted.

So having described the patchwork of coverage for collecting the documentary heritage of Canberra and the gaps in that collecting, what now? From our users' perspective, how does one know who has what? Where have the records of this Canberra organisation or that person ended up? A simple remedy is documenting collections in online databases, searchable by Google (and I'm pleased to say that the ANU Archives database is online and searchable by Google). And three cheers for the National Library's Trove which provides the opportunity for all institutions 'collecting Canberra' to make their holdings known and accessible.

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