

The Australian Memory of the World Register: What's the Problem?

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Abstract

The UNESCO Memory of the World program seeks to raise awareness of documentary heritage, ensure its preservation and increase access to it. Yet in 1997 the International Council on Archives expressed reservations about the program. In seminars in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth in 2005-06 about the Australian Register, participants raised questions about the assessment of 'significance': how does it relate to 'evidential value'? Is entry on the register 'incompatible with archival practice and ethics'? Maggie Shapley, now a member of the Australian Memory of the World Assessment Committee, comments on these and other questions.

Background

The Memory of the World program was launched by UNESCO in 1993 with the stated aim 'to guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world ensuring their wide dissemination'. The website for the International Register presents the argument for such a register in these terms:

Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear forever.

It's clear that there is competition to be included in the register from the number of nominations that have been accepted (91 collections from 45 countries) and the number that are nominated each year (54 for 2006) which also appear on the website. There is also this warning:

The international Register of the Memory of the World Programme cannot include all the records in public and private archives, no matter how important those bodies or individuals may be. A large proportion of the records are concerned with local, national and, sometimes, regional issues. Repositories should nominate for inclusion on the World Register only those documents that are clearly of world significance.

There have obviously also been issues with nominations broadening or changing after registration:

Once added to the Memory of the World Register, the document group cannot be varied or redefined over time. Having accepted this principle, however, the fugitive nature of some materials - such as audio-visual carriers has to be recognised: sometimes, what survives over time may be the content rather than the decaying original carrier.

The International Council on Archives discussed the Memory of the World program in Edinburgh in September 1997 and a number of reservations were expressed – these are set out in an ICA position paper written by Michael Roper in 2004. The gist of those reservations seems to be:

- *Archives are selected from the many records created because of their wider continuing value – in the past survival may have been by chance (war, theft, neglect, natural disasters) but is now by conscious appraisal*
The implication here seems to be that appraisal criteria are already applied so that not all records are available to be selected on significance criteria. This seems to be a furphy to me – obviously we can't select significant documents which haven't survived, but surely we aren't now destroying documents worthy of registration on a Memory of the World Register?
- *All national archives have extensive holdings which relate to other nations and cultures and hence form part of the world's memory*
This is true but there is no reason that this material can't be nominated.
- *Records and archives are organic accumulations in which value rests as much in the aggregation of contextual information embedded in the hierarchical structure of documentary units of the same provenance ... as in the content of any individual document. All archival documents are unique in their context ... even if their content may be duplicated within the fonds or elsewhere.*
This has more merit as an argument – but it's really an argument not to register individual documents, to respect the fonds or the series and to nominate those rather than not to nominate at all.
- *Consequently the focus of archival operations is on the total fonds and to select only the 'most important' documents for inclusion in the World Register is seen as incompatible with archival practice and ethics*
This seems to be a big jump – unethical? Are archivists being unethical in indicating in their finding aids, on their websites, in exhibitions or to their researchers that certain documents or collections are more significant than others? Do we actually believe in a democracy of documents where every record selected for permanent preservation is as worthy as the next?

This represents the ICA's view in 1997 but as it happened a number of archival institutions successfully nominated collections so the ICA changed its position recognising the advantages which it saw as:

- *Archival institutions are part of national systems, and pride and prestige are enhanced both nationally and internationally by inclusion of elements of the national archival holdings in the World Register*
- *UNESCO is a strong, worldwide icon and MOW recognition may offer significant advantages in 'selling' archives and securing third-party support*

The ICA then proposed that 'All national archives should be included in the MOW World Register' but as the situation of local authorities varied (some covered by national archives, some not) 'it should therefore be left to the discretion of national authorities to determine what other repositories of public archives should be included in the national archives in its World register entry ... It should still be possible for archival institutions, manuscript collections and other holders of archival material outside the national archives system to nominate specific documents of world significance for inclusion in the World register'. As a representative of one of those institutions, one can't help feeling excluded from this plan.

The Australian Register

The Australian Register founded in 2000 is one of over 60 national *Memory of the World* programs. Its stated aims are to:

- establish and maintain the Australian *Memory of the World* Register
- establish and maintain the Australian *Memory of the World* Register of Lost and Missing Documentary Heritage (I won't comment on this register further)
- coordinate and propose nominations from Australia to the *Memory of the World* International Register
- raise awareness and promote the Program through publications and presentations
- encourage and seek government and private sector sponsorship for specific projects and activities.

From its establishment the Australian Memory of the World Committee has drawn its members primarily from the library and museum sectors. There have been only two 'archives' sector members, a former Deputy Director at the National Film and Sound Archive, and a representative from the National Archives of Australia. The library bias of the Committee perhaps explains why the first successful nominations were from library collections: Captain Cook's journal 1768-71 and the Mabo Papers. The photograph chosen to illustrate the register entry for Cook's journal demonstrates also a museum bias: the journal as an object placed on Cook's desk, rather than a photograph

of the content – the information recorded in Cook’s own handwriting. Similarly the Mabo papers registration shows a photograph of the creator Eddie Mabo rather than the actual documentary heritage which, along with the Cook journal, has now been included in the World Register.

Registration number 3 is for ‘Landmark Constitutional Documents of the Commonwealth of Australia’, an artificial collection from a number of institutions and includes both the legal instruments of the establishment of the Commonwealth as well as film recording the event on 1 January 1901. Registration no. 4 is the Cinesound Movietone Australian Newsreel Collection 1929-1975.

No. 5 is the records of the Australian Agricultural Company, a successful nomination from my own archives. At this point, I will make some general comments on the criteria for selection. I mentioned before a museum bias to the program and in fact the guidelines for nominations have their origins in the ICOMOS Burra Charter (International Committee on Monuments and Sites) and the publication *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections* that had been written by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth for the Heritage Collections Council in 2001. When I was invited to join the Assessment sub-committee, I successfully argued that the terminology needed to move from ‘object’ to more appropriate terms such as ‘document’, ‘item’, ‘series’ or ‘collection’.

Some aspects of the current manual still reveal an object-based mindset. There are three primary criteria for significance: historic, aesthetic and community. It should be noted that not all criteria need to be addressed to prove significance but it does worry me that aesthetic value is included. As an archivist the ‘prettiness’ of records is for me not a determining factor of significance at all – it’s the provenance and content that matter. As those of us from collecting archives know, people offer us the decorative certificates and testimonials ‘for the archives’ because of their perceived value, and can be surprised when we indicate that we are more interested in the correspondence, research notes and drafts which provide the evidence, the real records of the activity that resulted in the presentation of beautiful certificates.

The image selected for this Australian Agricultural Company entry makes the point: the colourful and ornate testimonial presented to Jesse Gregson when he retired from the Australian Agricultural Company in March 1905 after thirty years as General Superintendent of the Company’s pastoral and mining operations. This is probably one of the least significant records in the Australian Agricultural Company collection. More significant are the records of early Company-sponsored immigration, the development of the pastoral industry on the Company’s million-acre grant from Port Stephens to the Manning River and of coal mining on the 2,000 acre grant of what is now downtown Newcastle. The collection includes records from the 1820s including early maps of exploration, records of the first railways, and birth, deaths and marriages of early

settlers, so Gregson's gift certificate is not the highlight of the collection.

To further illustrate this point about aesthetic value, one of the most significant records created in Australia during the Second World War is a cable from Prime Minister John Curtin to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs on 17 February 1942, in response to one from the British Prime Minister Winston Churchill, where Curtin insists on the return of Australian troops for the defence of Australia rather than Churchill's planned diversion to Burma. Many historians identify this as a turning point in Australia's relations with the United Kingdom. It is the provenance and content of the record which makes it significant – aesthetically there is little to distinguish it from the hundreds of cables that were being transmitted between the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia at the time.

This is not to say that significant documents can't also have aesthetic value and this is demonstrated by the next entry of the Register: the Griffin designs for Canberra (no. 6). Looking at what is already on the register raises the more important question of what hasn't yet been nominated. For instance, the Hargrave collection (no. 12) suggests that there are many collections of famous Australians which could be nominated: inventors, scientists, authors, artists, even politicians. An important factor here is to point out that the provenance isn't everything – it would be difficult to argue the significance of shopping lists written by Nobel Prize winner. It's both the provenance and the content that is important. Significance also isn't necessarily related to age, as successful nominations were made for the Sorry Books (no. 13) and the PANDORA website archive (no. 14).

In 2005 the Memory of the World Committee ran a series of workshops in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney (later in Adelaide and Perth) to identify problems in participating in the Australian Memory of the World Program. When the guidelines to the International Memory of the World Program were launched in 1995 it was acknowledged that the form for nominations to the Register was a work in progress. Consequently, the Australian Committee modified the form and the selection criteria in its development of the Australian Program. However, from the time the first nominations were received in 2002, it was apparent that many applicants experienced difficulty in preparing statements of significance. The Australian Committee decided that a good method of improving the process and creating a greater awareness of the Memory of the World Program would be to conduct interactive workshops where the process would be explained and participants at the workshop would provide comments, complaints and criticisms so that the guidelines could be improved.

A new version of the manual has been placed on the website addressing some of the issues raised by participants, such as terminology – 'item or collection of documentary heritage' is used rather than 'object'. It is accepted that the guidelines may be further

improved in the future – for instance, as an archivist I would like to see reference to ‘evidential value’ as a criteria rather than ‘historic significance’.

An issue discussed at the Melbourne workshop was the effect of rejection of an application. The Noel Butlin Archives Centre has had one unsuccessful application – we joined with the University of Melbourne in nominating the archives of Australian trade unions held by the two institutions, but this was rejected as too broad as it encompassed 7 kilometres of records.

The issue of what is the appropriate level for nomination is indeed difficult – one could say ‘it depends’ – the answer cannot be definitive, except to say that the entire contents of an archives is probably too broad. Certainly the International Register did not accept the argument that all national archives and their entire contents should be included. But we can be guided by the archival units by which we already organise our collections – the record group or the series, or records with the same provenance. It might not just be one series: the Displaced Persons files (no. 7) are in fact many similar series (the records are arranged according to each ship’s voyage) which were nominated as one collection. Our archival principles would argue against picking out single files or even ‘important documents’ from a file for nomination without their surrounding context.

Joint nominations can be a useful way of bringing together split collections – records with the same provenance which have been deposited in separate institutions. But the creation of artificial collections on a subject basis, such as all archival material relating to a particular event, for the purpose of a nomination could present problems of definition and comprehensiveness. There would always be one more institution which should be included on the basis of holding material relating to the same topic.

Getting back to the International Council on Archives reservations, is the existence of the Register incompatible with archival practice and ethics? Are we convinced by the ICA’s arguments? An important consideration is what we see as the purpose of the Register. It would naïve to think that the Register could ever be an absolutely definitive list of the most important Australian documentary heritage, or that the order in which collections are accepted on the register indicates their significance relative to each other. Rather we should see the register as a promotional opportunity for every archives in Australia to highlight their most significant collections, and an opportunity for the media, at least once a year, to focus on what we think is important every day of the year – our documentary heritage. Only the major archives can support media events such as the annual Cabinet documents release which both the national and state archives now host. Successful nomination to the Register of the Memory of the World provides an opportunity for us all to promote our collections.

It would be remiss of me not to provide some advice on the nomination process. In my limited experience, what distinguishes a successful nomination is the clear articulation

of knowledge of the collection itself – not a chronological history of the organisation or person who created the records but an appreciation of why the records are special in terms of their provenance and content.

You should be able to use words such as ‘unique’, ‘the first’, ‘the only’, ‘the best example’, ‘the key document’, ‘the earliest’, ‘the oldest’, ‘extremely rare’, ‘unparalleled’, ‘vital evidence of the origins’, ‘nationally significant’, ‘comprehensive’, ‘pre-eminent’ and ‘original legal instruments’, and if you can’t use superlative words like that then perhaps you can’t successfully argue the significance. All of those words have been taken from successful nominations.

It is also easier to argue for the significance of a collection if some historical perspective has been gained by the passage of time: while some recent collections are included on the Register it is more difficult to make a case if the extent of other similar records cannot be ascertained (for instance, if official records less than 30 years old haven’t been released). Providing the archival documentation for the creating agency or person, the series or record group and a list of items will assist the nomination.

Last year’s successful nominees (nos. 16-19) were able to articulate why their collections were more significant collections in relation to other known collections. Will number 20 be from your archives and be listed on the Register after your successful nomination?