

Connections & Conversations

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Writing Administrative History: Are Archivists Necessary?

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History is an interpretation of the past based on analysis of the surviving documents. Traditionally, these consisted of written records that have been preserved for posterity, but nowadays they may be in visual, oral or electronic format, each of which poses special challenges for archivists and historians alike.

Without entering post-modernist debates about whether there can be any “true” recorded history, the fact remains that many institutions in both the public and private sectors seek to commemorate significant anniversaries by commissioning a publication to mark that occasion. These publications can range from serious scholarly research to glossy coffee-table books that celebrate achievements while overlooking mistakes.

Archivists and historians have a symbiotic relationship. Professional historians are bound by a code of ethics to deliver a manuscript that is derived from an understanding of all available sources and not merely a selective reading. A critical partner in this whole process of research is the archivist, because the author is largely dependent on the integrity and accessibility of the archives to prepare a comprehensive, coherent narrative.

In his lyrics for *Pirates of Penzance*, currently part of the Opera Australia season in Sydney, W.S. Gilbert wrote that “the policeman’s lot is not a happy one”.

Neither is an historian’s. He, or nowadays more often she, is faced with the awesome task of making sense of the past from resources that inevitably are incomplete. After the historian’s precious manuscript is finally processed by copy editors, indexers, publishers, marketeers and sundry other experts, it appears in print to be attacked by academics, armchair critics and rival historians who draw attention to all the obscure sources that the author overlooked. If one is doubly unfortunate, one may become the target of politicians, and that most fearful beast of all, the media pundit or radio ‘shock-jock’. Then one becomes embroiled in one or other of the ‘history wars’ that are staged regularly for the amusement of the masses, much like ancient gladiatorial contests.

I have managed to escape most of these fates so far. Unlike political history, administrative history is an unfashionable genre, and usually is not very contentious. Indeed, when I was recently asked to suggest a collective noun for a gathering of historians, I suggested “a bore of historians”.

In this paper I want to give you some personal reflections on the symbiotic relationship between the archivist and the historian.

Why did I become an administrative historian? After nine years as a clerk in local government, I realised that this was not the career for me. I then traversed a series of managerial positions in not-for-profit organisations and the private sector. So when I later came to reinvent myself as an historian, I brought many years’ of bureaucratic baggage with me. I realised that unlike most young postgraduate students, I actually knew how the system worked. My PhD thesis examined the administration of a major government agency, and since then I have been commissioned to write histories of organisations in both the public and private sectors, where I was able to draw on my experience in both areas. Most recently, State Records of NSW engaged me to write the administrative history of the NSW public service between 1901-1960, published a couple of months ago as *Humble and Obedient Servants*. Researching behind the scenes at both the Kingswood and City repositories for eighteen months, I gained insight into how archivists behave in their natural habitat.

And here I want to say a few words of appreciation to my friends from State Records. Without their support, advice and assistance it would have been impossible to get this book to the publication stage on the tight schedule I was allowed. Historians don’t often get the

privileges I enjoyed. My previous two books were both commemorative histories written for organisations that did not enjoy the luxury of an archivist, or even a librarian. One of my clients took me to a distant warehouse, and pointed to eight large containers piled high on each other – “there are our archives”. There was no index or catalogue – the containers were not even labelled with basic information such as dates. A forklift had to be used to bring the containers down to a level where I could reach them, where a couple of labourers wielded crowbars to prise them open, disgorging the contents, which were loose, not even packed in cartons. It was rather discouraging, especially since I had been allowed barely six months to produce a 50,000 word manuscript. There was no way I could read, or even look at all the documents. I hoped that I could at least find the minute books and annual reports, but even these were not complete. There were hundreds of interesting-looking photographs, none of which were dated, described the situation or named the people portrayed.

Over a period of ninety years, this particular organisation had moved its premises twelve times and had been led by nine different chief executives, some of whom valued their records and others who considered them junk. It was just too easy to discard all this surplus paper when shifting the office to a new location.

Another anecdote concerns a client of mine who went to the opposite extreme. An elderly former president of this industry association had been appointed as honorary archivist. He had read Judith Ellis’s book *Keeping Archives*, but to be on the safe side his policy was to keep EVERYTHING. Every piece of correspondence, invoice, receipt book. It was all stored in cardboard archive boxes in a strongroom set aside for this purpose. Unfortunately, the staff forgot the combination to open the strongroom door and had to engage a locksmith at great expense to open the vault. The honorary archivist had been diligent in his duty – a typewritten list was attached to each box, listing every file by date, subject and author. He died before my jubilee history was completed, but one of his colleagues – a retired chief executive of the organisation – proved still more helpful. Because he mistrusted the honorary archivist, he personally retained a copy of every significant item in the archives, even when he was living in a retirement village, with every room of his small apartment stacked with boxes of duplicate archives. These were not catalogued, but he had a prodigious memory; I could ask him for information about a particular incident, and he would say “oh, that file is in the third box from the top in that pile near the bathroom door”. Sadly he also died before the project was completed and his relatives burned all “that rubbish”.

There are other sources of information, of course – newspapers, libraries, private collections, personal interviews. Using those, I was able to fill many of the gaps in the retained archives,

but it takes a lot more time, and sometimes may not be as reliable as using the original documents. Oral history is notoriously fraught with the dangers of failing memory or a desire to put a favourable personal 'spin' on events.

In any case, there seems to be an epidemic of collective amnesia in Australia at present. How often do we hear politicians, public servants and business leaders under interrogation state that they "have no recollection", "cannot remember" or "were not told about" important decisions that occurred only a couple of years previously, let alone the distant past.

These stories have a moral from which we can draw a general principle:

The quality of an administrative historian's work depends on the quality of the archives.

Professional archivists know the importance of good records – a rational retention policy, comprehensive indexing, appropriate storage and retrieval practices. Historians in all fields depend upon access to these primary sources, whether they be administrative, political, economic or social historians, or amateur family historians whose persistence – even obsession – often compensates for their lack of formal research training. Good archivists aren't mere hoarders of old documents – they know what's in the files, and where to find the information a researcher is seeking. Time and again when I was working on the public service history, I would stab around fruitlessly in the computer search engine for particular information, then ask one of the archivists. If he or she didn't know the answer immediately, they would take the time to find it, and come back to me soon with everything I wanted. My task as an historian was to discriminate amongst the wealth of material offered, otherwise the book would have run into many volumes.

Nevertheless, there were still gaps. Before the days when government agencies had a legal obligation to preserve vital records, much seems to have been destroyed, or at least has been misplaced in a basement somewhere where one day it may turn up again. In New South Wales, records were lost in the disastrous fires at the Garden Palace in 1882 and at Shea's Creek repository in the 1950s. With the suspicious mind that historians acquire, I also wonder whether some officials found these events a convenient opportunity to dispose of embarrassing records. But leaving aside sinister possibilities, I came to realise how easy it is for files to be inadvertently attached to a quite unrelated subject, and thus effectively lost until somebody comes across it serendipitously. I hope that every reader reports these

discoveries to the duty archivist so that the catalogue can be adjusted to help future researchers.

E.H. Carr provided an apt analogy in his 1961 book *What is history?*:-

“[Facts] are like fish swimming in a vast and sometimes inaccessible ocean; and what the historian catches will depend, partly on chance, but mainly on what part of the ocean he chooses to fish in and what tackle he chooses to use – these two factors being, of course, determined by the kind of fish he wants to catch.”¹

The job of the archivist is to make certain that the ocean is stocked with suitable fish, preferably those of a digestible rather than a sporting species. When resources permit, archivists make their own contribution to the historic record through preparation of guides to the material in their custody. These are invaluable to historians both professional and amateur, although the cautious researcher will always wish to explore a little beyond those boundaries.

History is coming back on the public agenda. There is talk about a uniform national curriculum, including a different approach to teaching Australian history. Will there be room for alternative viewpoints, or will political correctness take on a new meaning? Are we going to revert to a single approved metahistorical narrative? Interpretation is the stuff of history, but in this electronic age, information seems to be valued more than knowledge or understanding.

You do not have to accept post-structuralist theories about the nature of truth to recognise that each one of us will place our own interpretation on events. The evidence that Lieutenant James Cook sailed the *Endeavour* into Botany Bay on 29 April 1770 is fairly convincing, unless you believe that it was all a massive hoax, a conspiracy by white supremacists, much as some people believe that the moon landings were all staged on a movie set in Arizona. But a mere chronology is not history. What is debatable is what Cook was doing in Botany Bay. Why was he sent? Did Cook have a different perception to his superiors in London? How did the indigenous population react? Archival documents provide some answers – the official position – but they do not reveal hidden agendas that may have lain behind those decisions.

¹ E.H. Carr, *What is history?* (Second edition), Penguin Books, London, 1987, p.23.

Even in the eighteenth century, much relevant information did not appear in the official records. Has the situation become worse in the twentieth century with the advent of telephone calls and electronic messages that do not appear in the files, or was it always like this? In Cook's time, were not the gentleman bureaucrats deciding policy in their London clubs over a glass of port before returning to Whitehall to prepare a despatch to the colonies? Sometimes the historian has to make inferences from the flimsiest of evidence.

Prudent officials have always kept diaries or made marginal notes on the file as a record of informal discussions, whether in the club in 1890 or on the telephone in 1990. This brings me to another point that directly concerns archivists. Digitisation of archives is a process that is expanding exponentially, and this is an admirable objective. Many records are now accessible to researchers anywhere in the world, but another process of selection is taking place here. Sometimes the marginal notes are illegible or obscured in the digital version, and the all-important comments on the back of a letter or little slips of paper – 'post-it' notes, or their equivalent from earlier periods – are overlooked. Of course you may respond, "well having identified the relevant material, the serious researcher can then explore the original records". True, but everybody is pressed for time these days, not least the professional historian who is working to a deadline and a budget. Having looked at the digitised file on the internet, it is all too easy for the author to assume that there is nothing else worth looking at in that source.

For some material, and for some researchers, this may be less significant. Convict records or land titles that can be accessed from home are a boon to family historians trying to piece together their ancestry. Recently, a list of all the ships arriving in Sydney over a period of 130 years has become available on the internet – wonderful if you are trying to pinpoint when your great-grandfather arrived in the colony. But what about the advice that an under-secretary gave to his minister about land grant policy?

As all archivists know, digitisation may raise its own problems for future researchers. One day will the little electronic noughts and crosses disappear? Will there be software and hardware to read the stuff even if it survives? And will budget-conscious administrators decide there is no point in retaining warehouses full of paper after all the records are on compact discs or whatever technology follows? No responsible archivist would entertain such an idea, but will they be able to resist the inexorable pressure of the bottom line?

Indeed, if everything is preserved digitally, and is readily accessible by sophisticated search engines, will the authorities decide that human archivists are redundant? Already we are

seeing in some institutions a reduction in the hours of public access to records, presumably as an economy measure. This action is rationalised by the decline in reader attendance following the availability of digitised records. However, it is a short-sighted policy that reflects a quantitative rather than qualitative assessment, and can hamper the work of the serious researcher.

Returning to my policeman analogy, budding historians, like detectives, are always taught to go to the scene of the crime – the site of a battle, a political rally, the location of a government department – because only then can you fully appreciate the circumstances of the event you are writing about. The topography, relationship of buildings to each other and so on can give an understanding of what took place that may not be discernible otherwise. For the same reason, the historian needs to touch and smell the original archives, and see their relationship with other documents in a file.

Furthermore, let me point out that the risk of having unreadable files is already with us. While researching the NSW public service, I discovered that the numerous personal notebooks of the Chairman of the Public Service Board were all written in shorthand, at which he was adept. Notations on typewritten files very often were also written in shorthand, unless it was a peremptory remark like “Mr Jones – See me”. Now, I can’t read shorthand, nor could the archivists I consulted. It is many years since shorthand was taught to young women aspiring to become office secretaries. Those who might still be able to decipher it have forgotten most of the symbols over the years since they were a junior stenographer. Will future generations need a new Rosetta Stone in order to interpret these documents? Digitising them in their existing format would be a pointless exercise. Should efforts be made now, while some people still understand shorthand, to transcribe these notes into a readable form of English?

Academic friends tell me that some students cannot even read traditional cursive handwriting, because they have been brought up on typescript – in books, computer screens and even the handwriting they learnt at school. And these are our future historians!

Now let me talk about a couple of personal grumbles about using the archives. These are not the fault of archivists, but again are driven by political or financial pressures. Arbitrary restrictions on access to documents are the enemy of administrative history. Privacy and security concerns sometimes are taken to absurd lengths. Nobody wants their personal details splattered across the daily newspapers, of course, but researchers who are looking for broad trends in society are not interested in gossip about individuals. Blanking-out names

in the registers is a futile waste of archivists' time. Restricting the reproduction of construction photographs and plans of Sydney Harbour Bridge is rather pointless when one can go down to Milsons Point and take all the detailed photographs one wishes. I doubt whether prospective terrorists want to waste much time in the archives.

Theoretically, the remedy available to serious researchers is through Freedom of Information legislation. While working on my PhD, I wanted to read the minutes of a particular State Government statutory authority that was disbanded in 1973. These minutes were readily available in the archives, up to the time when the 'thirty year rule' applied. I was advised to contact the Department that had inherited the functions of the defunct agency. They refused permission to continue reading the minutes for the forbidden period. I therefore proceeded with a Freedom of Information claim against the Department, whereupon they backed down. The Department recalled their minute books from the State archives, and allowed me to read them in the Department's own head office, provided that a member of staff sat with me throughout. I was required to reimburse the Department \$30 per hour for this officer's time. As it turned out, I was provided with a private office, and the clerk was most helpful, photocopying for me any pages that seemed interesting – in fact the service was better than I might have expected from the State archives. But the point is, there was nothing contentious in the documents – they were bland, formal minutes recording decisions at a regular weekly meeting, with no indication of the issues under debate. So why was the Department so obtuse?

The nineteenth-century notion that historians sat in an ivory tower observing the foibles of humanity while writing objective, neutral non-judgemental accounts of events is now thoroughly discredited. Historians are products of their own time and inevitably bring their own opinions and prejudices to everything they write. It would be dull reading otherwise. "Study the historian before you begin to study the facts", wrote E.H. Carr. That is sound advice for the reader, but it doesn't help the archivist or the historian much. They both have to work from the material that is available.

That is why the historian is so dependent on the skills and integrity of the archivist to select and preserve material that is likely to be relevant, and not to suppress information that may be damaging to some interests or individuals. To do so would be to introduce another level of bias.

Are archivists necessary? My answer is yes, and long may they survive, and prosper.