

2015 Recipient of the Sharman Award Laura Harris - Conference report

When I initially read the title of this year's Conference 'Archives on the Edge', I was intrigued! Are archives on the splitting edge of innovation and practice? Or are they in a precarious position? Both aspects of this statement were addressed throughout the Conference, and can be simplified into one dominant concept - archives will not survive unless they adapt to the environment in which they operate.

My introduction to the 30th Annual Conference was through a meeting of the University Special Interest Group at the University of Tasmania. Being surrounded by archivists who share surprisingly similar challenges in their respective universities was a very reassuring experience. It was an excellent opportunity to discuss struggles and achievements, and understand how others operate in this environment.

The AGM of the Australian Society of Archivists was held later that day at the beautiful Grand Chancellor, Hobart. I was struck by the enthusiasm and friendliness of all attendees. Following the general business in which finances and similar issues were discussed, and new Council members were welcomed, a special acknowledgement was given to all the current ASA members who were also founding members. It was inspiring to see so many still committed to the industry. Kylie Percival, as ASA President, also gave a special presentation about what she saw as the future of the Society. I was particularly interested in her emphasis on encouraging younger members to take up leadership positions.

Afterwards Artist Julie Gough delivered the Loris Williams Memorial Lecture. This emphasised how archives revealing personal stories, both through inclusion and omission, are powerful resources that can be transformed into artwork. It seemed only fitting that the Welcome Reception would be held shortly afterwards at the Tasmanian Museum and Art Gallery.

Wednesday morning started with a lecture from keynote speaker, Geoffrey Yeo. He began by describing the information society that we live in today and how our professional skills are still useful. He emphasised, however, the need to adopt language appropriate to the businesses in which we work so that others can recognise our value.

I then chose to attend sessions on new professionals, 'Access in a World of Big Data', and on change. The first session raised important issues about supporting those new to the archiving sector. The second session uncovered the disturbing reality of how much data is collected about our daily lives and how it is used, as well as a reminder that some archives contain deeply personal information so access should be considered carefully. The final session discussed how different archives have managed change brought on through natural disaster, restructures, and budgetary pressures.

The following day began with a brief presentation on the work of Ancestry.com, as well as presentations from another two keynote speakers. Dr Hamish Maxwell-Stewart discussed how using archives has enabled him to get an accurate picture of the life of convicts sent to Van Diemen's Land and the impacts of transportation to the Colonies on future generations. Dr Leif Hanlen's presentation was somewhat more controversial in stating that archives are irrelevant if not searchable text in a digital format.

My final three sessions for the Conference discussed in greater detail some of the issues that had already been raised. One presentation questioned who we are as a profession. In another session, issues regarding access including copyright issues were outlined. My final session was on the Commission of Inquiry about child abuse, in which the lack of trained records and archives managers involved in the Inquiry was raised as a significant oversight.

The closing plenary and final remarks concluded what had been an informative and thought-provoking Conference. The conference was an opportunity to network with fellow archivists, to learn, discuss, and be challenged. I can't wait to see what is planned for next year in Parramatta!

Laura Harris

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