

2023 ASA Conference Report – Leanne Wilkes

This year's ASA National Conference – "Rising to our challenges: archives at the 'G'", was a hybrid conference held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, on the traditional lands of the Wurundjeri Woiwurrung people from the 4-7th September 2023. This was my second ASA conference, and first one in-person, with Covid disrupting plans to attend the 2021 conference in Brisbane.

What a week it was! Being able to attend in person was a fantastic experience – meeting archivists from across the country (and around the world) and from a variety of different archival roles, all willing to share their own stories and challenges was an encouragement to me as a new and emerging archivist. The line up of speakers across the conference made it difficult at times to choose which session to attend as they all sounded interesting. I appreciated the energy, enthusiasm, and passion that the speakers brought to the conference. Many of the talks challenged me regarding the importance and responsibility of my role as archivist.

The main theme that struck me across the conference was that people are at the heart of the archive – both those whose lives are recorded in the archive and those of us who maintain the archive. The archive can be a place of finding identity (and trauma) so it needs to be truthful and inclusive. This can require institutional change to the way we manage and think about archives – change which is already beginning to happen. As archives professionals we need to work together to support each other and support better archiving practices.

My conference started on Monday morning in the London Tavern Hotel, Richmond at a National School Archives Special Interest Group (SIG) meeting. It was wonderful to be able to meet up in person and online with school archivists from around the country, especially as many of us work in isolation. We had the opportunity to share stories, experiences, and challenges as we worked through a number of hot archival topics. Conversations continued over a delicious lunch. In the afternoon it was off to the MCG for the ASA Annual General Meeting and the Mander Jones Award presentations. There was a buzz of conversation and energy at the Australian Sports Museum in the evening, as many of the delegates came together for the Welcome Reception.

Tuesday morning's Welcome to Country by Mandy Nicholson and the Djirri Djirri Dancers was not only a special experience, but also highlighted the importance of records being maintained to be able to investigate, understand and resurrect old cultural practices. Through her research in the archives, Mandy has been able to pursue her culture, grow in knowledge of it and share it with others such as through resurrecting old ceremonial dances like those we had the privilege of watching. She explained that because of archival records cultures are not dead, just sleeping, and she now has the opportunity to keep her culture relevant, present, and alive.

The Opening Plenary was given by Professor Eleanor Bourke, chair of the Yoorrook Justice Commission, which is doing important work in bringing truth, healing, systemic reform, and changes to the policies and procedures around government recordkeeping. Indigenous-led, the Commission is investigating historic and ongoing systemic injustices, in a culturally safe and respectful way, looking at how best to address and redress these and ensure that the true history of Victoria is put in the public record. Importantly, they are also expanding the notion of what constitutes evidence to include artworks, photographs, song, and dance, among other things.

In the Loris Williams Memorial Lecture, the conversation between Maree Clarke and Frances Edmonds also challenged us to think about decolonising the archive, shifting our understanding to a living archive – what it is and what it could become. From the humble space of her own backyard,

Maree is working to reclaim the stories and records from collections and giving them back to communities so that culture, knowledge, and stories can be shared, giving ancestral connection and identity.

Wednesday morning's Plenary by the Australian Queer Archives Panel (AQuA) also highlighted the ability of records in an archive box to be able to give people – especially the marginalised – a chance to discover themselves, find a sense of belonging, and in turn take their place in the world. There was a reminder that records can be very personal. Those handled by AQuA document the lives of people who were criminalised by the State so a lot of shame and stigma can be attached to some of these records. As archivists we have a responsibility to handle them with respect and sensitivity.

By the Closing Conference Plenary I thought that I had taken in as much information as I possibly could over the course of the conference, but Barbara Reed and Pia Andrews really stepped up, challenging us to consider how recordkeeping can be done better in the public sector in a way that puts people back at the centre of records. They suggested that now is the perfect time – “the stars have aligned” – to instigate change for good. With the convergence of public service reforms, royal commissions, social justice issues and Covid, amongst other things, all showing us that the old systems are neither feasible nor viable, there is a need to do better. It was encouraging to hear where they thought the future of archiving in the public sector was heading.

The smaller sessions were also interesting and useful. I was able to get a better understanding of the legislative reform in NSW and the relationship between State Records NSW and the Museums of History. I considered how Artificial Intelligence (AI) and Machine Learning (ML) could be useful in managing archives while also considering the ethical implications of these and the overriding need to ensure that there is honesty and trust in the public record. I pondered the challenges of dealing with large-big datasets as well as the role that social media can play in archives. It was good to learn of PROV's new training courses to support those working in archives and also to hear about some of the recent projects undertaken by PROV staff to deal with at risk records. Hearing of the particular challenges surrounding Brett Whiteley's record collection, and how they were overcome, was particularly interesting as was learning about the Bob Hawke collection. I was especially impressed by the collaboration between the five universities in Western Australia that has seen the establishment of a world class digitisation facility in Perth.

My conference finished on Thursday morning with a tour of the Public Record Office of Victoria (PROV) facilities. What a fantastic (and large!) space. Those of us working in much smaller archives were jealous of the shelves which seemed to go on forever. Thank you to the PROV staff who welcomed us to the facility and showed us around.

Finally, thank you to the organisers for all your hard work in delivering such a successful conference and to the Australian Society of Archivists and the Sharman Award Committee for their financial support to help me attend this year's conference.