

Telling Our Stories Conference, Sydney 2025

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Arriving in Sydney on Monday by train and light rail, I checked into my lovely hotel and base for the next 3 days, Novotel Sydney Darling Harbour, which turned out to be a very long walk, or a more convenient but more expensive Uber trip from the conference location.

The conference proceedings began with the Welcome Reception, held in the imposing and impressive Brutalist architecture of the Marble Foyer at the Masonic Centre. After finding the registration table and locating my name tag, I immediately spotted a familiar face in Leanne Wilkes, as we had volunteered together at a previous conference a few years ago. This was reassuring, as I didn't know anyone else at the conference, and it was daunting to be alone in such a large crowd of people, although the champagne did help calm my nerves a bit. I located some other solo attendees and struck up conversations, hearing about their paths into the sector—their career highlights, challenges, and journeys. It was fascinating to find that no two stories were alike.

The next day, Tuesday, was an early start, at 8.30 am for the Welcome to Country and Official Opening of the conference. The Welcome to Country was a great start to the day, informative, casual and humorous, while the Opening Keynote talk, by Gailyn Bopp had everyone riveted with her personal and deeply touching story of responsive archiving, and of questioning the status quo of long-standing institutional practices, through “care, connection and storytelling”.

I attended the presentation by Dr Kirsten Wright and Dr Lauren Booker on *Facilitating Community Stories: Developing a Stolen Generation Survivors' Style Guide for Descriptive Practice*. Their paper outlined how “survivor-led descriptive practices” were developed using Yarning methodology, which builds relationships with participants by drawing on their lived experiences to create culturally sensitive descriptions that improve access for Stolen Generation survivors on the Find & Connect website. The resulting style guide will soon be published on the site, and while designed for Find & Connect, it has potential value beyond this context.

Up next was Mary Gillingham and Dr Jayne Rantall, discussing the Victorian “Stolen Generations Repatriation Package”, which assists people who were forcibly removed from their families as children (before 1976). They explained the steps that the research and assessment team followed in assessing applicants, ensuring that they used culturally and trauma-informed practices, utilising a wide range of documentary sources to support the applications.

Dr Jacinta Walsh followed with her emotional and fascinating life story, recounting the many years she spent trying to trace her Aboriginal family history, facing barriers in accessing archives due to archaic systems and institutional gatekeeping. She spoke about Indigenous identity as being about “Relationality – We are the relationships we hold”, including the land, ancestors and future generations. Dr Walsh aims to assist other First Nations people in discovering the stories of their ancestors by promoting Indigenous data sovereignty and access to family information.

A lovely lunch followed, before everyone headed back in to listen to the Loris Williams Memorial Lecture, with Dr Kath Apma Penangke Travis presenting *Unspoken Traumas and Hidden Stories of My*

Ancestors: Archival Justice and Wellbeing for First Nations People." She spoke about the intergenerational trauma of being a stolen generation survivor, but stated that "just as trauma can be passed down, so can healing." In her inspirational documentary, we see that Kath went on a physical and emotional journey to discover her family history, but found the archives were not welcoming, accessible or even complete, with the archival systems themselves adding to her trauma. Kath calls for structural change, so that First Nations people can reclaim, re-author and amplify their own cultural narratives.

Next was Annie Cameron's presentation, outlining her work as a linguist with Aboriginal communities. It highlighted the importance of recording First Nations languages that are at risk of extinction, as well as the efforts and challenges involved in keeping the Pilbara languages, history, and cultures alive for future generations.

Nicole Lockwood and Jorge Diez del Corral Dominguez from the National Archives of Australia spoke about their mission to undertake reparative description by taking actions such as removing offensive terms and issuing content warnings, to make the archives a culturally safe space for First Nations people.

The final speakers for the session were Dr Clare Land, Will Bracks and Taylah Austen, representing the Aboriginal History Archive, which aims to decolonise the archives and the profession through "conversation, not just conservation".

The conference dinner took place on Tuesday evening with *A Touch of Gold* theme. The room and the attendees were elegantly adorned, with shimmering hints of gold everywhere. A talented band set the mood, the food was excellent, along with some fun games, but the highlight of the evening was the Mander Jones Awards ceremony. It was an absolutely fabulous night of celebration and connection.

The 9 am start on Wednesday morning was a welcome change, and Day Two opened with the Keynote speaker of the day, Associate Professor Joanne Evans, reflecting on her 30-year career in the Australian archival and recordkeeping field. She recounted applying for her first role via a newspaper classified advertisement and posting it off in an envelope. She also remembered when blank CDs cost \$50 each, and laptops were \$10,000. Joanne highlighted the importance of accountability, rights, and care, especially in light of the rise of AI, which she believes encourages people to "outsource their brain in a jar."

Becky Bligh from the Queensland State Archives First Nations Strategy Team spoke about the goal of her team to not be perfect, but to be relational in providing Indigenous recognition and culturally informed access to records.

Annie Cameron then made an encore appearance, this time outlining her challenging role as the inaugural archivist at the Berndt Museum Archive, working with "Overpacked, under packed, folded, scrunched and bundled" records with indeterminable original order. The museum's ultimate current goal is to connect its museum and archive collections, enabling community engagement.

Peita-Maree Clark from the Queensland State Archives then spoke about managing access to restricted records, such as court transcripts, immigration records, out-of-home care records, and Indigenous family history documents, in light of Queensland's new Public Records Act.

Catherine Robinson from State Records NSW then gave her lightning talk about the work of Blue Shield International, and more specifically Blue Shield Australia, a group which was established in 2005 by the Australian Society of Archivists, Australian Library and Information Association, Australian International

Council on Monuments and Sites, and the International Council of Museums, with the aim of protecting Australia's cultural heritage from natural disasters and conflict.

Jacqui Sanders, a Museums Victoria employee and author of *Insanity's Ghosts: Dark Tourism and Its Implications for Aradale Asylum*, spoke about the hidden histories of the "insanity archives," documenting the lost voices and forgotten lives of patients at the Ararat Lunatic Asylum in the late 19th century. She stressed that we must learn from the mistakes of the past, and that every life, no matter how troubled, deserves a place in the community's collective memory.

Improving access to historical Papua New Guinea images was next on the agenda, and the paper by Kirsty Johnson, Steven Gagau and Melissa Thomas highlighted the work undertaken to remediate insensitive and racist descriptive metadata, restore and conserve the glass plate negatives, consult with the relevant communities, and provide meaningful access.

I was excited to hear Kate Sergeant's talk, as I had met her at morning tea that day, and she had mentioned she was speaking that afternoon. Kate is the Special Collections Coordinator at the University of South Australia (UniSA) library, now known as Adelaide University. Kate spoke about the opportunities and challenges of the UniSA Time Capsule project, a website showcasing digital collections of stories, photos, videos, and audio from students, staff, and alumni, capturing their memories of UniSA before the merger to become Adelaide University in January 2026. It is an exciting and important project, preserving and celebrating the university's history while marking its transformation.

Steven Gagau from the Pacific and Regional Archive for Digital Sources in Endangered Cultures (PARADISEC) made another appearance to discuss a community archiving project in Papua New Guinea, in which he encouraged community members to donate audio recordings of local music, performances, and ceremonies. He established and trained a local project team, advertised on community radio, and set up local collection points, resulting in a successful and invaluable outcome.

The conference concluded with a panel of past and present ASA presidents, who reflected on their time in the profession and the changes that have occurred. As an archives student, I was surprised to learn that there are only around one thousand archivists in Australia, and saddened to hear that we are at risk of losing our remaining archiving degrees. But I was encouraged to hear there are positive changes being made, with the emphasis on 'hidden histories' and First Nations stories in the archives, and a greater focus on supporting diversity in the sector.

Hannah concluded the conference with an enthusiastic and inspiring wrap-up speech, bringing the event to a close. While some delegates remained to attend workshops the following day, I returned home with my head full of new ideas, valuable connections, and lasting memories. I am already looking forward to next year. I would like to extend my sincere thanks to everyone at ASA for providing me with the opportunity to attend this excellent conference through the Sharman Award conference bursary. I have learned a great deal and am extremely grateful for the opportunity afforded to me.