

Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian essays

MICHAEL PIGGOTT

Oxford: Chandos Publishing, 2012

334 p. | ISBN: 978-1-84334-712-5 (print)

ISBN: 978-78063-378-7 (online)

£60.00 | US\$100.00 | £70.00

There is more to the provenance of a record than the name of a document creator or a record keeper. Around the person or organisation that archivists habitually think of as The Provenance there is, as Chris Hurley has put it, an 'ambience', an entanglement of people, practices, technologies, laws and institutions, histories and myths so significant to the production, use, and interpretation of the record that it could be said each record and body of records has a societal provenance. Michael Piggott uses this concept of societal provenance, first introduced into the profession's discourse by the Canadian archival science scholar Tom Nesmith, as the overarching theme uniting a collection of essays which address aspects of recordkeeping in Australia. They culminate in an epilogue of universal relevance as Piggott, drawing on his own experience, turns attention to the recordkeeping that anticipates and follows death, and muses on what leads to aspects of some people's lives persisting in recorded memory long after those who have known them have themselves passed away.

Divided into four parts, *Archives and Societal Provenance* pulls together a mixture of new writing, and revamped earlier work published or presented orally by this highly respected and influential Australian archives practitioner, teacher, and scholar. The first part, titled 'History', begins with an essay that focuses attention on four major themes in Australian recordkeeping. These are: the recordkeeping legacy brought to Australia by Governor Arthur Phillip and the 'colonising British' in 1788; the Australian populace's attitude to bureaucracy, which combines high expectations of government with a paradoxical antipathy towards 'red tape'; the importance of immigration as both shared experience and impetus for records creation; and the effects of the First World War on recordkeeping and building national archival collections. Following these are essays on the visit to Australia by Theodore Schellenberg in 1954, and on the archives-history nexus. Then, finally and delightfully, Piggott has written about the memories, myths, and records created and re-created in the days and decades following future Prime Minister Bob Hawke's purportedly naked dip in the lily pond at University House whilst

studying for a PhD at Australian National University in 1957.

Three essays comprise part two, 'Institutions'. The first reflects on the history of archive and library relations, and on the sometimes bitter personal character of public debate regarding the status of archives. This was revealing to me and left me wondering about the personal dynamics at work in New Zealand's relatively unexplored history of library and archive relations. The second essay considers the meanings, benefits, and challenges associated with the establishment of university-based prime ministerial libraries during the late twentieth century; and the last, returning to the war theme, describes the operations of the Australian War Records Section during the First World War and introduces the idea of 'sacred archiving' in its discussion of the founding of the Australian War Memorial. Three further essays under the title 'Formation' follow, focusing on the destruction and retention of census returns, the documenting of Australian business, and significant developments in appraisal. Each reflects on the 'deliberate or other processes' that bring a body of records into being and lead to its acquiring archival status.

Frank Upward's records continuum model is the subject of the first essay (of which more later) in the fourth and final part of the volume. Titled "Debates", this focuses on issues in Australia's archival discourse referred to earlier, but only here becoming the centre of attention. An essay on the Australian composer, performer, and 'auto archivist' Percy Grainger provides an opportunity to consider ideas of record creator as remembrancer and record as artificial memory. Following this, there is an essay on collecting archivists, a part of the Australian archives community whose practices have been much criticised by the mainstream. Piggott, acknowledging the problem, comes to the defence of collecting archivists, pointing out that at least some are addressing the issues even as they struggle to achieve and maintain the support of their governing bodies. Moreover, he asks, who else but these 'magpie' collectors would document the lives of 'ordinary Australians'? In the essays that follow, Piggott calls for more attention to documenting Australia's recordkeeping history, and for the adoption of an expansive concept of record that would give the same value to indigenous recordkeeping practices as it currently gives to the practices of Western societies.

Piggott's writing is a pleasure to read. There is something very human and accessible about the way he combines an easy style – and occasional vernacular turn of phrase – with engaging subject matter and personal reflection. He avoids laboured theoretical discussion in favour of story-telling and reminiscence sprinkled with apt allusions

to their theoretical significance. Personally, I would have liked more theoretical reflection, but Piggott may be right in his belief that few archivists share this academic taste for abstraction. Nevertheless, given the book's title, I had hoped that there would be more about societal provenance as a concept, paying fuller attention than it does to Chris Hurley's writings on parallel provenance and ambient context, and how narrative may relate to metadata in revealing societal provenance. I had also hoped for a closer look at Frank Upward's continuum theory, with more explicit illustration of its relevance for a segment of the archives community to which it has not yet spoken, at least not in a language easily understood by that audience. Although a whole chapter is devoted to Upward's work, Piggott does not discuss continuum theory in its now more mature state, but concentrates on the records continuum model. Upward's more recent continuum thinking has de-centred the records continuum and, in becoming more expansive, provided context for richer readings. Nevertheless, Piggott is right to draw attention to the difficult language used to communicate continuum theory, recognising that this has affected its understanding and acceptance in Australian recordkeeping discourse and practice. Weaving together these theoretical strands in recent Australian writing is, however, not what Piggott's book sets out to do. Instead, with Nesmith's idea of societal provenance as a fairly loose binding, Piggott contributes importantly to a discourse concerned with the history of Australian recordkeeping and advocates change in light of the lessons to be learned from that history.

New Zealand stands always in relation to Australia. Politically, commercially, professionally and personally, our experiences are entangled with theirs. Michael Piggott may have sub-titled his book *Australian Essays*, but eighty percent of this book still seems to speak directly to me as a New Zealand archivist. Australians and New Zealanders have different stories to tell, but we share the same recordkeeping traditions – and the same challenges. This very readable, deeply informed, and thought-provoking book written by one of our most highly respected cousins in The Western Island is highly recommended reading for all New Zealand archivists.

Kay Sanderson
School of Information Management
Victoria University of Wellington