

Exhibition Review

Logs to Blogs: Diaries from the Turnbull Library

Turnbull Gallery, July 29th to September 28th 2013

Exhibition review and interview with David Colquhoun, Curator Manuscripts, Alexander Turnbull Library

From tiny freeform marginalia to the meticulous documenting of shipboard activity; from the scribbles of idle children to the binary representation of social consciousness. With intended audiences from only the diarist through to the ubiquitous masses in the digital domain, the Logs to Blogs exhibition brought them all together.

The range of objects in the Logs to Blogs exhibition represented not only a linear trajectory, highlighting changes over time in recording personal and public memory, but also how they exist as totems of commentary on our social history. The exhibition arose from David Colquhoun's research interest in forms of personal record keeping. David, editor of Jack Lovelock's diary *Running on Air*, stressed the exhibition concept as two-fold: first, to use archives to tell the history of a story; but also, and equally important, to emphasise the *story of the archive*. The exhibit he stated 'was about both about diary keeping, how and why people kept diaries and the formats they used for record keeping, as much as it was about the stories contained within them'.

The Logs to Blogs exhibition displayed a wide and contrasting range of items from the Turnbull collections: from log entries written by Second Lieutenant Zachary Hicks of the *Endeavour* at Tolaga Bay in 1769 to Sarah Laing's blog *Let me Be Frank – Reading, Writing, Parenting, Angsting*; from Iraia Te Whaiti's diaries of Maori life in Wairarapa to early settler Ellen Petre's 1842 account of her first year in Wellington. Of the selection, David said 'we deliberately resisted the urge to choose collection objects purely on the basis of aesthetic', '... there was an expectation that certain works held in the Turnbull, such as the beautifully illustrated and much reproduced Bambridge journals would be included because of their attractiveness, but that was not what this was about, it was just as important to highlight the words, to read the stories.'

The exhibition, as its name suggests, included blogs, reflecting David's interest in personal recording mediums and their future direction. They were included to highlight the contemporary context of personal recordkeeping and, according to David, show that many of the diary keepers would probably have embraced social media had they been



Figure 1: L-R: James Cox in 1921, 1/2-164539-F; title page of Alice McKenzie's first diary, 1888, MS-1184; Mary Ann Eleanor Petre, 1842, 1/2-047261 F. Alexander Turnbull Library.

writers of our time.

David also noted the strong element of biography in some diaries; an underlying feeling by the authors that, perhaps one day, their personal records may be read more widely. While many diaries appear to close off outside audiences, the quality of their writing and the attention to detail belies that they were ever intended for the writers' eyes only. One author, said David, went to the extent of having her handwritten diaries typed up. Other diarists in the exhibition, such as Alice McKenzie, regardless of intended audience, had no choice, being unable to shield her private thoughts from the prying eyes of her brothers.

Imaginative, successful public programming accompanied *Logs to Blogs*. They included talks by academics Dr Kate Hunter and Professor Peter Holland; both used early New Zealand diaries for their publications. Professor Tony Ballantyne talked about colonial settlers' diaries and their uses in his scholarly research. Sarah Laing, a novelist, short story writer and cartoonist, provided perspective on the art of sharing in a digital space, whilst Katrina Young-Drew, Linda Forbes and Dylan Owen, from the National Library's Services to Schools, all talked about the success of recent popular (often hilarious) diary-based literature.

There are unique challenges in exhibiting documentary heritage, not least the restriction to single page opening and static display of a format originally intended to be tactile and movable. In *Logs to Blogs* these challenges were partly mitigated by the development of additional content. Material from Turnbull's pictorial collections was used to support the diarists' stories; and a tablet screen in the exhibition space featured extracts from six diarists. The production of an e-book titled



Figure 2: L-R: Detail of an entry by Harry McNeish, 1 Aug 1915, MS-1389; German postcard featuring Jack Lovelock, 1936, MSX-2261-076; Lovelock Papers. Detail of a portrait of an unidentified Maori chief, from the Thomas Laslett journals, 1833, MS-Papers-8349-1. Alexander Turnbull Library.

Personal Perspective: Diaries from the Turnbull was a late addition. David said the decision to produce an e-book ‘allowed us to layer a greater level of context around the exhibited objects and provided the reader/viewer, the opportunity to engage with more of the exhibition content in a different format.’ Another challenge was the text-heavy nature of the items displayed; *Logs to Blogs* resisted the urge to over-label and over-transcribe the works on display, balancing successfully readability and aesthetic.

A number of the works in the exhibition stood alone as discrete objects, yet there was still the issue of communicating their wider provenance and intrinsic record quality. How to ensure exhibited archives demonstrate their relationship to record series and their value as evidence is part of ongoing scholarly discourse. Both Agnes Bennett and Jack Lovelock’s diaries form part of a wider body of papers held by the Library. David felt that, although *Logs to Blogs* didn’t entirely resolve the communication issue, the layered programming and use of e-books went a long way towards contributing context-rich provenance to the individual works.

There is a dichotomy in the exhibition of documentary heritage materials. While outreach is crucial in exposing and illuminating the collections of cultural institutions, their security and preservation must also be paramount. The Turnbull Gallery (site of the *Logs to Blogs* exhibition) is upstairs on the second floor of the National Library building. Finding the exhibition involved by-passing the obvious galleries on the ground floor, heading up two flights of stairs, through the security gates,