Connections & Conversations

Australian Society of Archivists Conference 2006

Closing Plenary

_The Australian Memory of the World Register: What’s the Problem?_

Maggie Shapley

Maggie Shapley is University Archivist at the Australian National University and head of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre which has submitted one successful and one unsuccessful nomination to the Australian Memory of the World Register. She has been a professional member of the ASA since 1981 and was editor of Archives and Manuscripts 2000-04.

_The UNESCO Memory of the World program seeks to raise awareness of documentary heritage, ensure its preservation and increase access to it. Yet in 1997 the International Council on Archives expressed reservations about the program. In seminars in Canberra, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth in 2005-06 about the Australian Register, participants raised questions about the assessment of ‘significance’: how does it relate to ‘evidential value’? Is entry on the register ‘incompatible with archival practice and ethics’? Maggie Shapley, now a member of the Australian Memory of the World Assessment Committee, comments on these and other questions._

The Memory of the World program was launched by UNESCO in 1993 with the stated aim ‘to guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world ensuring their wide dissemination’. The website for the International Register presents the argument for such a register in these terms:

_Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear forever._
It's clear that there is competition to be included in the register from the number of nominations that have been accepted (91 collections from 45 countries) and the number that are nominated each year (54 for 2006) which also appear on the website. There is also this warning:

The international Register of the Memory of the World Programme cannot include all the records in public and private archives, no matter how important those bodies or individuals may be. A large proportion of the records are concerned with local, national and, sometimes, regional issues. Repositories should nominate for inclusion on the World Register only those documents that are clearly of world significance.

There have obviously also been issues with nominations broadening or changing after registration:

Once added to the Memory of the World Register, the document group cannot be varied or redefined over time. Having accepted this principle, however, the fugitive nature of some materials - such as audio-visual carriers has to be recognised: sometimes, what survives over time may be the content rather than the decaying original carrier.

The International Council on Archives (ICA) discussed the Memory of the World program in Edinburgh in September 1997 and a number of reservations were expressed – these are set out in an ICA position paper written by Michael Roper in 2004. The gist of those reservations seems to be:

- Archives are selected from the many records created because of their wider continuing value – in the past survival was by chance (war, theft, neglect, natural disasters) but now is by conscious appraisal. (The implication here seems to be that appraisal criteria are already applied so that not all records are available to be selected on significance criteria. This seems to be a furphy to me – we can’t select significant documents because they may have been destroyed? Surely we aren’t destroying documents worthy of registration on a Memory of the World Register?)
• ‘All national archives have extensive holdings which relate to other nations and cultures and hence form part of the world’s memory’. (This seems to me to be an ‘it’s all too hard’ defence.)

• ‘Records and archives are organic accumulations in which value rests as much in the aggregation of contextual information embedded in the hierarchical structure of documentary units of the same provenance ... as in the content of any individual document. All archival documents are unique in their context ... even if their content may be duplicated within the fonds or elsewhere.’ (This has more merit as an argument – but it’s really an argument not to register individual documents, to respect the fonds or the series and to nominate those, rather than not to nominate at all.)

• ‘Consequently the focus of archival operations is on the total fonds and to select only the ‘most important’ documents for inclusion in the World Register is seen as incompatible with archival practice and ethics.’ (This seems a large claim – unethical? Are archivists being unethical in indicating in their finding aids, on their websites, in exhibitions or to their researchers that certain documents or collections are more significant than others? Do we actually believe in a democracy of documents where every record selected for permanent preservation is as worthy as the next?)

This represents the ICA’s view in 1997, but as it happened a number of archival institutions successfully nominated collections so the ICA changed its position recognising the advantages which it saw as:

Archival institutions are part of national systems, and pride and prestige are enhanced both nationally and internationally by inclusion of elements of the national archival holdings in the World Register ... UNESCO is a strong, worldwide icon and MOW recognition may offer significant advantages in ‘selling’ archives and securing third-party support.

The ICA then proposed that ‘All national archives should be included in the MOW World Register’ but as the situation of local authorities varied (some covered by national archives, some not) ‘it should therefore be left to the discretion of national authorities to determine what other repositories of public archives should be included in the national archives in its World register entry ... It should still be possible for archival institutions, manuscript collections and
other holders of archival material outside the national archives system to nominate specific
documents of world significance for inclusion in the World register’. There is a strong sense that
the ICA just didn’t want to play UNESCO’s game.

The Australian Register founded in 2000 is one of over 60 national Memory of the World
programs. Its stated aims are to:

- establish and maintain the Australian Memory of the World Register
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  Missing Documentary Heritage
- coordinate and propose nominations from Australia to the Memory of the World
  International Register
- raise awareness and promote the Program through publications and presentations
- encourage and seek government and private sector sponsorship for specific projects
  and activities.

From its establishment the Australian Memory of the World Committee has drawn its members
primarily from the library and museum sectors. There have been up till recently two ‘archives’
sector members, Ray Edmondson formerly Deputy Director, National Film and Sound Archive,
and Adrian Cunningham of the National Archives of Australia. Jan Lyall formerly of the National
Library of Australia’s National Preservation Office has been chair 2000-2006, other members
include Margy Burn (National Library), Dianne Hosking (Australian Institute for Aboriginal and
Torres Strait Islander Studies), Roslyn Russell (Roslyn Russell Museum Services) and Linda
Young (Cultural Heritage and Museum Studies, Deakin University). The Committee now also
includes Joanna Sassoon from Edith Cowan University.

The Assessment Sub-Committee which considers the nominations to the register and makes
recommendations to the Committee consisted up till last year of Roslyn Russell, Linda Young
and Margaret Anderson, Director of the SA History Trust. I was invited to be a member last
year, probably as a result of my attending a Memory of the World seminar last year where I
expressed the opinion that the assessment committee desperately needed an archivist.

The library orientation of the Committee perhaps explains why the first nominations were from
library collections: Captain Cook’s journal 1768-71 and the Mabo Papers. The photograph
chosen to illustrate the register entry for Cook’s journal also demonstrates a museum bias: the journal as an object placed on Cook’s desk, rather than a photograph of the content – the information recorded in Cook’s own handwriting. Similarly the Mabo papers registration shows a photograph of the creator Eddie Mabo rather than the actual documentary heritage which, along with the Cook journal, has now been included in the World Register.

Registration number 3 is for ‘Landmark Constitutional Documents of the Commonwealth of Australia’. This is an artificial collection from a number of institutions and includes both the legal instruments of the establishment of the Commonwealth as well as film recording the event on 1 January 1901. Registration no. 4 is for the Cinesound Movietone Australian Newsreel Collection 1929-1975.

No. 5, the Australian Agricultural Company records, is the successful nomination from my own archives, so I will use it as an example to make some general comments on the selection criteria for the register. I mentioned before a museum bias to the program and in fact the guidelines for nominations have their origins in the International Committee on Monuments and Sites Burra Charter and the publication *Significance: a guide to assessing the significance of cultural heritage objects and collections*, that had been written by Roslyn Russell and Kylie Winkworth for the Heritage Collections Council in 2001. This means that the terminology in the guidelines was originally derived from museums: such as references to ‘object’ rather than archival terms such as ‘document’, ‘item’ or ‘series’.

Some aspects of the current manual still reveal an object-based mindset. There are three primary criteria for significance: historic, aesthetic and community. It should be noted that not all criteria need to be addressed to prove significance but it does concern me that aesthetic value is included. As an archivist the prettiness of records is for me not a determining factor of significance at all – it’s the provenance and content that matter to me. As archivists from collecting archives know, we are offered the decorative certificates and testimonials ‘for the archives’ because of their perceived value, and donors can be surprised when we indicate that we are more interested in the correspondence, research notes and drafts which provide the evidence – the real records – of the activity that resulted in the presentation of beautiful certificates.
The image selected for the Australian Agricultural Company registration makes the point: this colourful and ornate testimonial was presented to Jesse Gregson when he retired from the Australian Agricultural Company in March 1905 after thirty years as General Superintendent of the Company’s pastoral and mining operations. However, this is probably the least significant record in the Australian Agricultural Company collection. More significant are the records of early Company-sponsored immigration, the development of the pastoral industry on the Company’s million-acre grant from Port Stephens to the Manning River and of coal mining on the 2,000 acre grant of what is now downtown Newcastle. The collection includes records from the 1820s including early maps of exploration, records of the first railways, and records of births, deaths and marriages of early settlers, so Gregson’s certificate is not the highlight of the collection.
To further illustrate this point about aesthetic value, this cable is probably one of the most significant records created in Australia during the Second World War – it’s from Prime Minister Curtin to the Secretary of State for Dominion Affairs on 17 February 1942, in response to one from Churchill, where Curtin insists on the return of Australian troops for the defence of Australia rather than Churchill’s planned diversion to Burma. It marks the point at which Australia turned to the United States for support. I’m not arguing for the inclusion of this document on the register but rather making the point that it’s the provenance and content of the record which makes it significant – aesthetically there is little to distinguish it from the hundreds of cables that were being transmitted between the United Kingdom, the United States and Australia at the time, and it is in this context that it gains its significance.

This is not to say that significant documents can’t also have aesthetic value and this is demonstrated by the next entry on the Register: the Griffin designs for Canberra. I won’t comment on all the entries currently on the Register but in considering what has already been included it is perhaps more important to reflect on what hasn’t. For instance, the Lawrence Hargrave collection (no. 12) raises the possibility that there are many collections of famous Australians which could be nominated: inventors, scientists, authors, artists, even politicians. An
important factor to recognise is that provenance isn’t everything – it would be difficult to argue the significance of shopping lists written by Nobel Prize winner. It’s both the provenance and the content that are important. Significance also isn’t necessarily related to age: two recent registrations are a collection of Sorry Books (13) and the National Library’s archive of websites, PANDORA (14).

In 2005 the Memory of the World Committee ran a series of workshops in Melbourne, Canberra and Sydney (later in Adelaide and Perth) to identify problems in participating in the Australian Memory of the World Program. When the *Guidelines to the International Memory of the World Programme* were launched in 1995 it was acknowledged that the form for nominations to the Register was a work in progress. Consequently, the Australian Committee modified the form and the selection criteria in its development of the Australian Program. However, from the time the first nominations were received in 2002, it was apparent that many applicants experienced difficulty in preparing statements of significance. The Australian Committee decided that a good method of improving the process and creating a greater awareness of the Memory of the World Program would be to conduct interactive workshops where the process would be explained and participants at the workshop would provide comments, complaints and criticisms so that the guidelines could be improved.

A new version of the guidelines has been placed on the website addressing some of the issues raised by participants, such as terminology – ‘item or collection of documentary heritage’ is used rather than ‘object’. It is accepted that the guidelines may be further improved in the future – for instance, as an archivist I would like to see reference to ‘evidential value’ as a criterion rather than the more general ‘historic significance’.

An issue discussed at the Melbourne workshop was the effect of rejection of an application. The Noel Butlin Archives Centre has had one unsuccessful application – we joined with the University of Melbourne in nominating the archives of Australian trade unions held by the two institutions. It was particularly disappointing for those involved to have spent time and effort framing the application and gathering referee support to have it knocked back as being too broad.

The issue of what is the appropriate level (given that the 7 kilometres of trade union records were judged too large) is indeed difficult – one could say ‘it depends’ – the answer cannot be
definitive, except to say that the entire content of an archives is probably too broad. Certainly
the International Register did not accept the argument that all national archives and their entire
contents should be included. The archival units by which we already organise our collections
may be a guide – the record group or the series, records with the same provenance. It might not
just be one series: the Displaced Persons files (no. 7) are in fact many similar series (the
records are arranged according to each ship’s voyage) which were nominated as one collection.
Personally I do not favour the picking out of single files or ‘important documents’ from a file for
nomination without their surrounding context.

Joint nominations can be a useful way of bringing together split collections – records with the
same provenance which have been deposited in separate institutions, but I do not support the
creation of artificial collections for the purpose of nomination, such as all documents about a
particular event or policy or movement. The nomination of records relating to the struggle for the
8-hour day, using an example which my archives could support, would necessarily be an
amalgam of files and documents from different unions, organisations, people and governments,
all taken out of their context, which could involve a joint nomination with twenty other archives.

Returning to the International Council on Archives’ reservations, is the existence of the Register
incompatible with archival practice and ethics? I’m not convinced by the ICA’s arguments and
perhaps this gets back to the purpose of the Register. I think it would be naïve to think that the
Register can be an absolutely definitive list of the most important Australian documentary
heritage, or indeed that the order in which collections are accepted on the register indicates
their significance relative to each other. Rather I recognise the register as a promotional
opportunity for every archives in Australia to highlight their most significant collections, and an
opportunity for the media at least once every two years to focus on what we think is important
every day of the year – our documentary heritage. Only the major archives can support media
events such as the Annual Cabinet release which both the national and state archives now host.
Successful nomination to the Register of the Memory of the World provides an opportunity for
us all to promote our collections.

In closing I’d like to offer some general advice on the nomination process. In my limited
experience, what distinguishes a successful nomination is the clear articulation of knowledge of
the collection itself – not just a chronological history of the organisation or person who created
the records but an appreciation of why the records are special in terms of their provenance and
content. Successful nominations use words such as ‘unique’, ‘the first’, ‘the only’, ‘the best example’, ‘the key document’, ‘the earliest’, ‘the oldest’, ‘extremely rare’, ‘unparalleled’, ‘vital evidence’, ‘nationally significant’, ‘comprehensive’ and ‘pre-eminent’. If superlative words such as these don’t apply then perhaps the significance can’t be successfully argued. All of these words have been extracted from successful nominations.

It is also easier to argue for the significance of a collection if some historical perspective has been gained by the passage of time: while some recent collections are included on the Register it is more difficult to make a case if the extent of other similar records cannot be ascertained (for instance, if official records less than 30 years old haven’t been released). A nomination accompanied by archival documentation for the agency or person, series or record group and a list of items can make a good impression and makes it quite clear what is included in the nomination.

The next entry in the Register is no. 20: will your archives claim this place after your successful nomination to the Register? The closing date for the next round of nominations is 27 July 2007.