
Never Lost for Words: Canberra's Archives

NICHOLAS BROWN

FREE OF THE ROT OF POLITICS

As a city created largely from nothing to accommodate a national parliament and bureaucracy – and having from the start a rather ambivalent relationship to other roles and functions – Canberra has always had a rich official archive. The capital has never been lost for words. High levels of education and income characterised many of those who came to it in the service of the state, and who shaped rich worlds of paper and speech in its spare landscape. In 1973 the British political scientist, David Butler, identified a ‘Canberra model’ of government that was distinctive in the dynamics, candour and interdependencies fostered in the close proximities the capital encouraged between politicians,

Public History Review

Vol 21 (2014): 81-101

ISSN: 1833-4989

© 2014 by the author(s). This is an Open Access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International (CC BY 4.0) License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>), allowing third parties to copy and redistribute the material in any medium or format and to remix, transform, and build upon the material for any purpose, even commercially, provided the original work is properly cited and states its license.

bureaucrats and journalists. There was ‘gold’, Butler declared, simply in those seams of information and exchange, spanning from the formal to the candid and the confidential – and with a great deal of porosity between them. Canberra’s existence in the currency and authority of the written record, the hansard, file, memorandum, legislation, precedent, plan, press release or headline has never been beyond doubt or fascination.¹ Whether registering the issues gaining access to policy and political attention at the heart of Australian government, or adroitly keeping the gates against public accountability for things done or undone, that archive is synonymous with the city – and inevitably shaped a pervasive sense of its public history.

Alongside that repository of politics and politics, however, has developed another more diverse archive of experience and identity. This second holding often runs against the official grain, reflecting other aspects of an essentially experimental community. Like the residents of Washington DC, Canberrans since the proclamation of the Federal Capital Territory in 1911, and until the conferral of self-government in 1989, were excluded from any franchise for local political representation. Their first seat in federal parliament, created in 1949, came only with strictly limited voting rights. And, unlike the neat precinct of Washington, that exclusion encompassed the full extent of the residential and surrounding areas intended to serve the capital.

For some, the lack of a vote was a virtue, just as the insistence that land could only be leased in the territory would raise it above the speculative distortions and self-interests of private property. As one of its earliest advocates, maverick politician King O’Malley, declared, Canberra must sit in an enclave at least ten times the size of Washington’s district so that all its residents ‘can hope’, free of ‘the rot’ of petty politics.² The consequence has been that this same affluent, informed, articulate community – proud of the ‘common wealth’ – has also often railed against being the mere subjects of the same arts it refined and practiced in their day jobs. In that process they have built an alternative record of themselves, defining forms of citizenship in ways that were remarkably skilled, active, and innovative, drawing on the social if not political capital ready to hand. A record of organisation, lobbying, voluntarism and networking challenges the passivity alleged to be a consequence of the city’s privileges. The relationship between these two parallel but interdependent archives is a significant aspect of Canberra’s history – and history-making – as well as being an element of the ‘model’ the city continues to present in governance.

Sustained reflection on the interface between history and ‘the archive’ often arises from an awareness of the stark power imbalances

reflected in the active production of the former – the voices to be heard – and the rigid classifications practiced by the latter. Critical engagement with these processes is usually energised by the extent to which the acts of selection, preservation and organization implied by the archive are inevitably political, whether in overt exclusions or more subtle forms of regularisation and the sanctioning of standing and authority. Canberra, of its essence as a city of government, even a ‘city state’, does not throw up much in the way of such stark imbalances. Even its inequalities, and its marginalised populations (and they are there) have never lacked expert documentation and commentary. Such processes in themselves have often served to defuse politics into procedures of policy and planning. But Canberra does offer a perspective on the ways in which, even in a relatively homogenous community, gradations in access to ‘the record’ emerge and impose regularities and boundaries of their own.

This article offers a survey of some of Canberra’s official and representational archives, assessing the ways in which – as Joanna Sassoon argues – they have been ‘active participants’ in the construction of its history, at once highly selective, but also remarkably inclusive. This activity in turn relates to the terms in which, in the domain of public memory, these archives have, and could, serve to shape connections between present and past.³ As Aleida Assmann phrases a point descending from Pierre Nora, in the shift from ‘living memory’ to ‘cultural memory’ a past is ‘produced’ with purposes that are, implicitly or otherwise, in contrast to the past left to ‘waste’ outside the archive’s regime.⁴ Canberra might lack the drama of many such acts of production and wastage, but it still alerts us to how, even within the ordered spaces of an emblem of urban design and amenity, such a shift still goes on.

What follows reflects my experience in preparing a concise, general history of Canberra, with a publisher’s brief to capture both the character of its community and its significance as a national capital. My research – necessarily at broad scale rather than in-depth enquiry, and working with the (themselves voluminous) already published records of a community – revealed the complexities of Canberra’s archival history as a vital element of those two dimensions. Jacques Derrida begins his *Archive Fever* with the etymological analogy of the archive as ‘house arrest’, a ‘domiciliation’ of public authority and home-based safe-keeping.⁵ This formulation sets aside a polarisation between the archive as controlled public space and the privacies it seeks to regulate. It suggests instead the relationship between the two: between (borrowing Gane and Beer’s terms) the ‘act’ of ‘commencing’ an archive and the ‘place’ from which its conditions of access and use are ‘commanded’.⁶

Canberra neatly fits this analogy, not least in the proximities yet boundaries fostered between those acts of commencement and commandment in the often self-aware 'house arrest' of its people.

SILENT REVOLUTION

As a city, Canberra existed first on paper, in the concept-driven scheme for the capital by Chicago architects Walter Burley and Marion Mahony Griffin which won an international design competition in 1911. But paper – notoriously in the case of the Griffins' experience – scarcely guaranteed action. The city's name itself emerged from a carefully guarded solicitation of popular views, in which a play of textual allusion, in part high-minded ('Democratia', 'Pacifica' or 'Empire City'), in part sardonic ('Swindleville'; 'Gonebroke') was officially trumped by a word that struck a neat balance between an authenticity extracted from an Aboriginal past and a pastoral present about to be superseded by an idealised symbol of the nation. 'Canberra', it is now accepted, derived from a local Aboriginal language, but the continuing lack of certainty as to how best to describe that group or the meaning of the word is testimony to the speed of dispossession in the region and the ready sentimentalisation of a people falsely declared as early as 1834 to be 'no more'.⁷ As Ken Inglis noted, 'Canberra' made a deft transition between 'pioneers' and 'citizens', obliterating much unresolved business in the process.⁸ The carefully coached vice-regal first pronunciation of the chosen name (so as not to appear too 'upper class'), which was then cabled from nearby tents at record speed, was in turn greeted by a nation reassured – according to Brisbane's *Courier* – by its 'wholesome manly burr'.⁹ In the often halting progress of the capital project, such mixes of the 'living' and the 'cultural' recur with an obviousness reflecting how little separated commencement and commandment in the capital. As its first historians observed, the city descended on a largely side-lined rural enclave that had 'no official status' of its own.¹⁰ By decree, it soon acquired much – while at the same time stripping from existing residents both 'the rot' of the franchise and the temptation to self-interest associated with the right to own – rather than lease – private property.

Such interventions were widely endorsed as 'a brand of municipal socialism', presenting (according to Victorian liberal parliamentarian Hume Cook) 'a spectacle the world has not previously seen – an entire city... owned and managed for the people of Australia'.¹¹ They were not exactly matched in commitment to the place itself: if the future beckoned Canberra, the present was less well provided for, and the past scarcely featuring at all. In the modest, temporary accommodation envisaged for

first public servants to be transferred from Melbourne in the 1920s an exception from timber construction was proposed only for agencies and records 'deemed especially important' for preservation from fire.¹² But in the first stage of that move, all records relating to the functions of the Commonwealth parliament to that point were destroyed to save expense in freight.¹³ In that sense, among many others, the new city – still existing largely on paper – carried no history.

In fact, no provision at all was made for a national government archive in Canberra (or anywhere else) throughout the inter-war decades. While the cause had several advocates, as Michael Piggott observes, 'no cultural or administrative reason' emerged from the ruck of politics to trigger an 'archival response'.¹⁴ Scepticism towards the new city was compounded by vigilance regarding any extravagances in government. Even early ideals of the capital hosting some equivalent of the United States' Library of Congress were chiselled back by the temporising argument that the 'national library' in Canberra, only likely to serve the servants and sittings of parliament, needed no higher remit or budget.¹⁵

With the outbreak of World War II, Paul Hasluck – official historian of Australian society and government during the conflict, and a participant observer in the capital through those years – recalled the deep unreality of 'typists... rattling away in the government departments [in Canberra], copying important documents' in case the functions of the rudimentary bush capital needed to suddenly relocate or cope with air raids.¹⁶ That panic was perhaps one element in the initiative of 1942 to at least do something to coordinate the handling of official records, civilian as well as military, given that the conduct of war steadily encompassed so many aspects of national government. A 'provisional archives repository for the administrative records of non-service departments' joined many other temporary arrangements in the capital – but would remain among the last such ventures to graduate to permanent accommodation over the following decades.¹⁷

Not only did a home for official archives remain low on the long list of priorities for the capital, it also became captive to a tussle between versions of the historical project the nation required. The *kind* of 'home' – in terms both of commencement and command – became an issue itself, even as a default option while waiting for a clear determination of an 'archival response'. On the one hand, there was the established repository, research and curatorial capacity of the Australian War Memorial, geared to preserving the records of a nation seen as forged in war and sacrifice, and defined by such ministrations. On the other, there

were the less developed facilities but restive ambitions of the Commonwealth National Library, with its ideal of building a collection infused by ideals of 'national life and development', and broader goals of representing a narrative of cultural inheritance (acquiring the only copy of the Magna Carta outside Britain in 1952, the Library spoke of capturing a vital aspect of 'our constitutional life').¹⁸ In what was at the time, given professions not known for heat, a spirited debate, the National Library won the first engagement, one consequence being an enduring tension between the systematic 'organic' record-keeping advocated by archivists and the more selective classificatory aims of librarians.¹⁹

In 1953, H.L. White, appointed Commonwealth parliamentary librarian in 1947, and an exemplar of the latter ambition, took pride in the '60 000 linear feet of records now in the custody of the Library'. Among the virtues of this holding, he added, were the savings in office space it enabled many departments to make once freed of such material, the efficiency with which the library could make available to officers any file they needed to consult again in their business, and the generation of 'schedules... to guide... the future destruction of valueless records'. Adding the role of these holdings in assisting 'citizens wishing to establish or protect their rights', White – ever zealous in boosting the standing of his institution – placed such holdings in a daunting synthesis of roles.²⁰

Skirmishes over the place and organisation of the personal and official papers of senior politicians, over the reach of such a national project into colonial periods, and over the curating of diverse materials within collections, soon began to test and fracture such a web, and ironically to generate tensions that would in time see a 'national collection' dispersed across a thickening landscape of collecting institutions in the capital, each marking its own place in the balance of 'living' and 'cultural' heritage.²¹ From the National Film and Sound Archive, established in 1984 to the Museum of Australian Democracy (1999), Canberra has seen several more recent public interventions to preserve and commemorate aspects of the Australian 'experience', marking points in both its political symbolism and endangered heritage. That debate in relation to official archives through the 1950s can be seen to mark equivalent dynamics, if less in terms of a vulnerable resource than it seeking to capture distinctive practices.

If the 'archive response' came first from the demands of war-driven mobilisation, regulation and coordination, the consequence was that its drive remained linked to functions of central government which were unlikely to cease with peace, and which became increasingly integral to

the image of Canberra as national capital. As Steve Stuckey argues, Australia came late to the coordination of a national archive. In doing so, however, it broke from conservative English and European models at a time when governments were spurred by expanding policy agendas and capacities. White's precursor, Kenneth Binns, lobbied senior politicians that the value of official records related not only to documenting the *actions* of government but also in reflecting enough of the contexts of policy formation to inform assessments of changing administrative *roles* and functions.²²

Appointed Archives Officer in the National Library in 1944, and a central figure in the evolution of archives memory as well as practice, Ian Maclean similarly noted that the distinctive functions of Australian Commonwealth government had resulted in a 'free trade' in files that related 'not so much to the formal functional or organisational pattern of the office, as to the flow of administrative work' among officers, dispersed, mobile, and pragmatic.²³ By 1956, surveying the 'silent revolution' in which 'the management of records as well as the organisation of materials for the study of national affairs' had become interdependent activities, White continued to lobby for the centrality of the National Library to custody of such processes, and facilitation of such exchange.²⁴ An enquiry of 1961, however, found against him, and recommended the formal separation of national archival and library functions. The 'silent revolution' was best to be comprehended in questions relating not only to the accessioning materials, but also the obligations imposed on departments to keep their own day-to-day business in order, and on the record, for eventual deposit. As Stuckley adds, as a result of recognising this 'continuum' there developed in the National Archives a regime of 'intellectual control among the best [exercised by any archive] in the world'.²⁵

It is beyond the scope of this article to trace the history of Australian archival development. The point, however, is to note some of the influences on the official archive project as it unfolded in Canberra in this form of 'house arrest'. In 2012, Michael Piggott, drawing on a long career in Canberra's several archives, reflected evocatively on the 'societal provenance' that must become an integral part of studying their history – understanding what was culturally embedded in records, and in the questions to be asked of their assembly.²⁶ He urged researchers to explore the 'terror' – an awkward term, Piggott conceded, as he sought some kind of metaphorical sense of place in the archive – reflected in the creation of records as a social practice.²⁷ It was strange, Piggott lamented,

that Australians' alleged 'talent for bureaucracy' had generated so little reflection on the exercise of that skill.

Yet from the start Canberra had heightened awareness of what was encompassed in the fashioning of the figure of the public servant, and of public service work, that was central to its identity. The reluctant, resented transfers of officials from offices elsewhere were accompanied by promises (inducements? threats?) that 'an even higher degree of efficiency and a keener desire to render valuable service to the public' would result from relocation to Canberra, particularly as that move was associated with a recasting of the temperament of national administration from merely procedural to managerial skills, and from hierarchies of seniority in service to those of capacity in policy.²⁸ Again, it was World War II that heightened these expectations, not only in freeing the exercise of Commonwealth power from the 'passive resistance' exercised towards change in the older, established cities;²⁹ but because of the kind of generational change the war was seen to usher. In 1947, the Public Service Board presented a profile of its new, ideal senior officer:

men must have an opportunity of executive practice and... to make mistakes before the age of 30 if they are ever to reach the ranks of successful executives. Delay in giving this experience often means that an officer is called on to take an important executive post at a time when he has lost the mental resilience which would make him fully effective.³⁰

Canberra was seen as central to the culture of such figures, just as the government in which they served was expected to become 'more diversified [and] firmly rooted in an alert Canberra community'.³¹ Kenneth Bailey, before leaving his professorship in law in Melbourne to join the Attorney-General's Department in Canberra as one member of a broad infusion of new expertise into the national bureaucracy, declared 'the classical age of parliamentary legislation is over': this was the age of the administrator'.³² Administration as an ascending practice – including mistakes and building 'resilience' – was to assume a distinct embodiment in Canberra. Its archives should be read through this perspective – especially, as Hasluck reflected in 1951, because the kind of record they offered of an ethos of government and its moments of decision-making in itself entering a period of marked change.³³

In his biography of H.C. Coombs, one of the pre-eminent public servants associated with these wartime and post-war transitions, Tim Rowse identifies their shared 'competitive collegiate' style.³⁴ To a

remarkable degree even the driest files, exchanges and reports can often be read as records of the kind of 'house arrest' – the meshing of intimacy and regulation – that has characterised the scales at which, and phases through which, government took shape in Canberra in various acts of mentorship, mobility and sociability. Coombs' colleagues would often use the image of a 'family' – 'official' or otherwise – to evoke the kinds of relationships or 'trade' that developed among them. One of the most recent initiatives in political science has been the anthropological recovery of the role of everyday practices in sustaining the 'rules of the game' of politics, and in the particular fusion it brings to the lived experience and the formalised processes of government.³⁵ Canberra, as Butler argued over forty years ago, has long offered a microcosm of such processes. In approaching the history of Canberra, and reflecting on the need for such a history to be attentive to its own actors, these 'rules of the game' need to be actively explored in informalities as well as formalities. The 'real' Canberra is not to be recovered despite, or instead of, such identities, but by engaging instead with the self-fashioning and self-actualisation they involved.

Such recovery might be enabled by thinking more laterally about ways of reading files, establishing 'terror'. In a novel set in Canberra in the late 1970s, Sara Dowse – herself a participant observer in that bureaucracy – followed closely one of her central character's attempts to negotiate the political and policy currents of the time, returning to the mantra: 'when in doubt, remember your terms of reference'. Historians, particularly those who seek to build connections between audiences who feel their pasts have been left to 'waste', might attend to such a reflex in understanding the experiences of government: the tension between commencement and command.³⁶ Humphrey McQueen has identified among Australian historians a particular propensity to 'archivitis', arising from the assumption that the orderly sequence of files that are one part of the success of Australian archives, can be read as the story in themselves – a danger perhaps only accentuated by the digitisation and word-searchability of files. A corrective to this is perhaps in attending to the context, and the continuum, that archival practice can still reveal. The NAA has continued to provide leadership in the management of digital records, recognising the need to capture them as, in Adrian Cunningham's terms, 'performances', and 'evidence of decisions and activities', rather than merely 'data'.³⁷

The actual 'place' of the archive in Canberra's landscape is itself part of these processes, the designed landscape allocating its own priorities and relationships. The National Library might have acquired a marble-

clad, neo-Grecian, lake-side temple-like permanent home in 1968. But the National Archives were much slower in finding a home. The higher calling to provide a site for a National Gallery impelled the archive's graduation from a series of temporary premises in lakeside Nissen huts – 'elegant igloos', Prime Minister Menzies called them in 1960 – but only to a morbid concrete building in a remote industrial suburb, shadowed by the chimney of a surgical waste incinerator, and neighboured by sex shops: in itself, perhaps, a symbolic collocation.³⁸

In 1998 the move of at least its reading room to historic premises in the central parliamentary precinct related more to the archive's role in the capital's emerging profile of 'national cultural institutions', broadening the image of Canberra from a government-dispensing to a service-delivering town, and as a 'cornerstone of democracy' at a time when such improving civic messages again surged to the fore.³⁹ The accountability of government, reflected in ideas of 'open' procedures and 'freedom of information' taking shape in the 1970s, leading to enforceable rights of access to government records in the Commonwealth *Archive Act* (1983), underwrote this move. In the process, Canberra's official archive has reflected the 'interesting balancing act' Lionel Orchard has seen in Australian political culture over recent decades, negotiating pressures to 'responsive government', disciplines of program budgeting for specific agencies and services, and the recognition of rights in a population cast as stakeholders as much as citizens.⁴⁰

It is certainly appropriate that the National Archives' headquarters is now in one of the two modest if graceful secretariat buildings constructed in the 1920s as provisional accommodation for the core agencies transferred to Canberra. But that rightful 'home' should not obscure the journey preceding it. 'Territor' might be seen as the dust on the shoes of the nation's itinerant official memory as much as the slow settling of a vintage in such revered cellars – as an expression of a 'flow' reflecting the processes of work of national government but struggling to find recognition in its official landscape. Not far from the NAA's current headquarters, a slightly larger than life size sculpture by Peter Corlett, dedicated in 2011, shows two Labor leaders of the 1940s, John Curtin and Ben Chifley, in deep conversation as they stroll from austere hostel rooms to the provisional parliament house. Arresting in its intimacy, this sculpture is a fitting reminder of what needs to be captured in the political history of the city.

IMAGINATIVE AND EXPERIMENTAL

Alongside these official processes, Canberra as a community has always wrestled with its social as well as official engineering. What did it mean to 'live' in such a place? Sir Robert Garran, effectively Australia's first Commonwealth public servant on his appointment as head of the Attorney-General's department in 1901, and resident in Canberra since 1926, encouraged new arrivals in the early 1950s with the reassurance that the 'snobbery' of rank that had been mapped exactly over the city's suburban hierarchies was steadily disappearing amid the equivalent of the collegialities that marked post-war administration. Yet Garran still confided – as an inducement to recruits – that while the capital might be destined to be 'a city of public servants', most 'outside the office are quite good fellows, and on the Central Staffs we have the pick of them'.⁴¹ This mixed message went to the core of an ambivalent identity: the privileges bestowed on the national capital, as a proof of its role, ranged against a community keen for an integrity of its own.

There were earlier formulations of this tension. In the inter-war decades 'community' as an ideal had itself been evoked to mediate these conflicting identities. The Federal Capital Commission, established in 1924 to bring greater coordination to the development of the city, had proclaimed Canberra to be 'the world's biggest experiment in the systematisation of the happiness of humanity'. Yet that experiment was underpinned by a sterner message. The second issue of the FCC's monthly *Canberra Community News*, launched in late 1925, argued that the 'herd instinct' of cities, the easy access there to 'cheap amusement', even 'the kaleidoscopic movement of metropolitan populations', all had allure, but did little to ennoble an individual. The spirit at Canberra was instead 'work' towards the building a city 'the like of which has never sprung up on virgin soil', in an environment that was healthy for the body, restorative to the mind, and affirming of character.⁴²

Community groups were encouraged to assemble under this ethos, and subsidised to build tangible evidence of it, including playgrounds, or – in one celebrated initiative – a hall to serve as a focus for 'improving' activities in one of the most lowly early subdivisions, the Causeway. But any move beyond uplifting voluntarism among those rallying to this message, towards advocacy of specific interests let alone criticism of FCC priorities, was discouraged, even penalised.⁴³ The FCC undertook covert surveillance of the extent to which activities in its name observed its ideals; it attempted actuarial calculations of the relationship between participation, subsidies, and outcomes. The public sphere in Canberra would for a long time be caught in such calculus, defined by as much as despite it.

Steadily, however, community groups pushed for their own influence – and made their case by engaging with such formulations in their own terms, and on their own initiative. Among the most effective was a mothercraft movement which grew beyond the provision of services for relatively isolated new mothers to include the provision of professionalised advice on nutrition, child-rearing and education. Gaining leverage from the move of the Commonwealth Department of Health to the city in 1928, with its public health agenda, and then from the rather eclectic resources of the Institute of Anatomy, established in 1931, with its research into national hygiene, the still voluntary leaders of the Canberra Mothercraft Society were welcomed by a Melbourne medical specialist for their success in giving ‘a definite lead’ in a new context where ‘there are no mistakes to rectify and no vested interests to compensate’.⁴⁴ The society was innovative in its practices and lobbying, and made its own impact on the landscape of the city in clinics, visiting nurses and eventually child care centres. It was committed to inclusiveness in providing services extending across the class boundaries already evident in Canberra, and – like the local YWCA – extended its reach to the Aboriginal community at Wreck Bay, which almost inadvertently had been included in the land allocated to the capital territory at Jervis Bay, in the coast, in the withering prospect that one day the city would need a port.

The relatively high levels of education and policy literacy, and the governmental resources accessible to Canberra’s population, underpinned the increasing competence with which such claims were advanced for public provision. Equally, a government, keen to test the prospects for the expansion of such social assistance, often welcomed the opportunities a still isolated, or at least insulated, capital provided as a laboratory. Into the 1940s for example, officials of the Department of Post-War Reconstruction, and their wives, were prominent in the leadership of neighbourhood, suburban and community groups which now deployed a language of ‘welfare’ in representing ‘local people [who] must obtain the services to which they are entitled’.⁴⁵ These new emphases, in place of the supplicant civic voluntarism of the inter-war years, produced an archive of their own, in the minutes of meetings, petitions, correspondence, newsletters and flyers. These – along with a wide range of less tangible forms of solidarity – emerged from a community which had always relied heavily on its own resources to build a shared identity but now found the means to formally argue for the recognition of their work. A changing language of government informed such lobbying, and in turn defined a public sphere constructed in Canberra that was distinct from that of government itself.

Histories of Canberra routinely defer to the creation of the National Capital Development Commission in 1957 as the salvation of the city from the neglect that had largely prevailed since 1913. A statutory planning and construction authority with relative independence in funding and execution, the NCDC gained deserved admiration for its achievements in consolidating both the national capital and suburban elements of the city.⁴⁶ Its concepts, calculations, models and projections round out the formal archive of Canberra's planning in reviews and reports that sought to garner national pride to the city, and envisaged a landscape of order. But the public history of Canberra needs to capture a citizen effort, and its own archive, that established many of the preconditions for such visions, and kept them to a measure of account for the more localised experience of place.

There are many areas in which this effort was marked through the 1950s into the 1970s. The distinct contribution of Canberra's activists to the Women's Electoral Lobby is one example.⁴⁷ The archive produced in these campaigns has its own distinct dimensions. The educational and political resources of the Canberra community were, again, obvious elements in much of the work produced to advance these causes: in the networks activists drew upon, the analysis of issues available to them, and access to influence. That archive could include, for example, demonstrations and theatre events, or the screen-printed t-shirts, posters and tea-towels that became such a strong feature of Canberra women's campaigns, produced in backyard workshops and forging an idiom that made an arresting connection between a suburban vernacular in imagery and a directness of political message that was, in itself, redolent of Canberra. Building on these foundations, such print-making remained a distinctive element of socially-engaged art practice in Canberra through the 1970s. But while the records of the leading workshops, Megalo Print Studio, are now held by the National Gallery of Australia, one of its leading practitioners, Alison Alder, has also observed that for many years the same progressive aspects of the Canberra community kept recognition of such work at a level always just below the professional, as 'protest' rather than 'art', and always with the taint of amateurism in a city that recognised no other industry than government. 'Because Canberra is such a small place', Alder recalls, 'if you keep doing something then people will think that you are OK', and take it for granted.⁴⁸

Similar factors shaped the campaign of a group including local lawyers and academics who, from the late 1960s, drove a campaign that gained national prominence for homosexual law reform. Surely, they

argued, Canberra might provide a model for tolerance and decriminalisation in this area of personal rights? But as the wider movement for gay rights built from their case, it was also noted that while the capital might support political lobbying it was less congenial to the assertion of identity. Relative to other cities, Canberra might be highly literate in such lobbying but a good deal more circumspect in open solidarity, since many potential supporters were 'public servants who are afraid of losing their jobs'.⁴⁹ The 'public' of such campaigns was a far from simple entity; their archive requires careful reconstruction and reading for its own variations on 'house arrest' – sometimes quite literally in terms of the places from which people could speak.

Perhaps the most revealing of these campaigns was that which developed through the late 1960s, seeking to create a secondary school system better suited to the particular circumstances of the Canberra community. In 1966 a vigorous parent-initiated public campaign began registering dissatisfaction with the increasingly under-resourced NSW system which had long provided education the Australian Capital Territory (ACT). A series of newspaper articles, public meetings and conferences reflected an engaged and effective local leadership and constituency. The Australian National University (ANU) economist, Noel Butlin, calculated that the taxation paid by ACT residents – reflecting higher average incomes – could support an independent school system better tailored to their needs. Don Anderson, head of the university's recently established Educational Research Unit, undertook an innovative survey of students, documenting both their aspirations and discontents. Richard Campbell, an ANU philosopher, chaired the committee that formulated a model system. The driving force, however, remained with citizens, and the proposed senior secondary college system reflected their participatory ideal of schools governed by boards on which parents and teachers would share influence over staffing and curriculum.⁵⁰

Canberra, it was argued, deserved an 'imaginative and experimental' approach to education, recognizing the 'professionalism' of teachers and avoiding the 'conformity' imposed on them and their classes by public examinations. Tasmania had adopted a matriculation college system to prepare a 'critical mass' of students for university. Canberra, however, faced a different problem. Most ACT students stayed until their final year, an affluent community building their aspirations but also exerting 'greater pressure to succeed' and producing (Anderson found) high levels of anxiety. The 'discernibly hierarchical' nature of a public service town and the relatively high proportion of married women in paid work were among the factors judged to be

building a mounting pressure of expectations among Canberra's youth. If increasing levels of alienation among them was to be avoided, they needed an education more attuned to the development of a sense of individual responsibility and choice.

Critics derided the 'privileges' the capital once again assumed in arguing for such a model, but the capital's self-conscious status as a vanguard of 'post-industrial society' also meant it was increasingly troubled by the demands students felt to conform to the narratives of career, status and security driving their parents.⁵¹ Their lobbying, again finding a Commonwealth government, and a Commonwealth Department of Education, aware of the need for reform, led by 1974 to the establishment of a system of secondary colleges judged 'one of the most dramatic and important [Australian] experiments in educational administration'.⁵² While that achievement in policy is considerable, as is the process of representation that drove it, so is the troubled image the community assembled of itself in making its case.

Canberra, clearly, has a population skilled in the creation of an ordered repository of its business and goals, but the tension between the dominant identity of government and its capacities and a residualised if articulate concept of community is part of its living as well as cultural memory. When the severe contraction of public investment in the capital in the late 1970s accentuated this tension, commentators noted with alarm how the once relatively settled, or at least creative, balance between benevolent, still unelected government and a heightened sense of voluntaristic, community engagement in the creation and projection of identity, descended quickly into marked conflict and confusion.⁵³

The largely unsought bestowal of self-government for the ACT in 1989 struggled against that legacy, and attempts to reimagine the 'public' of the city and its community continue to negotiate an unsteady popular distancing from being a 'government town' while still so clearly dominated by the business of government. Attempts to apportion responsibility for the 'capital' and 'city' or 'community' aspects of Canberra, and to allocate funds and lines of accountability for them, have proved challenging. A split has been forced between identities once cultivated as united, turning the city into a laboratory for new cultures of privatisation in services, performance contracts in government, and developer-driven planning.⁵⁴ As more of the community's past is, in Assmann's term, left 'waste' in the search for a culture appropriate for the new image of metropolitan dynamism, it is worth reflecting on the archives that once existed in that earlier creative synthesis of government and community.

LIKE NO OTHER AUSTRALIAN TOWN OR CITY

Along with the official and community archives, Canberra has also produced, over recent decades, a third repository of more resolutely local testimony. Comprising memoir, testimony, recollection and oral history, it is a repository in which 'living memory' seeks incorporation rather than consignment in the 'cultural memory' of a community so pre-occupied by its perennial refashioning as a created, artificial city. Always tormented by the capital-yet-to-be, a rich seam of local history has sought to account for the several phases of migration, community and culture that have characterised at least the past one hundred years of Canberra's growth, and fallen largely outside the syntheses noted above. A related stand of local Aboriginal history has even more emphatically worked with that distance to make a more fundamental point about dispossession and resilience. The social archive produced in this process counters the 'artificiality' that is often attributed to the Canberra project and also, to some extent, the 'laboratory' of activism and innovation. But its emphatic 'authenticity' shows its own traces of a 'house arrest' in dealing with the boundaries Canberra inevitably brings to the experience recorded.

The 'pioneer' as a resolute figure in Australian public history, has had serial incarnations in Canberra's narrative, in part as a reflection of these phases of commitment to the capital, and in part in gestures to reclaim what is seen to be distinctive against an imposed narrative of experimentation and 'nation building'. Ironically, perhaps, the pioneer has dominated the capital's local history long after it has faded elsewhere, precisely in reaction to the dominating stories of planning and politics. Canberra's community historians, defined by their engagement and representation of these phases and antithesis, have created a sequence of such 'pioneers': those of pastoralism, those of inter-war settlement, or those of ostensibly transitory wartime or more permanent post-war transfer, each set against the less authentic infusions of people, policies and experience to follow. Overall, the pioneer past that Canberra's local historians have worked to recover has been framed more by a desire to rescue 'the people' from the imprint of government, and to push past always slightly patrician initiatives to an attention to those who were the subjects rather than the agents of an imminent, if not omnipresent state. This push, however, has created tensions of its own.

Since its foundation in 1953, the Canberra and District Historical Society has sought to reconcile a determination to counteract the increasing 'invisibility' of the past in a city so determined on

transformation with an approach that might reconcile the local and more 'academic' interests compromising its membership – the 'pioneers' versus the 'intelligentsia'.⁵⁵ At its first meeting, for example, those present 'were asked to record the date of their families' first association with the district', and local enthusiasts spoke of their careful collections of Aboriginal artefacts, found on their properties and treasured as souvenirs. The Society's energy was undeniable, pushing through lapses in membership in the 1960s to tap a revival in family and community history in the following decades.

'Pioneers' stood outside the ambitions of government; they represented variations of resilience, of 'truthing'. Advocacy for a range of heritage and preservation causes, including built and natural landscapes and Aboriginal sites, surged into the 1980s in association with the bicentenary and countered a pervasive view that Canberra lacked 'a past worth preserving'.⁵⁶ A journal launched 1966 reflected this enthusiasm, but generated its own debates over the 'local' and the popularly accessible, and more research-driven material, reflecting aspects of the readership.⁵⁷ An ACT Heritage Committee, established in 1972, advocated the establishment of a museum to foster a 'stronger sense of identity... in a population still largely comprised of persons born interstate or overseas'. Over following years, the restorations of pastoral properties such as Lanyon Homestead (to capture the convict era of the 1830s) or suburban homes such as Calthorpe's House (middle class domestic life of the 1930s) were innovative in their attention to issues of labour, gender and rank. But still the 'pioneer' image prevailed, individualising and perhaps sentimentalising the terms in which local history was presented.

Local history has fostered engagement with a rich and evolving historiography, moving into a second phase of critical synthesis, and finding its place – for example – within the recent revitalisation of Australian colonial history.⁵⁸ It has engaged with the expansion of oral history, memory and testimony. It has also given a voice to people otherwise marginalised from the narrative of high politics that has dominated the history of Canberra, to the exclusion of the efforts of those who made such a narrative possible. Sara Dowse, who wrote so evocatively of the workings of bureaucracy in the 1970s and 1980s, also reflected on the strength of women writers emerging from the small, collegial groups the city encouraged in its mix of affluence and alienation. These writers, Dowse noted, negotiated the 'transience' of new suburbs and the 'renewal' they could offer in 'children, building, planting, and people reaching out'.⁵⁹ Equally, committed and prolific

community-based historians such as Ann Gugler and Alan Foskett have marshalled archival research and personal recollection to 'recover' the lost places of Canberra's early development as a city of workers and migrants.⁶⁰ Into the 1990s processes of heritage classification generated opportunities for grants and consultancies that could move such work into more professionalised foundations, just as community grants assisted in bringing groups of writers together. Over the past decade the ACT Heritage Library, a specialised collection developed within the ACT Government Library Service, has amassed a diversity of materials relating to local and regional history – if in an unsteady demarcation from the National Library, as much driven by limited resources in both institutions to systematically acquire materials. The Canberra Museum and Gallery has mounted a similar, and increasingly bold, enterprise of marking out its role in a city dominated by national cultural institutions.

Steadily Canberra is beginning to produce an archive that rises above imperatives to reclaim the integrity of local experience to also begin make a contribution to understanding the ways in which such experiences were a part of wider stories of class, conflict, identity and isolation. In *Hope*, for example, Ann-Marie Jordens has explored the solidarity emerging across generations of immigrants and refugees in the particular context of Canberra. Here, in an older spirit of community volunteerism, combined with an awareness of falling outside the stereotypes of the planned and soulless city, people from Europe, then Asia, now Africa, have experienced the many dimensions of being 'New Australians' in a new community.⁶¹ A new wave of writers and visual artists are portraying the same diversity in Canberra's suburbs – but with the revealing emphasis that these suburbs are familiar in *any* Australian city.⁶²

Just as the found object, the assembled life, the bric-a-brac of experience in juxtaposition to a sparse landscape, has defined a prevailing aesthetic for Canberra – most famously in the work of Rosalie Gascoigne – it is appropriate that the Canberra community should exist in these individual narratives of experience, surprise, reinvention and adaptation. But if public history, and our understanding of the archive, is to move beyond such personalised memories, testaments and deposits to consider the circumstances of their creation, then the history of Canberra suggests ways in which we might foreground these fundamental acts of invention and performance as artefacts in themselves.

Canberra, in its peculiarities, it might be argued, demands this foregrounding more than most places; but it also offers more general reflection on what they represent in the Australian project, whether in

the long-delayed 'archival response' in government or the dynamics of social advocacy. For all its insularity and seductive privileges, Canberra is, as Don Watson concedes, 'like no other Australian town or city, yet no other Australian town or city is more Australian'.⁶³ It has been presented as a 'laboratory' for what the nation might aspire to, in planning, service provision and amenity. It is also the centre in which the wheels of government, its agencies and agents, are portrayed as grinding on in their relentless, unaccountable paths. The official, community and local archives point to other aspects of the city, not set in contrast to these images, but interdependent with them in commencement, commandment, action and place. In this synthesis, too, Canberra is – as Jeanne MacKenzie reflected before Watson – 'not like Australia and yet it could not be anywhere else'.⁶⁴

ENDNOTES

- 1 David Butler, *The Canberra Model*, Macmillan, London, 1973, pp4-6.
- 2 King O'Malley, *Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates*, 19 July 1901, p30.
- 3 Joanna Sassoon, 'Phantoms of Remembrance: Libraries and Archives as the "collective memory"', *Public History Review*, no 10, 2003, p40.
- 4 Aleida Assmann, *Cultural Memory and Western Civilisation: Functions, Media, Archives*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge UK, 2011, pp6; 13.
- 5 Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression*, trans by Eric Prenowitz, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, 1996, p2.
- 6 Nicholas Gane and David Beer, *New Media: The Key Concepts*, Berg, Oxford, 2008, p73.
- 7 John Lhotsky, *A Journey from Sydney to the Australian Alps*, Blubber Head Press, Hobart, 1978, pp67-9.
- 8 K.S. Inglis, 'Ceremonies in a Capital Landscape', *Daedalus*, vol 114, no 1, 1985, p86.
- 9 See Nicholas Brown, 'Canberra 1913', in Michelle Hetherington (ed), *Glorious Days: Australia 1931*, National Museum of Australia Press, Canberra, 2013, pp76-77.
- 10 Frederick Watson, *A Brief History of Canberra*, Federal Capital Press, Canberra, 1927, p69.
- 11 Quoted in Frank Brennan, *Canberra in Crisis: A History of Land Tenure and Leasehold Administration*, Dalton, Canberra, 1971, p24.
- 12 Paul Reid, *Canberra Following Griffin: A Design History of Australia's National Capital*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2002, p170.
- 13 Michael Piggott, *Archives and Social Provenance: Australian Essays*, Chandos, Oxford, 2012, p58.
- 14 Michael Piggott, 'Beginnings', in Sue Kemmish and Michael Piggott (eds), *The Records Continuum: Ian MacLean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years*, Ancora Press, Melbourne, 1994, pp4; 13.
- 15 Peter Biskup, *Library Models and Library Myths: The Early Years of the National Library of Australia*, Historical Bibliography Monographs, no 11, Canberra, 1988, pp12-13.
- 16 Paul Hasluck, *The Government and People 1939-41*, Australian War Memorial, Canberra, 1952, p125.
- 17 *Official Year Book of the Commonwealth of Australia, 1944-45*, p.210.
- 18 *Canberra Times*, 20 August 1952.
- 19 Piggott, *Archives and Social Provenance*, p90; P.R. Eldershaw, 'Archives', *Public Administration*, vol 15, no 4, 1956, p335.
- 20 H. L. White, 'The Commonwealth National Library', *Education News*, vol 4, no 1, 1953, p2.
- 21 Stuart Macintyre, 'The Library in the Political Life of the Nation', in Peter Cochrane (ed), *Remarkable Occurrences: The National Library of Australia's First Hundred Years*, National Library of Australia, Canberra, 2001, pp130-34.
- 22 Steve Stuckey, 'Keepers of the Flame', in Kemmish and Piggott (eds), *Records Continuum*, pp39-40.
- 23 Ian Maclean, 'An Analysis of Jenkinson's *Manual of Archive Administration* in the Light of Australian Experience', in Peter Biskup et al (eds), *Debates and Discourses: Selected Australian*

-
- Writings on Archival Theory 1951-1990*, Australian Society of Archivists, Canberra, 1995, pp60; 76.
- 24 H. L. White, 'The Development of the Commonwealth Archives Programme', *Public Administration*, vol 15, no 4, 1956, pp290-91.
- 25 Stuckey, 'Keepers of the Flame', p45
- 26 Piggott, *Archives and Social Provenance*, p3.
- 27 Stuart Macintyre, 'Archives', in Graeme Davison, John Hirst and Stuart Macintyre (eds), *Oxford Companion to Australian History*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1998, p38.
- 28 Jill Adams and Chris Oates, *Serving the Nation: 100 Years of Public Service*, National Council for the Centenary of Federation, Canberra, 2001, p89.
- 29 F. A. Bland, 'Public Administration in Wartime', *Australian Quarterly*, vol 14, no 4, 1942, p52.
- 30 Public Service Board, *Twenty-Third Annual Report*, AGPS, Canberra, 1947, p7.
- 31 P. W. E. Curtin, 'Politics and Administration II', *Public Administration*, vol 8, no 1, 1949, p18.
- 32 K.H. Bailey, 'The War Emergency Legislation of the Commonwealth', *Public Administration*, vol 4, no 1, 1942, p12.
- 33 Paul Hasluck, 'Problems of Research on Contemporary Historical Records', *Historical Studies*, vol 5, no 17, 1951, pp1-13.
- 34 Tim Rowse, *Nugget Coombs: A Reforming Life*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2001, p154.
- 35 See R. A. W. Rhodes, *Everyday Life in British Government*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, 2011.
- 36 Sara Dowse, *West Block*, Penguin, Ringwood, 1983, pp20; 71; 73; 234-5.
- 37 Adrian Cunningham, 'Digital Curation/Digital Archiving: A View from the National Archives of Australia', *American Archivist*, vol. 71, 2008, pp536; 539.
- 38 Quoted in Biskup, 'Library Models', p35.
- 39 Gabrielle Hyslop, 'For Many Audiences: Developing Public Programs at the National Archives of Australia', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 30, no1, 2002, p51.
- 40 Lionel Orchard, 'Managerialism, Economic Rationalism and Public Sector Reform in Australia', *Australian Journal of Public Administration*, vol 57, no 1, 2008, p20.
- 41 Sir Robert Garran, Foreword, *Canberra Today*, Department of the Interior, Canberra, nd, p4.
- 42 *Canberra Community News*, 14 October 1925, p1; 11 November 1925, pp1-2
- 43 Freeman Wyllie, 'Constructing a Community: The Canberra Social Service Movement 1925-1929', M.Litt, ANU, 1994, pp12, 23.
- 44 Helen Crisp and Loma Ruddock, *The Mothering Years: The Story of the Mothercraft Society 1926-1979*, Canberra Mothercraft Society, Canberra, 1979, pp20; 41; *Canberra Community News*, 9 May 1927, p3; Libby Robin, *How a Continent Created a Nation*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2007, pp84-87; James Gillespie, *The Price of Health*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 1991, pp53-4.
- 45 *Canberra Parents Bulletin*, March 1945, April 1945; Minutes of the Griffith Progress and Welfare Association, 13 January 1944, 28 October 1946; Minutes of Canberra Citizen's Rights League, 25 July 1944; Bill Fanning Papers, NLA MS 7881.
- 46 See, for example, Hugh Stretton, *Ideas for Australian Cities*, Griffin Press, Adelaide, 1970, p103.
- 47 Marian Sawyer, *Making Women Count: A history of the Women's Electoral Lobby in Australia*, UNSW Press, Sydney, 2008, pp8-9; 22; 33; 37; 40; 94.
- 48 Anni Doyle Wawrzynczak, 'Canberra's Bitumen River Gallery', *Art Monthly*, no 259, 2013, p38; see generally Julia Church and Alison Alder (eds), *True Bird Grit: a book about Canberra women in the arts 1982-83*, Megalo, Canberra, 1983, p14.
- 49 *Camp Ink*, May 1972, p8.
- 50 Clifford Burnett, 'How the ACT Schools Authority Came Into Being', *Australian Education Review*, no 10, 1978, pp13-17.
- 51 *An Independent Education Authority for the ACT*, ANU Press, Canberra, 1967, pp5-7; 14. *Secondary Education for Canberra*, AGPS, Canberra, 1973, pp10; 12-15; 21-24.
- 52 Barry Price, 'Planning a New School System', *CHJ*, March 2004, pp23-34; Grant Harman, 'The New ACT School System', *Australian Education Review*, no 10, 1978, pp89.
- 53 Tony Vinson, Victor Coull and Robyn Walmsley, *Review of Welfare Services and Policies in the Australian Capital Territory*, AGPS, Canberra, 1985, pp4; 6-8; 9; 11; 42.
- 54 Phillip Grundy, Bill Oakes, Lynne Reeder and Roger Wettenhall, *Reluctant Democrats*, Federal Capital Press, Canberra, 1996.
- 55 Patricia Clarke, 'The Society Begins...' in Chris Clark (ed), *Canberra History 1953-2003*, Kelly & Sons, Canberra, 2003, p8.
- 56 Alan Fitzgerald, 'The Case for an ACT Museum', *Canberra Historical Journal*, no 15, 1985, pp27-28.
- 57 Graeme Barrow, 'From a Humble Start', in Clark (ed), *Canberra History 1953-2003*, pp23; 25.

-
- 58 See for example David Meyers, *Lairds, Lags and Larrikins: An Early History of the Limestone Plains*, Sefton Press, Canberra, 2001.
- 59 Sara Dowse, 'Foreword' to Majura Writers' Group, *Home Grown Anthology*, Majura Writers Group, Canberra, 1993, pix.
- 60 See, for example, Ann Gugler (ed), *True Tales From Canberra's Vanished Suburb, On Demand*, Canberra, 1999; Alan Foskett, *Homes for the Workers*, Narrabundah Pre-Fabs History Group, Canberra, 2012.
- 61 Ann-Marie Jordens, *Hope: Refugees and their Supporters in Australia*, Halstead Press, Canberra, 2012.
- 62 See, for example, Lee Grant, *Belco Pride*, Everbest, Canberra, 2012; Christie Thompson, *Snake Bite*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 2012.
- 63 Don Watson, *Recollections of a Bleeding Heart: A Portrait of Paul Keating PM*, Vintage, Sydney, 2003, p249.
- 64 Jeanne MacKenzie, *Australian Paradox*, Cheshire, Melbourne, 1961, p32.