

Workshop given by Ronald Briggs of AIATSIS and Jim Stokes from the National Archives of Australia at the 'Partnerships in Knowledge' Conference, Canberra, April 2001 hosted by AusSI ACT Branch and the Canberra Society of Editors. Published in *Australian Society of Indexers Newsletter* 2001, vol. 25, no. 8, pp. 75, 80-1.

The National Archives 'Bringing Them Home' Database Project

Jim Stokes

The 'Bringing Them Home' indexing project is part of the Commonwealth Government's response to the Bring Them Home report. The project aims to assist Indigenous people in family and community reunion by indexing hundreds of thousands of occurrences of personal names and other relevant information. The names are compiled in an Access computer database which is used by National Archives of Australia reference staff working with individuals and family link-up organisations.

My first substantial experience of records issues relating to Indigenous people was when I worked on the Australian Law Reform Commission's review of the Commonwealth Archives Act in 1996–98. We looked at a range of problems relating to the accessibility and preservation of records of significance in land claims and family and community reunion, and made series of recommendations which I hope will be gradually implemented.

Matthew Storey of the North Australian Aboriginal Legal Aid Service, who was one of our honorary consultants, said something, which I think, summarises the whole issue very well:

Aboriginal people, especially ... the Stolen Generations, are surely the most regulated and recorded population in Australian history.

Yet within this there is a paradox. On the one hand, written records relating to Indigenous people often seem at best intrusive and patronising and at worst cruel and misleading. Furthermore, many Indigenous people see the records of the various levels of government as insufficiently accessible to themselves, but in some case too widely accessible to others.

On the other hand, for communities with oral rather than written traditions and subject to fierce external pressures the European records—whatever their failings—often contain vital information.

A further complication is that the records which governments compiled about Indigenous people also tell important stories about European society and the way in which it interacted with the Indigenous population. So they are part of all our stories.

Yet another complication is that records relating to Indigenous people are spread over a wide range of jurisdictions, government and private.

This is illustrated by the fragmented nature even of National Archives' holdings:

Canberra: we hold a mixture of national policy records and old NT administration records. They include records relating to:

- government expeditions
- relations with missions and institutions
- land administration (mining and pastoral leases)
- education
- fishing
- prisons
- social security
- Royal Commission on British Nuclear Tests
- Commonwealth initiatives in Indigenous affairs

Darwin: the records of the pre self-government NT Administration, in particular

- F1 main correspondence files of NT Admin 1915–78 (918 shelf m)
- D4082 NT Welfare Branch case files 1963–72 (6 m)
- E742 Native Affairs Branch staff files 1954–69 (2 m)
- E155 Tennant Creek welfare files 1957– (17 m).

Melbourne: the former colonial/state Aboriginal Affairs records, which were transferred to the Commonwealth in 1975 (following the 1967 referendum)

- Case and correspondence files for the Central Board for the Protection of Aborigines 1869–1968 (B318, B337)
- Name index cards for Aboriginal Welfare Board 1965 (B2016)
- Lake Tyers correspondence files 1865–1968 (B356)
- Lake Tyers population statistics 1922–64 (B2023).

As in many other areas of government administration, the survival of records has been patchy. It is certain that some records were destroyed that should not have been destroyed—some because their value was not appreciated, some perhaps deliberately to bury the past. For example, most of the NT Welfare Branch’s so-called half caste files were destroyed in the 1970s.

NAA has addressed this problem by imposing a freeze on the disposal of records which might assist family or community reunion. This was applied to records in NAA custody in 1996 and to records in the custody of all Comm agencies in 2000. It is important to note that it does not apply to all records relating to Indigenous people, but only to those which might reasonably be expected to assist reunion.

However, the problem with disposal freezes is that they are often too late—the damage was done many years ago.

The Bringing Them Home indexing project

Giving effective community access to Commonwealth government records has always been a challenge. Only a few per cent of Commonwealth records survive to be transferred to NAA, but even so we hold around 250 shelf km of records designated for long-term retention. These records were created by hundreds of agencies using a wide range of systems of organisation. We have acquired with them a range of indexes and lists and we have applied our own descriptive standards to them.

Traditionally, it was necessary to approach records from the top down, through administrative histories and series registrations to index cards and transfer lists.

Even then individual file titles are not necessarily an accurate or complete guide to what is actually in the file.

Over the past decade NAA has developed the RecordSearch electronic database (now available though the NAA website) which includes all agency and series registrations and around 3 million individual items. But this is only a small percentage of the total number of items in NAA.

In any case in a complex area like family reunion even a complete list of item titles is of only limited use—a detailed index of the contents of each item is necessary.

As part of the Commonwealth government’s response to the HREOC Bringing Them Home report in December 1997 NAA was given \$2 million over four years to index, copy and preserve thousands of files relevant to family and community reunion.

Indexing began in July 1998 and will continue until June 2002.

So far we have examined more than 15,000 files, about half of which proved to be worth indexing. We have searched nearly 550,000 individual folios and made around 170,000 entries on the database (including multiple occurrences of references to the same people).

Indexing strategies

These are not easy records to index. In the main Commonwealth case management records series (e.g. welfare, Tax, Defence personnel, Veterans Affairs) you would expect to find personal details recorded completely and consistently. You would expect at the very least to have full names and date and place of birth and death recorded. But in many records relating to Indigenous people, particularly in the nineteenth and earlier twentieth century, the only identifiable reference may be a single name imposed by Europeans, together with a geographical location. In consequence the same person may have multiple index entries which can not be definitely linked at the time of indexing.

We had to design an indexing standard which could capture whatever information existed in a way that would help researchers to as far as possible link a range of very embryonic references to the same person.

Our indexing sheets (from which data is later entered to the database) provide for surname and given names (including alternative forms), a primary/secondary/tertiary relevance code, birth and death information, sex, an events date range and age of subject at the time of the event and any place names associated with the reference. We also have open and closed comments fields.

Some of the issues we had to consider were:

The database

We are using an Access database and all data entry is done by a single DPO in Canberra. The Access database was adopted a simple solution to get the project up and running. It was intended that within six months the BTH database would be integrated with the RecordSearch database. For various technical and sensitivity reasons this was not done and we have had problems with slow operating speeds as the volume of data increases. We are in the final stages of converting the database to Access 2000 and transferring it to an SQL serve, which should improve its performance considerably. Our next project is to develop more sophisticated search strategies. Another issue, which we need to face, is who can use it.

The database is basically an index to records rather than record itself. Even so it contains information which the subjects and their communities might well consider sensitive, especially in aggregation.

NAA's position is that the database is intended to facilitate family and community reunion, not to be a general guide to records relating to Indigenous people. People generally seek information from the database through the Link Up groups, for whom NAA staff run searches on the database.

Access to the records themselves is granted under the memoranda of Understandings between NAA and Indigenous groups, which were signed in 1997 in the Northern Territory and 2000 in Victoria.

Anyone else seeking access to the records must do so under the normal public access provisions of the Archives Act. The records we index are listed at item level on the RecordSearch database, but members of the public would not be able to access the BTH database as a finding aid. Some of the records would certainly be subject to 33(1)(g) unreasonable disclosure of personal affairs exemptions.

If Indigenous groups were generally agreeable, we would probably incorporate the database into RecordSearch and make it generally available via the Internet. However, it is clear that the Indigenous advisory groups, particularly in the Northern Territory, would not be prepared to accept this at this stage.

Indexing priorities

We are working our way through the relevant records in the NT, Canberra and Melbourne.

We know there are some relevant records in our other offices and we will move into these later this year.

We have not indexed the big Commonwealth personal case file series. Examples of these are armed service personnel records and Commonwealth public service and Australian National Railways staff files. The problem is not only that there are tens of thousands of shelf kilometres of them, but that in many cases it is not possible to reliably identify Indigenous people. We might consider indexing some service personnel files if Indigenous soldiers have been identified through other research.

Accountability

We are very much aware that we were given this money for a specific humanitarian purpose. We made a detailed submission to the Senate Legal and Constitutional Committee's inquiry last year into the Bringing Them Home response and we appeared before them. Both from the hearing and the subsequent written report we formed the impression that the Committee was aware of what we are doing and did not have any specific concerns about it. The Committee was obviously concerned about the fragmentation of records between jurisdictions and from their questioning we thought they might be inclined to recommend the development of a single national database, which would certainly be an interesting challenge. However, somewhat to our relief, they did not take this up in the written report.

The committee did strongly urge that there should be more accountability and scrutiny of Bringing Them Home response projects and no doubt we shall be involved in this.