

Putting the pieces back together

Trevor Ah Hang, project supervisor, Bringing Them Home Project

In July 1998 the National Archives of Australia was allocated \$2 million over four years to index, copy and preserve thousands of files on Indigenous peoples to make them more readily accessible. It established the Bringing Them Home Name Indexing Project, which comprises a team of indexers who are preparing an index of all Aboriginal names listed in Commonwealth Government records.

History

The Commonwealth Government's decision to provide funding for this project was part of its response to the *Bringing Them Home* report. The report followed the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islanders from their Families which produced a series of recommendations to address issues related to Australia's Indigenous peoples. Recommendation 22a stated:

That all government record agencies be funded as a matter of urgency by the relevant government to preserve and index records relating to Indigenous individuals, families and/or communities and records relating to all children, Indigenous or otherwise, removed from their families for any reason.

As the majority of relevant records in the National Archives were held in Darwin and Canberra, teams were established in those cities first, at the end of 1998. Melbourne joined the team in early 2000.

Objective

The primary objective was to index as many names of Indigenous people, places and groups as possible given time and money restrictions but, in accordance with the wishes of the Northern Territory Advisory Group, was not to prepare another dossier on the Indigenous peoples. This was to give us a useful, searchable database, accessible to Indigenous Australians looking to 'link up' with their families and communities.

Location of records

Most of the Archives records on Indigenous peoples are located in Canberra, Darwin and Melbourne. They are primarily about people from the Northern Territory and Victoria, and the development of Commonwealth government policies on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander affairs.

Until the 1967 referendum, the Commonwealth had responsibility for indigenous affairs only in the territories. State governments were responsible for Aboriginal affairs in their jurisdictions and created and maintained most government records relating to those affairs. The National Archives has more recent records for all States because in 1968 the *Constitution* was amended to pass the power to legislate for Aboriginal people from the States to the Commonwealth.

In 1975 the Victorian State Government legislated to transfer responsibility for Aboriginal affairs and associated records to the Commonwealth. Those records, some dating as far back as 1860, are now held in the Melbourne office of the National Archives.

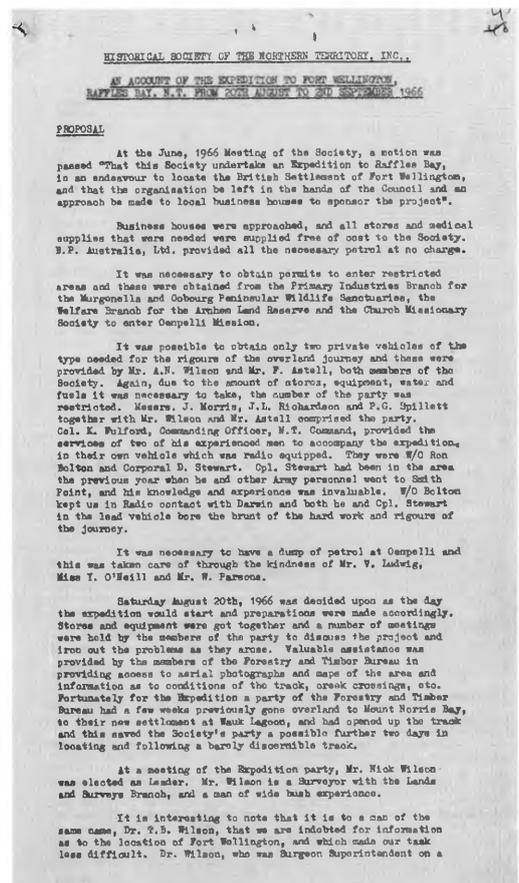
The Canberra and Darwin offices of National Archives hold records about indigenous peoples in the Northern Territory dating back to 1911.

Identifying the records

A 'primary source' is a source that contains Indigenous names and originates from an agency whose primary concern was Indigenous peoples of Australia. A 'secondary source' is a source (although it may not have originated from an agency that dealt primarily with Indigenous matters) whose title indicates that it might reasonably be expected to contain Indigenous material. Due to the diverse nature of the series held by different Archives offices, varying methodologies have been used to select record series for indexing.

Darwin

Darwin's primary series have been found to contain a lot of information relevant to Indigenous people but due to the nature of these files, this information has not been easily accessible. A Memorandum of Understanding was reached between the National Archives of Australia, the Central Australian Aboriginal Child Care Agency (CAACCA), the Karu Aboriginal and Islander Child Care Agency, and representatives of the Northern Territory stolen generation to provide better access to Commonwealth records.



An example of a thermal copy from a 1967 file, typical of the thousands of folios we examine.

Canberra

Agencies based in Canberra have been identified and their functions analysed. Relevant file series have been recorded and selected. File lists and control records were checked for item control symbols. Records relating to Territorial functions were identified and keywords used to filter files by their titles. At the same time, reference officers and other Archives staff have often alerted the Bringing Them Home indexing team to relevant files discovered during their daily work.

Melbourne

Many of Melbourne's relevant records were listed in *My heart is breaking*, a guide to records about Aboriginal people, published in 1993 by the Public Record Office of Victoria and the Australian Archives, Victorian Regional Office. Further material has been raised by reference officers and from inquiries by the Victorian Museum, which led to investigations into Indigenous soldiers serving in World War I.

Other States

Adelaide has index cards from the Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Com-

mission, which were identified for the indexing team with the co-operation of the Adelaide staff. Perth, Sydney and Brisbane offices have also helped to identify their relevant records.

Where we are at

In Canberra we have completed many of the primary sources and we are now looking at secondary sources as well as files from states other than the Northern Territory and Victoria. In Darwin the primary source is one series that is large enough to require all the available resources to index it. In Melbourne, it seems that we will be able to complete the primaries and commence a review of other records.

Where are we going?

As we approach the last funded year of the project we must look to the future, to ask what are our options in light of what we have achieved and what may remain.

If at this stage, it appears that there are strong arguments, we would look to continue the project. Completing the data entry phase, investigating to ensure that the finer details are not overlooked and



Canberra Bringing Them Home indexing team: Back row (l-r): Cheryl Griffiths; Philippa Scarlett; Di Molnar; Glynis Vickery; Manik Datar. Front row (l-r): Trevor Ah Hang; Dr Jim Stokes; Vince Burns

moving towards the development of a useful and useable interface, searchable and user friendly, to disseminate the indexed information. Unlike the Sydney Harbour Bridge which is painted from one end to the other and then started all

over again, it would be unreasonable to expect further funding to go back over the material already examined. This opportunity may not come again and it would be frustrating to fall short of the finish, being so close. ■

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