Study in Documents

Chasing Phantoms in the Archives: The Australia House Photograph Collection*

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RÉSUMÉ L'auteure fait un jour la découverte qu'une importante collection de photographies historiques d'Australie a disparue, ce qui l'intrigue. Elle mène alors une enquête sur le pourquoi, le quand et le comment de cette disparition et sur ses causes les plus probables. Cet article suggère qu'une plus grande sensibilité à la culture visuelle dans la politique de gestion des documents de l'agence permettrait qu'une pareille destruction de collections photographiques soit évitée à l'avenir.

ABSTRACT The author's discovery that an Australian government agency's large historical photograph collection no longer exists intrigues her. She pursues an investigation into when, how, and why these records disappeared, and the most likely cause of their disappearance is traced. The article suggests that sensitivity to visual literacy in the agency's current records management policies would ensure that further destruction of large photograph collections will not recur.

Archivists share with researchers the joys of discovering new sources and also our frustrations when we encounter gaps in the records. This symbiotic relationship is borne from the idea that "deep within our belief systems is a model which associates archival materials with historical research discoveries."[1] This understanding can lead to the expectation that the discovery of new information and new evidence is a prerequisite for writing history. Sometimes the absence of direct evidence can lead to more imaginative uses of historical sources, and has the potential to lead to writing new kinds of histories. Equally, an absence of records can, in itself, be seen as evidence, and there comes a point in the research process where it may be more telling to explain erasure than continue searching for records.

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1 Michael Piggott, "Archives and Australian History," *Australian Historical Association Bulletin* (June 2000), p. 4.

As John Tagg has suggested, there is a need to incorporate the history of the archive into the writing of history based on that archive.[2] Investigations into the history of the manipulation of war records exist,[3] but the apparent disappearance of less politically charged records in archives provides an opportunity to explore more fully the possibilities of writing about the absence of evidence and the history of destruction of records.[4] My discovery that a large photograph collection once held in Australia House in London no longer exists led me to pursue why this once important series of photographs is now but a "phantom of the archives." Through tracing the history of destruction of a series of records, this study in documents provides a point of entry into a history of the visual literacy of records managers and archivists. It also gives insight into possible processes behind the erasure of this series from the archival record.[5]

The notion of "chasing phantoms" emerges from research carried out for a biography of a specific group of photographs of Western Australia, all of which were taken by the local commercial photographer E.L. Mitchell. Their "lives" were being followed from their time of taking for private clients, newspapers, and government in 1910 until the present, so as to understand their role in creating an imaginary idea of Western Australia to the empire. The biography of these photographs is situated historically within the broader context of an empire that Richards has argued was "united not by force but by information."[6] My research has involved tracing the networks of individuals and institutions behind the placement of these photographs across the world into a range of contemporary collections (including that held in Australia House), analysing publications ranging from adventure narratives to the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and, more recently, investigating archives. However, writing such a biography relies on the survival of "biographical" information – not only the photographs themselves, but also documentation about the contexts in which they were found, and the mechanisms and individuals behind their distribution.

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2 John Tagg, "The Pencil of History," in P. Petro, ed., *Fugitive Images: From Photographs to Video* (Bloomington, 1995), p. 286.

3 Keith Wilson, ed., *Forging the Collective Memory: Government and International Historians Through Two World Wars* (Providence, RI, 1996).

4 One example of writing about the history of the records is Patrick J. Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millenium* (Princeton, N.J, 1994).

5 For discussions on this issue see Joan M. Schwartz, "We Make Our Tools and Our Tools Make Us: Lessons for Photographs from the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics," *Archivaria* 40 (Spring 1996), pp. 40–74 and Joanna Sassoon, "Photographic Meaning in the Age of Digital Reproduction," *LASIE: Library Automation Systems Information Exchange* 29, no. 4, pp. 5–15.

6 T. Richards, *The Imperial Archive: Knowledge and the Fantasy of Empire* (London, 1993), verso, p. 1.

The "phantom" in this paper is the collection of photographs, lantern slides, and associated documentation once held at Australia House in London. Australia House was the London base for a range of Australian government agencies, and it was a significant node in the distribution of information from Australia to England and North America in particular. At one point, its photograph collection was reported to have contained up to 30,000 items. The networks that ensured the distribution of photographs between the periphery of empire in Western Australia and its centre in Britain were initially somewhat haphazard, but from 1922, with a new Commonwealth-State agreement on immigration, the movement of photographs from Australia to London was placed on a more systematic footing. Thus, the Australia House collection was the conduit through which the trade in official photographs of Australia across the British Empire was conducted between 1922 and 1939.

Photographs in the collection held by Australia House were selected by staff in Australia from collections of commercial photographers and from newspaper and state government collections to create a specific image of land and people. These photographs were widely distributed to publishers and shown to potential immigrants, along with a range of printed ephemeral materials intended to encourage them to choose Australia in general and Western Australia in particular, rather than South Africa or Canada.

Records created in association with the construction and management of these photographs included a set of copy negatives held in Australia and a triplicate set of numerical registers, one each housed in London and New York and one retained in Melbourne.[7] But my attempts to research the history of the Australia House photograph collection led to the discovery that there are now no large stashes of photographs or registers that survive in their destination in Australia House in London, nor in the Australian embassy, now in Washington, D.C. All that may have survived from its operation until 1939 was to be found in Australia – unless the photographs and related records remain hidden in the backyards and garages of former employees of the Australian government in England. The state records lent clues to the nature of the photographs which were originally sent to Australia House, and it is possible that photographs may also survive in the archives that remained within government departments.

After several weeks of intensive research in the National Archives in Canberra trying to trace information about, and the contents of, the Australia House photograph collection, something suddenly dawned on me. I had been systematically going through large series of federal government files, looking

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7 Letter from Superintendent, Commonwealth Immigration Office to Commissioner for Australia in the U.S. (4 April 1921). Prime Minister's Department file C532/1, National Archives of Australia A458/1.

for mention of the supply or distribution of photographs, or lists of captions – texts which may serve as traces of their former existence.[8] And, although hoping to find the occasional photograph on the files, all I was hearing was the odd echo – it was apparent that something had been there once, but was no longer there.

Driving back to my temporary home one night, the thought flashed through my mind that these photographs that I was looking for – hoping to find as fragments in the files or as a large stash rescued from some cupboard – simply didn't exist. And this thought brought with it a sense of horror. But once the first wave of panic had passed, I began to consider this response, particularly in the context of my previous practice as a reference librarian. Why had I expected to find what I was looking for? Had I been too systematic in my approach to the whole research process and left little room in my mind for uncertainty and flexibility? In my reference work I had often been called on to help other people redesign their research strategies due to lack of hoped for records, but why wasn't I so lucid when it was happening to me?

As the Melbourne University archivist Michael Piggott reminds us, historians for the most part base their writings on successful finds of source materials. Rarely do they bemoan the destruction or disappearance of material records, or, as archaeologists have done, use the very destruction of material as the basis for study.[9] History has taken to both rereading old sources for new voices and creating new forms of records to incorporate voices silenced within the archives. But there are fewer discussions that turn the abject failure to find material or the destruction of records into the subject of study.

As the fog of panic gave way to a renewed ability to think rationally, it became clear that the collection of photographs once held at Australia House in London was now but a "phantom of the archives." But I also began thinking about my response as an historian to discovering the disappearance of records. Why was I scared of silences in the archives? Isn't the task of the historian to "eke story out of talk and silence?" Doesn't the absence of records provide evidence for writing other kinds of histories?

I began to wonder if it was possible to write the archaeology and biography of this phantom, to work out what it was about the contexts surrounding such a large collection that meant it no longer existed. So, what started as a fear of the phantom became transformed into something much more productive. Chasing this phantom through the archives gradually emerged as an attractive

8 Catherine De Lorenzo, "Appropriating Anthropology? Document and Rhetoric," *Journal of Material Culture* 5, no. 1 (2000), p. 94.

9 Iaakov Karcz and Uri Kafri, "Evaluation of Archaeoseismic Damage in Israel," *Journal of Archaeological Science* 5, no. 3 (1978), pp. 237–57.

research tangent. Why was this collection now but a phantom, how could I find what may still survive, and could the fate that befell this once large collection be repeated today?

Destruction/Survival

Archival records face threats to their existence at critical points of instability of their surrounding context. Changes in administration, ownership, and staff, organizational restructuring, and changes in the fabric of the buildings as a result of renovations are some of the basic points in the life cycle of an organization where its corporate records en masse face as much threat to their survival as do the staff. Records are also subjected to the ongoing and standard threats of vermin, water, fire, the instability of the material on which they are based, and human beings. While infrastructure instability is a threat to the lives of records, at other points it can be the very stability of their surrounding context that threatens them. Stability enables moulds to grow, white ants (termites) to build nests, or, as is likely to have happened to the earliest documents in Western Australia, allows rats to eat all the wax seals.[10]

There have been continual shifts in the administrative responsibility for, and control of photographs of, the Australia House photograph collection, since it moved in 1918 into the Strand, London. This, combined with the distance from the archival eye in Australia, may mean these records have disappeared into the mists of England rather than being seen as part of the official record of Australia and thus repatriated. One concrete example of such a threat to the survival of records in Australia House occurred in 1921. An Acting High Commissioner, keen to make his mark and to rationalize the way space was used in Australia House, reported that, in order to make more efficient use of space, he had cleared accumulations of years of storage of material and documents from the rooms in the basement of Australia House and created space for catering, "which hitherto has been wasted."[11] Outside the more obvious threats of wartime, this perception that space used for storage of documents is wasted may not only indicate the fate of some of the photographs in question, but it seems it is also prevalent within governments even today.[12]

Although it appears that the well–intentioned actions of government officers

10 Public Librarian to Colonial Secretary's Office (11 March 1904), Colonial Secretary's Office, file 2352/1921, State Records Office of Western Australia, Acc 752.

11 Report of the Acting High Commissioner for the year 1921. Commonwealth Parliamentary Paper 17 of 1922.

12 Robert C. Sharman, "The Hollow Crown," *Archives and Manuscripts* 21, no. 2 (1993), pp. 196–207.

may have led to the destruction of valuable records of operations in London, another threat to the long-term survival of the photograph collection may have been the result of its primary function. This photograph collection housed in London was intended for distribution to publishers, educators, and the media in England as part of the broader strategy to educate and to encourage immigration to, and investment in, Australia. In this regard, it ensured that photographs of Australia were both viewed within the building and distributed widely, and published in a large range of genres. Therefore, inherent in the design of the photograph collection was its destiny that it was to be distributed. Knowing this, how would I have judged its worth had I found it lying in the great filing cabinet of empire? Perhaps the way it was designed to function is the reason that it is now a phantom.

But just because the photographs themselves no longer exist, that is, they have served their intended purpose by being widely distributed, does this mean that what the collection once contained need remain unknown and that research can no longer be undertaken on this collection? With some sense of why the material may not have survived, are there ways in which the contents of this material can, in some way, be reconstructed from remaining fragments?

Tracing what fragments of the original collection may have survived required two different approaches. First, there were a few records created by those responsible for advertising Australia and which were therefore about the collection. These discussed the entry of photographs into the collection from Western Australia to Melbourne Head Office and on to London. Second, the trajectories of the photographs from Australia House into the hands of publishers, educators, and the media were traced by using acknowledgements in published sources and gleaning clues from a few lists recording the destinations of photographs. Through these two approaches about ten per cent of the original 30,000 items have been traced.

Destinations for photographs from Australia House included picture agencies in the United Kingdom – commercial organizations who then sold copies of the photographs to commercial publishers. In the archives of one such agency, Exclusive News Agency, lay the only tangible evidence of what once remained of the original Australia House collection: photographs with commonwealth stamps, original numbering systems, and official captions on the backs of the photographs.

Retention/Disposal

The large photograph collections used since 1947 to advertise Australia overseas have survived and are now in the National Archives,[13] but could

13 Australian Overseas Information Service (1947–1950), Australian National Information Bureau (1950–1973).

such large and important photograph collections become phantoms of the archives today, like that of the Australia House collection? Part of the answer lies in the level of awareness of photographs as documentary records, and thus is manifested in the visual literacy of those creating the retention/disposal schedules for these series.[14]

The first schedule for the long-term management of records generated by agencies in Australia House was approved in 1956. It was prefaced with the following comment, which echoes that of the Acting High Commissioner to England in 1921.

The accumulation of records in our overseas posts is creating storage difficulties. These will increase with the passage of time, and unless some disposal action is taken now, shortage of storage space will lead inevitably to improvisation and improvisation will in turn give rise to security risk. On the other hand, the indiscriminate destruction of records may well result in the loss of valuable material and cannot be accepted as the answer to the problem.[15]

This schedule was designed specifically to deal systematically and responsibly with a storage problem. But this formal schedule related almost entirely to correspondence files and publications of the then Department of External Affairs. It was as recently as 1970 that photographs were first mentioned in their records management policies – that the photographs of the Australian News and Information Bureau, the successor to the Australia House collection, should be retained permanently.[16]

Is it too great an extrapolation to equate the absence of photographs from records schedules with absence of photographic evidence in the archives? Can the point at which photographs are first mentioned in a disposal schedule be seen as indicative of the moment when the importance of photographs as archival records is first recognized? Can this be seen as the moment at which those responsible for the retention and disposal schedules begin to show a nascent visual literacy?

Finding phantoms in the archives provides an opportunity to write histories of the absence of evidence in the archival records. Moreover, chasing this one phantom has provided a glimmer of insight into the start of a history of the visual literacy of archivists and records managers. But I do sometimes secretly wonder what I would have done if I had found the goldmine I began

14 Elisabeth Kaplan and Jeffrey Mifflin, " 'Mind and sight'. Visual Literacy and the Archivist," *Archival Issues* 21, no. 2 (1996), pp. 107–27.

15 Disposal authority S.245 was issued on 30 November 1956, jointly signed by the Department of External Affairs and the Commonwealth Library, Archives Division.

16 Disposal authority CA 219/2/2 was issued on 26 February 1970.

searching for – the 30,000 photographs and the triplicate sets of negatives and registers controlling their creation, dissemination, and distribution across the empire. Would I have found the volume of evidence intimidating, or would I have been bored by the fact that I would have to do a much more standard functional, content, and contextual analysis? Would I then have wished that I hadn't found them so that I could have asked a different set of research questions about absence of evidence and the processes of erasure from the historical record?