

## **Purposes almost infinitely varying: Archives as sources for labour biography**

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Sir Hilary Jenkinson, sometime Deputy Keeper of the United Kingdom Public Record Office, wrote in his *Manual of Archive Administration* about the two common features of archives 'of extraordinary value and importance': Impartiality and Authenticity. He referred to the purposes for creating archives and the purposes to which they are put:

Drawn up for purposes almost infinitely varying – the administrative or executive control of every species of human undertaking – [archives] are potentially useful ... for the information they can give on a range of subjects totally different and equally wide ... the only safe prediction concerning the Research ends which Archives may be made to serve is that ... these will not be the purposes which were contemplated by the people by whom the Archives were drawn up and preserved.<sup>1</sup>

That is, archives created for one purpose will invariably end up being used for another purpose entirely. This is challenging for archivists tasked to decide what it is we keep and what we let go: the fact that we need to predict future research use when not even those creating the records know to what uses they will be put.

But to focus on the Impartiality and Authenticity, this is why archives are so important for historical research: those who create them are, for the most part, unaware of the uses to which they will be put and so they stand as an impartial record, as proof of what really happened. Authenticity is not just the signature, the letterhead, and the paper used (though these are important) but also the context: the presence of a letter on a file of a particular organisation within their archives indicates that the actual letter was received by that organisation, and the presence of a reply on the same file indicates that a representative of the organisation took action in response.

To illustrate this, consider the relative value of these sources as 'proof' that a particular person was present at a particular place at a particular time:

1. The recollection of a 72-year-old historian that he was at the age of 23 in Bonn on 10 November 1938
2. A diary entry written by that historian in late 1938 indicating that he arrived in Bonn on 26 November 1938
3. An official stamp in that person's passport indicating the date that he arrived in Bonn.

This example refers to Professor Manning Clark's account of walking the streets of Bonn on the morning after Kristallnacht. Archivists would place most value on the third source and least on the first. The government official stamping a passport is creating a record without much thought of who Manning Clark is (apart from whether he looks like the photo in his passport), or who he might become, and is not

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<sup>1</sup> Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, Percy Lund, Humphries and Co, 1966, p. 12.

considering his reputation as an historian and what he will say in the future. No doubt there are procedures to ensure that the date stamp he uses will be adjusted each day to ensure that the correct date will be stamped. The diary entry has authenticity, assuming that it is not loose-leaf or written years later, but we might want to consider its impartiality: whether what is written in a diary is truly for private record and contemplation or written with an eye to the future, for a later public audience.

Manning Clark was appointed Professor of History at the Canberra University College in 1949, and continued his employment with the Australian National University on its amalgamation with the Canberra University College in 1960. He retired in 1975 but his association with the University continued as he was a Library Fellow and a Visiting Fellow up till his death in 1991. After his death, negotiations with his family continued over the disposition of his library and support for the establishment of Manning Clark House. Manning Clark's staff file held by the ANU Archives therefore holds fifty years of correspondence from 1949 (with arrangements for his travel to Canberra to be interviewed for the job he was appointed to) through to 1999, the last folio being a letter from his wife Dymphna acknowledging funding provided by the University to support Manning Clark House.<sup>2</sup>

Manning wrote many letters in a minuscule scrawl that slanted across the page. When received by his employer, they were invariably typed up so that they could be read and acted upon. His staff file extends to six parts, bulked out by these additional copies of his correspondence. For instance, whenever he was out of town from the early 1950s he corresponded with his superior, Professor Joe Burton, the Principal of the Canberra University College and later the ANU School of General Studies, till Burton's retirement in 1965. This file of correspondence includes their discussion on administrative, academic and personal matters and is one part of Manning Clark's staff file.

The purpose of maintaining Manning Clark's staff file was of course to keep track of his conditions of service – that he was paid at the right level, that he justified his requests for leave for particular purposes and that these periods of leave were approved, that he submitted reports on his study leave, that his input to staffing decisions – the appointment and promotion of other staff and decisions concerning himself such as the timing of his retirement – were recorded and acted on. But staff files are retained for another purpose: because they provide an impartial and authentic record of a person's working life. When someone retires or dies, a staff file can provide the accurate information needed for a farewell speech, eulogy or obituary. For a biographer, using a staff file as a source can complement or even replace less impartial sources and speculation about when or why something happened.

With the recent spate of Manning Clark biographies one might expect that this multi-part file is well-known and used by historians but alas, it sits in its acid-free box in the archives repository waiting for the call. An impartial and authentic source has been ignored in favour of supposition and the subject's own self-justification of their actions after the event. In the case of Manning Clark, his diaries and letters have been extensively mined by biographers, one of whom characterises his subject as 'a historian who placed narrative ahead of facts'.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Australian National University Archives: ANUA 19, Staff files, 3789, CMH Clark, 1949-1999.

<sup>3</sup> M McKenna, *An Eye for Eternity: The Life of Manning Clark*, Melbourne University Press, 2011, flyleaf.

To provide a brief example: in 1955 Manning Clark applied for a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation to fund a visit to South-east Asia. On his staff file there is a letter from Professor Burton to the Rockefeller Foundation providing 'the additional information' they had asked for in support of his application. It details the purpose of Manning Clark's proposed visit to meet particular people in South-east Asia and India, what information and sources he sought to find, and the theory that he sought to prove by reference to these sources. In short, he wished to 'explore the possibility that the north coast [of Australia] was known to Asians before Wilhelm Jansz ,,, discovered it in 1607'.<sup>4</sup>

Not all University staff files are retained – one needs to attain the status of Professor or equivalent to have one's staff file designated as worthy of permanent preservation. The files of labour historians such as Professor Robin Gollan are preserved, for example, as are those for labour leaders Gough Whitlam and Bob Hawke who were University fellows.

Only some student files are retained permanently: while the records which enable the issue of an academic transcript are kept for all students, the full file is only retained for a select few based on their achieving prominence later in life as politicians, judges, and writers, for instance. The original purpose of the file is to ensure that a student pays their fees, enrolls in the right number and type of courses, and passes those courses to enable the awarding of a degree, but there is a different purpose in retaining the file. Kevin Rudd's student file will be of interest to a biographer, but may also be of interest to linguists as evidence of the establishment of a distinctive speech pattern at a young age.<sup>5</sup>

Another source for labour biography are oral history interviews conducted in preparation for the publication of ANU's 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary history: transcript and tapes of interviews with Manning Clark, Laurie Fitzhardinge, Robin Gollan and Humphrey McQueen are included in this series, including a 1982 interview by Gollan of Fitzhardinge.<sup>6</sup> Oral history interviews have authenticity in that one can hear the sound of a person's voice, and can listen to what they say and how they say it, but their impartiality can be questioned particularly when interviewees are asked to recall their motivation for actions taken many years previously.

The files of the Australian Dictionary of Biography which are held in the ANU Archives are another example of archives being used for purposes totally different.<sup>7</sup> For every entry in the ADB there is a file created for the purpose of tracking a detailed workflow from appointment of author to publication of a thoroughly researched and checked entry which will stand up to critical review, hopefully without corrigenda. Once the article is published, their original use to check progress on a particular entry is no longer valid, but their current use is equally valuable: to see what was amended from the author's draft to the final published entry, what was omitted (perhaps useful research undertaken that was not used in the entry due to space limitations), what was edited out as 'too much information' or what was reworded to cast a slightly different meaning.

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<sup>4</sup> ANUA 19/3789, part 1A, Burton to Fahs, 30 June 1955.

<sup>5</sup> ANUA 78, Student files, 76A548, Kevin Rudd, 1975-1990, Rudd to Registrar, June 1975.

<sup>6</sup> ANUA 44, ANU Oral History Project transcripts and tapes of oral history interviews, 1976-1995.

<sup>7</sup> ANUA 312, Australian Dictionary of Biography subject files, 1961-2008.

The examples of sources for labour biography discussed so far are in fact archives of the Australian National University. That is, they are not part of the conscious collection of 'labour archives' which is the business of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. This illustrates the point again of 'purposes infinitely varying': the ANU Archives was established for the purpose of ensuring that ANU history is preserved, but at the same time it serves many other purposes; in this case, documenting labour history and its people.

The ANU Archives recently published a guide to Prime Ministers at the Australian National University.<sup>8</sup> It was a challenge to find sources in the Archives for all 27 prime ministers, not least to avoid having to state on the blurb that there were sources for 'nearly all' prime ministers. Some prime ministers were easier than others: the Noel Butlin Archives Centre holds the archives of the Australian Council of Trade Unions (where Hawke is well-represented), the records of the Australian Federated Union of Locomotive Enginemen (where Chifley's role at the local, state and federal levels is recorded) and the records of the company Paterson, Lang and Bruce (of which Stanley Melbourne Bruce was Managing Director 1917-21). For those on the Labor side of politics we could source records of early union involvement (Watson, Fisher, Cook, Hughes, Curtin), and on the conservative side, union records of protest against prime ministers (Menzies, Holt, Fraser, Howard, and Hughes again because of the union campaigns against him on conscription).

There were also the personal connections with the ANU which generated records: Bruce as Chancellor, Hawke and Rudd as students, Whitlam and Hawke as Fellows, Gorton, Fraser and Hawke as Council members, Hughes who commissioned ANU academic Fitzhardinge to write his biography, and a procession of prime ministers visiting campus, laying foundation stones, opening buildings, giving addresses, launching books, and announcing education policies (Chifley, Menzies, Whitlam, Fraser, Hawke, Keating, Howard and Rudd). So the end result was not just sources for biography for Labor prime ministers but for all twenty-seven including the short-term conservatives such as Page and McEwen.

Our trade union collections are well-used by biographers: those writing biographies of politicians with a union background (such as the Senate Biographical Unit) and authors writing (and editors checking) Australian Dictionary of Biography entries. Their subjects tend to be people who live their lives publicly, but for many family historians who use the collections their biographical subjects are 'workers', not at all famous, and often all they know is that, for example, they 'worked on the wharves'.

The popularity of the SBS program 'Who do you think you are?' has brought new researchers to the archives and many family historians are happy to see their ancestor's name on a union membership roll, recorded as having paid their subscription. If they were beneficiaries from a funeral fund, there may be references in the minutes or if they were a union official, more mentions in the minutes and perhaps a signature. More important are the union records as a source for what it was like to 'work on the wharves' before mechanisation and containerisation, to learn about the conditions of work from discussion of issues such as the acceptable weight

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<sup>8</sup> M Piggott & M Shapley, *Prime Ministers at The Australian National University: An Archival Guide*, ANU E View, 2011 at [http://eview.anu.edu.au/ministers\\_anu](http://eview.anu.edu.au/ministers_anu).

of an individual flour bag or sack of wheat, and reports of illness from exposure to concrete dust and later asbestos and wheat dust.

A common query for the archives is from parties before the Dust Diseases Tribunal seeking to confirm membership of the Waterside Workers' Federation. While the membership cards themselves provide minimal information they provide the impartial and authentic proof that is required as evidence of workplace exposure to asbestos. When it was decided to retain them this use was perhaps not even envisaged.<sup>9</sup>

For labour people, the Australian Trade Union Archives website<sup>10</sup> locates the archives of trade unions and individuals associated with trade unions in many archives and manuscript collections in Australia. Our own trade union collections are included there. Some collections are identified by the person's name, eg Meredith Burgmann, Michael Easson, Charlie Fitzgibbon, and Joe Owens. But for most collections, you need to identify the organisations that the person may have been associated with. If for instance you were looking for records about Ben Chifley and you searched on our holdings using his name, you would not find anything, but searching for the records of his union (AFULE) will lead you to many files, full of his contributions to union wage cases. Similarly if you searched for his employer (NSW Railways) at the NSW State Records you would no doubt find material on Chifley's role.

The ANU Archives does not yet have a database to every file in its keeping, but we are making good progress with developing one.<sup>11</sup> At this stage we have series-level information about all University Archives and are gradually adding item-level (ie the titles of individual files). For the Noel Butlin Archives Centre collections, we have entered information about the business archives we hold (information about the companies who created them and series-level information about the records, but not the items) and are currently entering information about personal collections, both their creators and series-level information about the records. We have also started entering information about our extensive collection of serials, including trade union newspapers and newsletters, which are themselves good sources for information about labour people.

This survey of archival sources for labour biography has been necessarily brief but hopefully provides encouragement to go beyond the usual sources, the diaries and letters, to look to archives as impartial and authentic sources for the writing of biography.

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<sup>9</sup> Noel Butlin Archives Centre: Waterside Workers' Federation of Australia, N114/1569A-B & Z631.

<sup>10</sup> [www.atua.org.au](http://www.atua.org.au).

<sup>11</sup> [www.ica-atom.org/anu](http://www.ica-atom.org/anu).