

Family Archives, Fateful Options

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Article abstract

This article presents reflections prompted after the writer, a retired archivist, began work during 2020 on family papers passed to his care following his parents' deaths, conscious in doing so that many of the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) must be undertaking similar exercises and facing similar needs for decisions about the legacy of the last truly analog generation. The resulting autoethnography draws on his own family story, the emotional experience of working on the papers, archival theory, biographies, and autobiographies. The reflections are structured around the three options all families face in actively dealing with their archives: to cull them; to seek to outsource or deprivatize their custody to a library, archives, or more specialist heritage body; or to manage them within the family. He also identifies various psychological, societal, and random factors influencing individual approaches to the choices and shaping what was created and survived, which the children can consider "round the kitchen table." An additional dimension speculates about the notion of family, and family pets, within descriptive standards and ideas of provenance.

Family Archives, Fateful Options¹

MICHAEL PIGGOTT

ABSTRACT This article presents reflections prompted after the writer, a retired archivist, began work during 2020 on family papers passed to his care following his parents' deaths, conscious in doing so that many of the baby boomer generation (born between 1946 and 1964) must be undertaking similar exercises and facing similar needs for decisions about the legacy of the last truly analog generation. The resulting autoethnography draws on his own family story, the emotional experience of working on the papers, archival theory, biographies, and autobiographies. The reflections are structured around the three options all families face in actively dealing with their archives: to cull them; to seek to outsource or deprivatize their custody to a library, archives, or more specialist heritage body; or to manage them within the family. He also identifies various psychological, societal, and random factors influencing individual approaches to the choices and shaping what was created and survived, which the children can consider "round the kitchen table." An additional dimension speculates about the notion of family, and family pets, within descriptive standards and ideas of provenance.

¹ For help and support in my drafting and thinking, I thank my family and colleagues Karen Anderson, Jeannette Bastian, Jim Burant, Anne-Marie Condé, Adrian Cunningham, Joanna Sassoon, Maggie Shapley, Paul Wilson, and Stephen Yorke. I also thank General Editor Heather Home for her encouragement and forbearance during the preparation of this article.

RÉSUMÉ Cet article présente des réflexions faisant suite au travail entrepris en 2020 par l'auteur, un archiviste à la retraite, sur des archives familiales qui lui ont été transmises à la suite du décès de ses parents. L'article s'inscrit dans un esprit où plusieurs personnes de la génération *baby boomer* (nées entre 1946 et 1964) vont être amenées à entreprendre des procédés où elles vont devoir faire face à des situations similaires concernant l'héritage de la dernière génération complètement analogique. Cette exploration autoethnographique prend source dans les propres récits de famille de l'auteur, dans l'expérience émotive associée au travail documentaire, mais également dans les théories archivistiques, les biographies et les autobiographies. Les réflexions sont ancrées dans les trois options rencontrées par toutes les familles lorsqu'elles doivent s'occuper de leurs archives : effectuer un tri ; chercher à sous-traiter ou à déprivatiser leur garde en les léguant à une bibliothèque, à un centre d'archives ou à une autre société historique spécialisée ; ou conserver leur gestion au sein de la famille. L'auteur identifie également différents facteurs psychologiques, sociaux et autres variables aléatoires qui influencent les approches individuelles face aux choix et procédés ayant contribué à la création et à l'existence des archives, ce que les enfants peuvent considérer comme des « discussions autour de la table de cuisine ». Une dimension supplémentaire interroge le concept de la famille et des animaux de la famille, principalement en ce qui a trait aux normes descriptives et aux conceptions de la provenance.

Introduction

During 2020, after procrastinating for a decade of formal retirement, I began working on inherited family papers, mostly those of my parents. A quieter social life due to COVID-19 presented the opportunity, and by then, invitations to undertake paid project work were rare. The exercise triggered all manner of thoughts, both personal and archival.

What follows are observations and reflections about an aspect of family archives and an historical moment involving two generations – so-called baby boomers and their parents – specifically located within the context of a settler Australian family of Anglo-Celtic ancestry. Still, they undoubtedly have relevance beyond Australia, for transcending this particular setting is a very common phenomenon: generational memory transmission via family archives. One may say mine is a discursive personal archive story; it is not a research report, and it is certainly not a tale of sniffing at sacred stationery or encountering the allure of 200-year-old dust from records on French police informants. Nor is it a tell-all family memoir, though I readily concede that some of the 13 questions Verne Harris posed about nuclear Western families and their archives seem uncannily well aimed.²

It is a kind of autoethnography too – my exemplar, Betsy Hearne and Susanne Belovari's shared and clearly articulated perspectives on the archiving of the former's personal papers, whose approach adopted a model seeking to connect "the personal to the cultural, social, and political."³ Separate again are exemplary analyses achieved without any genre self-consciousness. Archivally and histori-

2 Verne Harris, "Archons, Aliens and Angels: Power and Politics in the Archive," in *The Future of Archives and Recordkeeping: A Reader*, ed. Jennie Hill (London: Facet Publishing, 2011), 103–22, 115–16. One trusts that the idea of a nuclear family is understood, but in case it is not, Lois Harder's succinct "different-sex, legally married couples with children" can suffice. See Lois Harder, *After the Nuclear Age? Some Contemporary Developments in Families and Family Law in Canada* (Ottawa: Vanier Institute of the Family, 2011), https://vanierinstitute.ca/wp-content/uploads/2015/12/CFT_2011-10-00_EN.pdf.

3 Betsy Hearne, "Leaving a Trail: Personal Papers and Public Archives Part One – The Donor's Story," *Archivaria* 86 (Fall 2018): 68–89, 73. See also Susanne Belovari, "Leaving a Trail: Personal Papers and Public Archives Part Two – The Archivist's Story," *Archivaria* 86 (Fall 2018): 90–117. More generally, see Karen Gracy, "Documenting Communities of Practice: Making the Case for Archival Ethnography," in *Research in the Archival Multiverse*, ed. Anne Gilliland, Sue McKemmish, and Andrew Lau (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2017), 868–99. For Australian autoethnographical writing, see Chris Hurley, "About Me," *Chris Hurley's Stuff* (blog), accessed August 23, 2022, <https://www.descriptionguy.com/about-me.html>; and Kirsten Thorpe, "Transformative Praxis: Building Spaces for Indigenous Self-Determination in Libraries and Archives," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*, January 2019, accessed August 23, 2022, <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2019/01/>.

cally informed family reflections such as Frances Stonor Saunders' *The Suitcase*, Gillian Tindall's *The Pulse Glass*, and Maria Stepanova's *In Memory of Memory* are insightful examples.⁴ The eminent Australian historians Graeme Davison and Alan Atkinson have also produced broadly set self-analyses, one on concluding a family history and the other on his life's work. For me, Atkinson's observations specially resonated:

Nothing can be done to persuade the world to take the knowledge created by imaginative literature and theology as seriously as the objective sort. That makes it a kind of knowledge worth pursuing mainly by those of us who have stopped working for a living. Besides, advancing age adds new dimensions to subjectivity. (I am in my early seventies.) Age brings memory to the fore, and not just what you remember but also what you have recorded and created during life, as so many mirrors, even a tunnel of mutually reflective mirrors showing you who you are.⁵

Additional to these authors, my reading during the pandemic included Geoffrey Dutton's biography of explorer and governor of Jamaica, Edward John Eyre. In it, Dutton observed that "time covers and obliterates everything, like the enormous sandhills on the shores of the Great Australian Bight, that silently smother the old telegraph station, the tall poles and the even higher trees, forming and re-forming to the smooth pressures of the winds."⁶ Anyone with the patience to dig will find physical traces, he added, but "the voices of the human beings who lived there are lost in the silence."⁷ Dutton had settler Australians in mind, but their rupturing impact on the cultural memory practices of Indigenous Australians and the communities in which they were and are nurtured, sometimes also tragically leading to silence, is undeniable.

⁴ Frances Stonor Saunders, *The Suitcase: Six Attempts to Cross a Border* (London: Vintage, 2021); Gillian Tindall, *The Pulse Glass: And the Beat of Other Hearts* (London: Vintage, 2020); Maria Stepanova, *In Memory of Memory: A Romance* (New York: New Directions Publishing, 2021).

⁵ Alan Atkinson, "The I in the Past," *History Australia* 15, no. 3 (2018): 578–90, 586. See also Graeme Davison, *Lost Relations: Fortunes of My Family in Australia's Golden Age* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2015).

⁶ Geoffrey Dutton, *The Hero as Murderer: The Life of Edward John Eyre* (Sydney: William Collins, 1967), 399. In a similar vein, see Gregory Day's novel *A Sand Archive* (Sydney: Picador, 2018).

⁷ Dutton, 399.

In the West, at the beginning of the last millennium, the names of notable families began to appear in the records of kings, churches, and courts. Within communities, the preservation of physical and documentary traces of the past also slowed the journey toward silence. And families themselves began to accumulate mementoes – letters, diaries, and “likenesses” – their meaning extended when their provenance was documented and their physical integrity protected, and sites of family memory reflected culture, religion, and wealth. Brideshead Castle’s muniments room became, in Australia, Darryl Kerrigan’s pool room.⁸ Over the past century or so, the rise of public libraries, public archives, and historical societies helped too, allowing some families to deprivatize their patrimony. But only a few. Let me explain.

Family Setting: “Appraisal Began Round the Kitchen Table”

Well into their 80s, my parents lived in the family home in Melbourne. As the decline of their physical and mental health became clear, their three children’s involvement increased. My brother, sister, and I became part of the unpaid aged-care economy.⁹ Some tasks involved securing medical and financial powers of attorney and, more generally, reversing the family recordkeeping system, such as it was; when we were young, records had been kept about us. Other tasks involved seeking aged pensions, sorting various medical and dental appointments, managing their finances, taking them to church, and preparing meals. Photo albums aside, it was our first contact with the household records, too. This was another very common experience; as the *Globe and Mail*’s Erin Anderssen wrote of someone facing a similar scenario, after a long search, “Mr. Cameron

8 For non-Australian readers, a room for an “ordinary” family’s most treasured possessions. See Darryl Sparkes, “Straight to the Pool Room: A Love Letter to *The Castle* on its 25th Anniversary,” *The Conversation*, April 8, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/straight-to-the-pool-room-a-love-letter-to-the-castle-on-its-25th-anniversary-176361>.

9 In some circumstances, government support is available for those caring for aged parents, e.g., Services Australia, “Caring for Someone,” accessed December 16, 2022, <https://www.servicesaustralia.gov.au/caring-for-parent-or-someone-whos-elderly?context=60056>.

would eventually find the registration for his parents' car – which he now had to sell – inexplicably buried in a plastic bag stuffed with unused Christmas cards.”¹⁰

I will never forget the challenge of authenticating my mother's identity for pension purposes. Her birth certificate alone was not nearly sufficient. Mum did not have a passport or driver's licence or separate health insurance. Official letters addressed solely to her were accepted toward identity yet quite scarce; correspondence concerning electricity rates, the phone tax, and bank loans were also sent to my father or to “Mr. and Mrs. Piggott.”

In my memory, Dad was more alert to the implications of mortality than Mum, who was in the early stages of dementia. Facing the need to leave home, garden, neighbours, and the local church they had enjoyed for over 50 years seemed insurmountable, and rational argument alone rarely carried the day. What helped in our case was that Mum was injured when answering the front door to someone urgently in need of money. Hospital protocols for her release required an alternative be arranged; she could not continue to live at home to be cared for by her equally elderly husband, with a polio-affected arm that had been useless since childhood.

There followed, between 2003 and 2007, some classic stages. In fact, a lot happened during those four years – some of it emotionally stressful for them and us. The one-sentence version begins with the legal and financial arrangements made to place them in an aged-care facility and the house sale to finance this and ends with the legal, financial, and burial arrangements that followed their deaths.

For a couple of decades now, this human story – or more complicated, fraught, and traumatic versions – has been the experience of millions of Australians in their 60s and 70s, the baby boomer generation born between 1946 and 1964.¹¹ This generation was born in Australia *and* beyond, it must be noted, as many parents were post-war immigrants, and its numbers have matched the natural increase in population. The political, social, and economic implications of

¹⁰ See Erin Anderssen, “The Great Junk Transfer Is Coming: A Look at the Burden (and Big Business) of Decluttering as Canadians Inherit Piles of Their Parents' Stuff,” *Globe and Mail*, May 21, 2022, <https://www.theglobeandmail.com/canada/article-the-great-junk-transfer-inheritance-decluttering-canada/>.

¹¹ Similarly, in Canada, see Laura Osman, “Baby Boomers Now Less than 25% of Canada's Population, 2021 Census Data Shows,” *Global News*, April 27, 2022, <https://globalnews.ca/news/8790080/canada-census-2021-baby-boomers-seniors/>.

this generation are equally varied and widely researched, particularly through government intergenerational reports.

What have been little appreciated are the archival repercussions. Firstly, because baby boomers are Australia's primary genealogists, many have become, by extension, quite well-informed (family) archivists: "the older you get, the more you begin to perceive the boundaries of your envelope. . . . The consciousness of what is to be lost grows, as does the consciousness of what has been."¹² Secondly, their parents were from the typewriter era. They were letter writers, telegram senders, pianola and gramophone owners, wireless listeners, newspaper readers, and film camera photographers – the last true analog generation.

Consider again my parents' final four years. In preparation for selling the family home, the most treasured possessions needed to be reduced to the capacity of a single room in an aged-care facility – and urgent thought given to the rest. For us, this meant a kind of domestic collection review, resulting in bags of recycling, donations to charity shops, cartons packed for commercial storage, and eventually, a garage sale. And the family archives? Often, in domestic settings, appraisal begins, as Anne-Marie Condé deftly puts it, "around the kitchen table."¹³ In some families, the decisions are not made anywhere near the kitchen table but are taken reactively, on the run – literally, if flood or fire threatens, as it increasingly does. In some families, death is sudden, and a son or daughter is called home from another state or another country. In our case, the word *archives* was never used, though the lifetime's accumulation of letters, photos, albums of newspaper cuttings, and books full of underlining and annotations were real enough. The decisions were deferred to the author, who is still mulling.

Whenever and wherever decisions are made, the kitchen table experience is not only stressful but can be divisive, becoming a subset of the universal phenomenon of disputed estates. Indeed, I have personal knowledge from my extended family of cousins, in dispute about the fate of family photos, resorting to solicitors' letters before sanity (and scanning) prevailed. Domestic instability takes its toll on family documentation too: divorces, partnership break-ups, house moves, and other dislocations are some of many classic negative factors,

¹² Christine Kenneally, *The Invisible History of the Human Race* (Collingwood, VIC: Black Inc., 2014), 30. For a US parallel, see Elizabeth Yakel and Deborah A. Torres, "Genealogists as a 'Community of Records,'" *American Archivist* 70, no. 1 (2007): 93–113, 103.

¹³ Anne-Marie Condé, "Capturing the Records of War: Collecting at the Mitchell Library and the Australian War Memorial," *Australian Historical Studies* 36, no. 125 (2005): 150.

while the absence or existence of children and the proximity of extended family members each also has implications for the family archives.

Preparing for a parent's funeral, also stressful, can trigger conflict if a particular photo is needed for display on the coffin or for copying and indefinite attachment to a headstone. For our family, the realities of elderly parents and powers of attorney meant that what had survived to that point passed intact to the custody and effective ownership of the family's honorary archivist. Among that inheritance is an undated, unsigned handwritten note to my sister (clearly in my older brother's handwriting, clearly in preparation for our father's funeral) asking, *inter alia*, "Can you find a photo of George for the Church notice board?"

Wider Setting: "All Records Have a Societal Provenance"

In recent decades, countless Australian families have experienced these archival moments of truth. This easy generalization masks variations that are impossible to grasp beyond a few broad patterns, all framed by the family itself and of limited interest, it seems, to archival research, though all records "have a societal provenance."¹⁴ According to an Australian Bureau of Statistics report,

Families underwent significant shifts in structure over the 20th century. At the time of federation, families often had extended kin and unrelated people living with them. In the decades following World War II, nuclear families (i.e. families formed around couples and parent-child relationships, with no extended members) became more common.¹⁵

By the time the children of those post-war families were facing archival dilemmas, numerous social influences had left their mark, affecting the production of family papers, and the children themselves – their birthdays and other milestones – had been the focus of much parental record-making. Sadder excep-

¹⁴ Tom Nesmith, "The Concept of Societal Provenance and Records of Nineteenth-Century Aboriginal-European Relations in Western Canada: Implications for Archival Theory and Practice," *Archival Science* 6, no. 3 (2006): 351–60, 352.

¹⁵ Australian Bureau of Statistics, "Living Arrangements: Changing Families," in *Australian Social Trends*, 2003, accessed August 10, 2022, <https://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/7d12b0f6763c78caca257061001cc588/2559632155bf56b8ca2570eb00835396!OpenDocument>.

tions were triggered by loss; the loss of a child explains, for example, séance attendance records and registers and scrapbooks documenting different psychic experiments, created by Thomas and Lillian Hamilton in Winnipeg, Manitoba, following the death of a young son from the Spanish flu. Another instance involved Australian J.G. Roberts (1860–1933), who channelled the loss of his eldest son in France during the First World War by obsessively compiling scrapbooks of newspaper cuttings, letters, and reports “as a means of memorialising and interpreting the death.”¹⁶ In 1940, and again in 2012, later family members donated all the scrapbooks to the State Library of Victoria. Amplified by documentary remains, this father and son’s memories echo still. As for the rest of the family, time and chance have already rendered them practically forgotten.

Other record-shaping factors include divorce, remarriage, the timing of parents’ deaths, and the number and co-operativeness of siblings. Domestic realities like my own family’s constant house moves, as well as the lotteries of flood and fire, available storage, and the geographical spread or concentration of family members, also have documentary repercussions. And the relative success or dysfunction of a family unit can influence what tangible traces survive.

The life of Tasmanian writer and academic Margaret Scott (1934–2005) may serve as a first example of the permutations. Born in England, she migrated to Tasmania in the late 1950s with her husband and son, and later entered into a further partnership, with children and stepchildren. A poet, novelist, and teacher, with many other accomplished roles, Scott, by then divorced, lost the family home near Hobart from a bushfire in 1967, and thus also lost books, paintings, and drafts of novels and poems – indeed, everything she had written since the age of five. She recalled the aftermath of the fire that engulfed her house with stoic humour years later:

All I managed to grab . . . was the family dog, Wizzle, and several chapters of a quite unreadable thesis called “The Saint as Tragic Hero”

16 Kevin Molloy, “From Kallista to Mont St Quentin: JG Roberts and the Memory of the Great War,” *La Trobe Journal* 98 (September 2016): 124–35, 126. On the Hamiltons, see Jennifer Douglas, Alexandra Alisauskas, and Devon Mordell, “‘Treat Them With the Reverence of Archivists’: Records Work, Grief Work, and Relationship Work in the Archives,” *Archivaria* 88 (Fall 2019): 84–120, 103; on Roberts, see Molloy, “JG Roberts and the Memory of the Great War.” Memory is also sustained by repeated citation; two of the many scholarly uses of the Roberts’s scrapbooks are Peter Stanley, *Men of Mont St Quentin: Between Victory and Death* (Melbourne: Scribe, 2009); and Joy Damousi, *The Labour of Loss: Mourning, Memory and Wartime Bereavement in Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

– the one thing which could have been left to burn without any loss to anybody. At nightfall, reunited with my children, I found that, apart from Wizzle and the Saint, our assets consisted of the clothes we were wearing, three school bags, three lunch boxes and a doll taken to school for “show and tell.”¹⁷

In 2003, Scott’s new home was lost to fire too – this time, one started by an electrical fault! Only two boxes of manuscripts had made it (in 1987) to public archival preservation. For now, her memory is perpetuated by published work and some interviews, which, as time begins to cover and obliterate, may perhaps be augmented through the interventions of an extended family of her descendants in the United Kingdom and Australia.¹⁸

Unless there are explicit legal instructions, such post hoc interventions by children are never guaranteed. Will the children recognize the significance of scribbled jottings, say, as earlier hints of a poem? For many baby boomer children of Australia’s immediate post-war migrants, photos in particular can have contrasting meanings. In *The Old Greeks*, George Kouvaros reflected on the feelings and memories that connect these two generations. When those who initiated the journeys die, “the onus shifts to their children to gather together what remains and to account for what has been lost of these lives.” But how does one do this when “the means by which a history is grasped is no more substantial than snatches of phrases, pieces of broken stories and stubborn attachments to faded photographs.”¹⁹

There are other dislocations within families, of course. A son or daughter who feels unloved or betrayed by parents is unlikely to erect an archival monument to their memory and more likely – thinking of Germaine Greer²⁰ – to write a

17 Margaret Scott, *Changing Countries: On Moving from One Island to Another* (Sydney: ABC Books, 2000), 166.

18 The two boxes are at the Australian Defence Force Academy Library, Canberra; see UNSW Canberra, “Guide to the Papers of Margaret Scott [MSS 042],” Special Collections, UNSW Canberra, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.unsw.adfa.edu.au/special-collections/guide-papers-margaret-scott-mss-042>.

19 George Kouvaros, *The Old Greeks: Photography, Cinema, Migration* (Perth: UWA Publishing, 2018), 19–20. Similar themes of migrant memory and documentation, in this case, Ukrainian-Australian, are explored in John Hughes’ essay “My Mother’s House”; see John Hughes, *The Idea of Home: Autobiographical Essays* (Artarmon, NSW: Giramondo Publishing Company, 2004), 43–74.

20 Germaine Greer, *Daddy, We Hardly Knew You* (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1989).

biography about “the hunting down . . . of Daddy,”²¹ or – thinking of Jeanette Winterson – a devastating portrait of adoptive mother “Mrs. Winterson.”²²

Another case in point is Lachlan Strahan’s searing account of his father Frank’s relationship with *his* father, who abandoned his family when Frank was nine. The father walked out on family and debts at the beginning of the Second World War, leaving nothing but kitchen utensils. Later becoming the doyen of his generation’s collecting archivists and our nearest equivalent to Canada’s “paper sleuth,” Hugh MacMillan,²³ the son even suggested that Frank’s abandonment might explain the intense, almost reparative drive behind this collecting. At home though, he “never displayed a portrait of his father anywhere in his house, but he did keep a clutch of photographs of the old man tucked away in a battered box.”²⁴ By contrast, Jim Davidson’s father did not abandon his sons but behaved like a domestic colonial overseer and is now remembered not through a battered box of photos but through a son’s angry memoir, *A Führer for a Father*.²⁵

Philippe Sands’ *The Ratline*,²⁶ the story of the Nazi war criminal Otto von Wächter (1901–1949), offers a further instance of children controlling the fate and meaning of patrimony. The family papers accumulated by Wächter’s wife, Charlotte, were vast – 13 gigabytes when digitized – and inevitably compromising. Her correspondence, diaries, and other papers eventually passed to the custody of the fourth of their six children, Horst, who could have destroyed them but, despite opposition from siblings, chose to make them available to Sands, though he never quite came to terms with the specifics of his father’s guilt.

There are dozens of such examples. Introducing a final category, we should note that narratives developed within families underpin continuity and identity, a sense of belonging to a bigger story that reaches back generations. Again, cultural differences require caution regarding generalization, but typically, in

21 UNSW Press, “Introducing Jim Davidson’s *A Führer for a Father*,” UNSW Press Ltd., September 2017, <http://www.newsouthpublishing.com/articles/introducing-jim-davidsons-fuhrer-father/>.

22 In her heartfelt *Why Be Happy When You Could Be Normal?* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2011), 197, Jeanette Winterson explains why she destroys her literary and personal manuscripts.

23 Hugh P. MacMillan, *Adventures of a Paper Sleuth* (Manotick, ON: Penumbra Press, 2004).

24 Lachlan Strahan, “Fathers and Sons,” *Meanjin* 66, no. 1 (2007): 215–25, 219.

25 Jim Davidson, *A Führer for a Father* (Sydney: UNSW Press, 2017).

26 Philippe Sands, *The Ratline: Love, Lies and Justice on the Trail of a Nazi Fugitive* (London: Weidenfeld & Nicolson, 2020).

post-war Australia, narratives and recordkeeping were regularly intertwined; occasions were marked not only in photo albums and memorabilia and reinforced at birthdays, celebrations of naming, and coming of age but also in more mundane moments too. During the COVID-19 lockdown in Melbourne, my 68-year-old sister often babysat grandchildren leafing through albums of photos from family travels overseas.

Such scenes have unhappier versions, as we know from inquiries detailing the experiences of the Stolen Generations, Indigenous children removed from their families; of child migrants from Malta and the UK; and of non-Indigenous Australians placed in “care.” Perversely, many of the bureaucratic files about them, which fascinate historians, were for care-leavers, as Swain and Musgrove put it, “a rare surviving fragment of their earlier self.”²⁷ Such files mock the very idea of family archives yet are sought by survivors “in the hope that they will be able to replace family as the repository of personal histories.”²⁸ Jackie Huggins is blunter: the files documenting her mother Rita’s time under the control of the Cherbourg Aboriginal Reserve, “are my mother’s and my people’s.”²⁹ Nathan Sentence, reviewing Natalie Harkin’s *Archival-Poetics*, also noted the connection: “While the ocean of paper is seeming endless and ever expanding, Harkin shows us that through it you can also hear your ancestors calling you.”³⁰ Some files even contained original handwritten letters from parents, never forwarded but still carefully added to the records. Canadian archivist and Cree woman Allison Mills has written in similar terms of an Indian Residential School system file on her two great uncles. Little more than four pages, they “mean everything,” representing “the only account my family has of Alan and Charlie at St. John’s.”³¹

27 Shurlee Swain and Nell Musgrove, “We Are the Stories We Tell about Ourselves: Child Welfare Records and the Construction of Identity among Australians Who, as Children, Experienced Out-of-Home ‘Care,’” *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 4–14, 7.

28 Swain and Musgrove, 6.

29 Jackie Huggins, *Sister Girl: Reflections on Tiddaism, Identity and Reconciliation* (Brisbane: University of Queensland Press, 2021), 132.

30 Nathan Sentence, “Disrupting the Colonial Archive,” *Sydney Review of Books*, September 18, 2019, <https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/natalie-harkin-archival-poetics/>.

31 Jennifer Douglas and Allison Mills, “From the Sidelines to the Center: Reconsidering the Potential of the Personal in Archives,” *Archival Science* 18, no. 3 (2018): 257–77, 270. The relevant literature is extensive. See also Cate O’Neill, Vlad Selakovic, and Rachel Tropea, “Access to Records for People Who Were in Out-of-Home Care: Moving Beyond ‘Third Dimension’ Archival Practice,” *Archives and Manuscripts* 40, no. 1 (2012): 29–41, 37.

Three Options

Variations acknowledged, the aggregate reality of family papers accumulated through the 20th century remains. Staring at it, metaphorically scratching their heads, are hundreds of thousands of Australian baby boomers. The more committed will have compiled family genealogies, as they “review[ed] their roller-coaster ride from the austere 1940s and 1950s . . . to their chastening years of maturity.”³² For most, entropy will settle the fate of this mountain of recorded memories or, to return to Geoffrey Dutton, time will have begun to cover and obliterate. In the shorter term, benign neglect and creative delay will seem like wise rationalizations. Some families will buy time, perhaps, like the Piggott children, settling on a notional custodian who has done little more than bought acid-free boxes and done some sorting, listing, and thinking.

In 100 years, in 200 years, where will our family papers be, or should they be? Will our grandchildren’s grandchildren care in the slightest about my father’s letters, courting my future mother in the early 1940s, or about the drafts of his unpublished novels? Is there a wider social good to consider, and in any case, can one dictate solutions and time-bound certainties about significance to the unknowable future? The answers emerge in considering the fundamental choices we face. There are three, which, translated into slogans, are cull, keep it in the family, and deprivatize.

Cull

The last survivor of my parents’ generation was Stuart, born in the late 1920s and affectionately known as “Unka Stoo.” He never married, and for most of his adult life, he lived in the family home in Melbourne, caring for his widowed mother and remaining there for over 60 years. His sister, our aunt, died by suicide in 1960, and his two living brothers had their own family homes. When grandma died in 1966, by default, Stuart became the family archivist, though I do not recall that he himself sensed this. House and contents, including documents, letters, photos, various printed material, and newspaper cuttings, became his.

During that time, in addition to an unknown and unknowable quantity of papers of his parents, the house contents included letters from his brothers and occasionally from us, his nephews and niece. By the time he moved into

³² Graeme Davison, *Lost Relations*, 237.

aged care, all had gone. I can recall from occasional visits that he had displayed photos on the mantelpiece but can conversely remember him hinting at discomfort, too. Perhaps, living in the family home, the past was palpable enough to render keeping tangible memories redundant. Perhaps, becoming a semi-recluse with time to brood about past events, culling helped. In *The Lost Mother*, Anne Summers wonders about the opposite response, asking, “Did I think if I found the painting I would be making amends for not having been a better daughter? Was it atonement I was seeking?”³³

Or perhaps, thinking of Derrida and Freud, we might wonder if Uncle Stuart was dealing with something else entirely. He was a great storyteller and always spoke fondly of his parents, yet he was overshadowed in age and conventionally measured success by his brothers, who, having left home as soon as they could, dutifully and regularly wrote home. Certainly, nothing survives as evidence of any drive behind his culling. Any trace has now been erased as surely as Philip Larkin’s diaries. Near death, when an ambulance arrived, Larkin “looked up at [Monica] wildly, begging her to destroy his diaries,” suddenly sensing the risk of leaving the issue unresolved. Monica duly spent an afternoon using the Hull University shredder and, for good measure, used the boiler house to turn the confetti to ash.³⁴

Such loss is common, I suspect, yet almost entirely unremarked; until we have more archival ethnography, it is easier to illustrate from incidental mentions in memoirs than to prove through controlled observation. “My mother is spring cleaner and caretaker of the family history,” Beth Spencer wrote in her chapter for *Family Pictures*. “She tidies regularly, throwing out the photos that don’t fit into the albums.”³⁵ Biff Ward, in her family memoir *In My Mother’s Hands*, explained, “I have to dredge up memories of these pictures because Mum destroyed all the family photos after Mark and I left home.”³⁶

33 Anne Summers, *The Lost Mother: A Story of Art and Love* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2009), 291. Summers elaborated on her parents, siblings, and grandparents – and indirectly on the documentary repercussions – in *Unfettered and Alive: A Memoir* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2018), 400–409.

34 Hermione Lee, *Body Parts: Essays on Life-Writing* (London: Pimlico, 2008), 214.

35 Beth Spencer, “The True Story of an Escape Artist,” in *Family Pictures*, ed. Beth Yahp (Sydney, NSW: Angus & Robertson, 1994), 207–36, 215–16.

36 Biff Ward, *In My Mother’s Hands: A Disturbing Memoir of Family Life* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2014), 4.

Much better known and documented by literary scholars, biographers, and manuscripts curators is the tortured writer or artist feeding the incinerator, and so often implicating or co-opting family members. Australian examples include Katharine Susannah Prichard, Miles Franklin, Aileen Palmer, and Lorna Stirling. Internationally, we are spoiled for choice; examples are now conveniently gathered by websites such as <https://lostmanuscripts.com/>. The case everyone mentions now concerns Franz Kafka and draws its notoriety from the disregarding of Kafka's instructions to destroy, followed by a second near miss, when his executor and lifelong close friend Max Brod escaped with his papers to Tel Aviv, just before the Nazis entered Prague in 1939.³⁷

There is also Patrick White, one of Australia's most renowned writers and "the archetype of a destroyer of records."³⁸ In novels such as *The Tree of Man* and *The Solid Mandala*, he called the practice of keeping letters morbid and their destruction liberating. Biographer David Marr regarded the real-life burning of most of the papers in White and partner Manoly Lascaris's custody in 1964, just before they moved house, as a "most thorough purging of his past, an act of renewal by fire."³⁹ There was also a conflicted attitude to notoriety and autobiography, though White published several memoirs – in effect, an "oscillation between repudiating literary celebrity and desiring recognition," which was "made still more complicated by his homosexuality."⁴⁰

Family papers rarely include anything like drafts of a Nobel prize winner's novel, however, and nor do their temporary custodians hold to any belief in theories about texts, authorial voices, and letting one's work speak for itself. With typical 60- and 70-year-olds accepting the logic of a spring clean after a funeral, the societal influences have more to do with garage sales, charity shops, and trash-and-treasure markets. And if there is a philosophy in play, it links to declut-

37 Apparently, Foucault once said, "Don't pull the Max Brod trick on me." See Scott McLemee, "The Afterlife of the Mind," *Foucault News*, August 12, 2015, <https://michel-foucault.com/2015/09/01/the-afterlife-of-the-mind/>. The Kafka/Brod drama continued, eventually through the courts, as documented by Benjamin Balint in *Kafka's Last Trial: The Case of a Literary Legacy* (London: Picador, 2018). One of the earliest general treatments of the fate of literary papers (which includes references to Kafka and Larkin) is Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London: Pimlico, 1992).

38 Sue McKemmish, "Evidence of Me . . .," *Archives and Manuscripts* 24, no. 1 (1996): 28–45, 34.

39 David Marr, *Patrick White: A Life* (Sydney: Vintage, 1992), 441.

40 Guy Davidson, "Displaying the Monster: Patrick White, Sexuality, Celebrity," *Australian Literary Studies* 25, no. 1 (2010): 1–18, 1.

tering and recycling, the attraction of guaranteed privacy, and the seductive idea of the clean break, which deals once and for all with the problem of what to do with “all that stuff.”

Finally, we must acknowledge the psychological provenance inevitably present when culling is in mind. All kinds of situations can readily be imagined. Motivations can be as simple as parents not wanting inherited family material to be a burden to their children – itself sometimes a convenient rationalization. Or a secretary or literary agent can be conflicted about instructions to destroy, just like the fictional Pavel, the reluctant Soviet archivist, who stood among the shelves of a Lubyanka storeroom wondering, “How long would it take to destroy all of this? Every file, every folder, down to the last story, the last poem,” then moved to other boxes, “letting his hand rest a moment on each of them. *The magnificent grave of the human heart.*”⁴¹ Meanwhile, his aging mother’s memory was failing, and her few family keepsakes no help.

Verne Harris observed that, “Clearly, understanding ‘family archive’ is dependent on understanding family politics.”⁴² Someone so resentful as to call a family memoir *A Führer for a Father*, or deeply hurt because he was abandoned aged nine, most likely will not agonize over archives as readily as the son who describes his father, like John Birmingham did, as “a good man, the best I’ve ever known,” or like Ayad Akhtar, who wrote, “I love my dad. I think he’s a good man.”⁴³ Even within families, personality differences can shape the legacy. It is hardly surprising that the Wächter children were divided about their *brigadeführer* father’s legacy, while we regret the slow, inexorable cleanout by a much-loved uncle, though we retain letters he sent us.

Keep It In the Family

When the chosen path is to cull, But how? is hardly a burning question. On the other hand, it looms instantly for anyone at the point of committing – finally, before it is too late – to do something about the family papers. From that moment, the classic choices divide on the basis of culture and practicalities – practicalities and resources.

⁴¹ Travis Holland, *The Archivist’s Story* (London: Bloomsbury, 2007), 50.

⁴² Harris, “Archons, Aliens and Angels,” 116.

⁴³ John Birmingham, *On Father* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2019), 2; Ayad Akhtar, *Homeland Elegies* (London: Tinder Press, 2020), 15.

It is not unknown for families that have enjoyed centuries of wealth and entitlement to establish their own privately run archives. In the UK, among the best known and organized is that operated by the Rothschilds; in the Netherlands, several famous family archives, such as that of the House of Orange-Nassau, are jointly called *huisarchieven* (house archives). In the USA, the best-known example centres on the Rockefellers. In Australia, two of the few near equivalents are the Hasluck Library and the Kerry Stokes Collection, the latter essentially comprising just art and some manuscripts – perhaps unsurprising, given the billionaire's troubled family background.⁴⁴

Australia may lack family dynasties to match the Rothschilds and Rockefellers; by contrast, there are many multiple-page websites documenting branches of families whose historical roots stretch to Europe and the UK, typically Scotland. The site for the Mackintoshes aims “to form a lasting record of Mackintosh/McIntosh/MacIntosh/etc families in Australia, unite family members, and assist in their research,” and adds that it has incorporated “records . . . taken from the archives of the Clan Mackintosh Society in Australia Inc.”⁴⁵ The Cave Family History Society presents a further variant. Formed in 1976, with members in the UK and former dominions, including Australia, and links back to the Norman Conquest, its aims include “to promote the preservation of documents, monuments and other material of special interest to members of the Cave family,”⁴⁶ and it publishes a journal and operates a website. Some such sites have also been preserved (via snapshots) within the Australian Web Archive operated by the National Library of Australia.⁴⁷

Billionaires and family websites aside, for the aging children of Australia's traditional nuclear families, the dominant archiving approach has been what might be described as assisted self-help – the assistance offered being both

44 Erica Persak, “A Celebration of Manuscripts in the Kerry Stokes Collection,” *Australian Library Journal* 63, no. 1 (2014): 16–22; Andrew Rule, *Kerry Stokes: The Boy from Nowhere* (Sydney: HarperCollins Publishers, 2014). On the Hasluck family collection, see “About the Hasluck Library,” Hasluck Library, accessed September 9, 2022, <http://www.freshwaterbaypress.com.au/HL-About.shtml>.

45 Mackintosh Families in Australia, “Welcome to the Mackintosh Family Website,” accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.mackintosh.org.au/>.

46 Cave Family History Society, “About the Cave FHS,” accessed August 11, 2022, <http://www.cavefhs.com/about-cave-fhs/>.

47 See National Library of Australia, “What Is the Australian Web Archive?” Australian Web Archive, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.nla.gov.au/what-we-collect/archived-websites>.

public spirited and commercial. Within the former category, the most common assistance has been designed for small organizations such as schools, churches, or community organizations, although individuals and families benefit too. The expert advisers are from institutional archives and libraries and professional societies of archivists and conservators. Their workshops and seminars, typically coordinated with local historical societies and genealogy groups, deliberately incorporate hands-on practical content. The public institutions feel good and (to their political masters) look good, and the professional organizations achieve outreach goals. Aligned to bicentennial programs in the 1980s and its 1987 textbook, *Keeping Archives*, the Australian Society of Archivists ran “Keeping Archives” workshops. In the past decade, as the first baby boomers reached retiring age, the National Archives of Australia published *Keeping Family Treasures* (2010), with later versions on its website, while the National Film and Sound Archive offers online advice under the banner “Preservation at Home.”⁴⁸

For the do-it-yourself family archivist, there have been a huge variety of services, ranging from lock-up storage to shredding operations, and products, including packaging materials sold by large-scale office stationery outlets; high-quality acid-free papers and boxes sold by more specialist businesses; and all manner of supplies needed by scrapbooking hobbyists and, indeed, anyone planning to travel. The large tech companies have also seen archiving business opportunities, even if they have been thinking not directly of baby boomers but rather of anyone with a smartphone. They have offered storage and sharing platforms for images and text but also applications such as Facebook Memories and the freeware app FamilyAlbum, which establishes online sites for commemorating things like causes, deaths, births, reunions, graduations, and marriages. However, once baby boomers realized they could reformat old photos and handwritten letters as digital files, the issues narrowed to questions about what to do with the originals and how to handle digital security and preservation. As for hardware and software obsolescence, let alone things like metadata, normalization, and trust in digital repositories, if the conclusions from UK research are

⁴⁸ See advice at National Archives of Australia, “Looking After Your Family Archive,” NAA, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.naa.gov.au/explore-collection/search-people/researching-your-family/looking-after-your-family-archive>; and National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, “Preservation at Home,” NFSA, accessed September 7, 2022, <https://www.nfsa.gov.au/preservation/guide/home>. For one of many examples beyond Australia, see Margot Note, *Creating Family Archives* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2019), <https://www2.archivists.org/publications/creating-family-archives>.

indicative, the digital age was causing as many problems as it appeared to solve.⁴⁹

The aging children now dealing with family papers come from traditional nuclear families that are mainly European. For millennia, Indigenous Australians have been preserving archives of knowledge and experience and sharing it within extended family group and clan settings through oral processes supplemented by socially coded images of song, dance, and object. Survival in “settled” Australia, as Tom Griffiths put it, “has been decidedly unsettled.”⁵⁰ Keeping family and community archives alive has required multiple strategies of essentially social self-determination and continuity that go well beyond the efficacy of acid-free archives boxes and an app.

Inevitably, many of those strategies have played out at the individual level. Margo Neale learned “bits and pieces of remnant Aboriginal culture,” mainly from “my grandmother on her visits, often with the aunties”;⁵¹ Aunty Connie Hart listened and watched her mother make grass baskets; Doreen Kartinyeri was taught by her Aunty Rosie; and artist Sandon Gibbs O’Neill absorbed art and culture from his grandfather, Tex Skuthorpe.⁵² And the Piggotts? Inevitably different yet just as contingent. With the boxes of papers stowed and an aging nominal family archivist in place, we begin to imagine an intergenerational solution. But we wonder, too, about Walter Benjamin’s warning that, when a collector has gone, so too has the meaning of the collection. Who among our grandchildren might understand what the family archives mean, or see new significance, enough to ensure their continued preservation?

49 Anna Woodham, Laura King, Liz Gloyn, Vicky Crewe, and Fiona Blair, “We Are What We Keep: The ‘Family Archive’, Identity and Public/Private Heritage,” *Heritage & Society* 10, no. 3 (2017): 203–20, 214.

50 Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Melbourne: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 226.

51 Margo Neale and Lynne Kelly, *Songlines: The Power and Promise* (Port Melbourne: Thames & Hudson, 2020), 20.

52 See Neale and Kelly, *Songlines*, especially “Personal Perspectives”; Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors*, 280–82; Doreen Kartinyeri and Sue Anderson, *Doreen Kartinyeri: My Ngarrindjeri Calling* (Canberra: Aboriginal Studies Press, 2008), 99–101; and Sandon Gibbs O’Neill, “Sandon Gibbs O’Neill on Keeping Culture and Knowledge Alive Through Art,” ABC Radio National, November 14, 2020, <https://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/sundayextra/12878000>.

Much indigenous memory is now sustained by both official files of administrative surveillance and family-held stories, objects, and practices. See examples cited in Anna Haebich, “Fever in the Archive,” *Humanities Australia* 5 (2014): 23–35.

Deprivatize

Working as an acquisitions field officer with the State Library of Victoria in the mid-1980s left an enduring impression on Tom Griffiths, who was later acknowledged as one of Australia's most gifted historians. The five years' experience stimulated interests still evident today – interests first fully articulated in 1996 as *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia*.⁵³ In a lecture at the National Library of Australia the following year, he reflected on this field work, noting that donations of personal and family papers revealed people “at their most social.” This was “the point at which something private becomes public, the point at which people decide that something that was personal and theirs should become communal and ours.”⁵⁴ Griffiths called this a kind of reverse privatization, a “making of a public future from a myriad of private pasts,” which “constitutes what we can only see as a sustained process of *de-privatisation*.”⁵⁵

Though otherwise rich in insights, there was an innocence to this lecture. It implied a seller's market and a passive, indiscriminating library mother ship with generous staff and storage capacity and an interest in ordinary people's experiences of ordinary times. Donors “were happy, or at least determined, to wave me off with their lifelong treasures, to watch me disappearing into the dusk with their letters and diaries and photographs.”⁵⁶ In fact, even in the mid-1980s, people looking to deprivatize the care of their family archives were not unconditionally indulged. Certainly now, when receiving offers, libraries and archives are almost always very skeptical, and it is very difficult to convince them that a particular family is so significant the taxpayers should underwrite an open-ended commitment to preserving its memory. “Seriously, who do you think you are?” they ask. Their bar is set incredibly high, and above it, they cherry-pick and inquire about subventions and cost shifts.

⁵³ Tom Griffiths, *Hunters and Collectors: The Antiquarian Imagination in Australia* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1996).

⁵⁴ Subsequently published in Tom Griffiths, “Collecting Culture,” *National Library of Australia News* 7, no. 10 (1997): 9–16, 10.

⁵⁵ Griffiths, 10.

⁵⁶ Griffiths, 10.

The most serious cause of reluctance arises from the structure of Australia's preservation and access arrangements for recorded information.⁵⁷ At the state and federal levels, there are government-funded libraries and archives sharing generalist "government and the people" remits, and in parallel, there is an array of regional and local libraries, museums, and historical societies. Here the general picture is completed by reference to a long tail of hybrids preserving material from all curatorial disciplines and formats. Most represent niche heritage focuses (for example, the Grainger Museum, the South Australian Jazz Archive, and the Australian Queer Archives), though this random sample is barely adequate to hint at the range.⁵⁸

Overlaying this structure are two themes central to Australia's identity – its experience of war and Indigenous Australians' experience of European Australia since 1788 – in turn documented in the national capital primarily at the Australian War Memorial and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. These are complemented through a series of museums and Aboriginal keeping places throughout the country. In terms of profile, funding, and wide societal licence, there is a second tier of university-based archives trying to document specific sectors (for example, business and trade unions) and not-for-profit museums dealing with societal and historical themes (for example, immigration). There is no coordination underpinned by a national documentation strategy, no single mind coordinating policy, funding, higher education research priorities, and arts heritage and history interests.

In short, no national state or local library archives or museum has the archives of the family per se. The family is a social institution of profound significance in the aggregate; in that sense, all families are alike, and consequently each in

57 On the patterns of Australia's archival estate, see Michael Piggott, "The Australian Archival System, 1971–2008: A Valedictory Appraisal," *Archives and Manuscripts* 36, no. 2 (2008): 189–207; Michael Piggott and Sigrid McCausland, "The Australian Business Archives Scene: Comments and Comparisons," *Business Archives: Principles and Practice* 87 (2004): 1–15; and Michael Piggott and Adrian Cunningham, "Documenting Australian Society Summit (Canberra, December 2018)," *Australian Museums and Galleries Magazine* 27, no. 2 (2019): 35–37.

58 An overview, necessarily incomplete, can be gleaned via Australian Society of Archivists, "Directory of Archives in Australia," accessed August 11, 2022, <https://www.archivists.org.au/community/directory-of-archives>. On the three specific examples, see University of Melbourne, "Grainger Museum," accessed August 11, 2022, <https://grainger.unimelb.edu.au/>; South Australian History Network, "South Australian Jazz Archive," accessed August 11, 2022, <https://explore.history.sa.gov.au/organisation/south-australian-jazz-archive>; Australian Queer Archives, "About Us," accessed August 11, 2022, <https://queerarchives.org.au/about-us/>.

its own way is “symbolically annihilated.”⁵⁹ For much of the 20th century, the suburban nuclear family underpinned much of Australia’s society, economy, and politics, but its champions, critics, and observers have based their analyses on reports, official records, statistics, and popular culture⁶⁰ – and occasionally on oral histories, leaving the “pleasures, thoughts and feelings” of pre-oral history families harder still to know.⁶¹ *The Diary of a Nobody* was a clever title for a novel about the life of London clerk Charles Pooter and once attracted a publisher, but nobody wants the Pooter family papers. A novella by Fabian Kastner called *Archive of the Average Swede* makes a similar point. The plot involved the National Archives of Sweden arranging for a randomly selected civil servant (in Stockholm’s municipal bus service) to retain for preservation every last scrap of documentation collected and relating to his entire life. The result was more random than representative; the project got out of hand, and eventually the archives, overwhelmed, had to refuse any further material.⁶²

Perhaps for families, expectations should be constrained and just the family photo albums or diaries considered for custody elsewhere. The extended Piggott family has both, by definition unique in a myriad of small ways. My mother-in-law kept a journal that tracked her adjustments to marriage, children, and living in Australia following her migration from England in the late 1940s. My father had an equivalent number of diaries, begun just before his retirement, which recorded outings and football scores and the progression of his daily walk calculations toward a goal of notionally circumnavigating the globe. There is nothing in Australia – indeed in most countries – equivalent to the Bishopsgate Institute’s Great Diary Project, where the diaries of “the uncommissioned,

59 My use here is counterintuitive; the phrase is more commonly used by archival scholars in relation to the under-representation of minorities. See, for example, Elspeth H. Brown, “Archival Activism, Symbolic Annihilation, and the LGBTQ2+ Community Archive,” *Archivaria* 89 (Spring 2020): 6–33.

60 For examples of oral history-based studies, see Jacqueline Kent, *In the Half Light: Reminiscences of Growing Up in Australia, 1900–1970* (Sydney: Doubleday, 1991); Don Aitken, *What Was It All For? The Reshaping of Australia* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 2005); and Anisa Puri and Alistair Thomson, eds., *Australian Lives. An Intimate History* (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2017).

61 Pat Thane, “From Cradle to Unmarked Grave,” *Times Literary Supplement*, January 2, 2015, 5, a review of Alison Light’s *Common People: The History of an English Family*.

62 See Fabian Kastner, “Archive of the Average Swede,” in *From Dust to Dawn: Archival Studies After the Archival Turn*, ed. Ann Öhrberg, Tim Berndtsson, Otto Fischer, and Annie Mattsson (Uppsala: Uppsala University, 2021), 395–424.

unpublished and non-famous” – of the “marginalised, as well as the mainstream” – are the priority.⁶³

Are there other possibilities? Australia’s lead body focused on families is the Australian Institute of Family Studies,⁶⁴ a Commonwealth statutory agency that, since 1980, has been conducting and publishing research. Its library supports its mission of research, *not* documentation, through building collections of archives of individual families. So, families seeking to deprivatize the future care of their archives must deprivatize their mindsets too. Those hoping to interest a public heritage institution will need to demonstrate convincingly how their family story directly reflects a certain time and place and how it aligns with a particular experience or event in a special or unusual way. They will also face several additional hurdles if the quantity of material involved is large, its physical and organizational state is messy, and there are lengthy embargoes on research use.

Families are untidy; collection development policies are neat, and the funds for their implementation are shrinking. Almost always, there is a structural mismatch. In the case of my immediate family (my parents and their three children), it starts with locality: Victoria, Australia’s second-smallest state. Until they met in the early 1940s, my father and mother’s geographical anchors were the regional city of Bendigo, then the inner-city working-class suburbs of South Melbourne and Port Melbourne (his) and the small towns of Sea Lake, Ouyen, and Tempy in north-eastern Victoria (hers). For most of their life together, they lived and worked in regional Victoria (Meringur, Werrimull, Murrabit, Katamatite, Great Western, Sale, Bendigo), then finally Blackburn, a suburb of Melbourne.

There are roughly 300 local and specialist historical societies across Victoria as well as local history collections in local government council libraries in suburban and regional areas. Which one might we approach? Our family archives include material documenting my parents’ early 1940s courtship in the Mallee region of Victoria, but if the Ouyen District History and Genealogy Centre or the academic team that produced *Mallee Country*⁶⁵ were interested, it would

63 Polly North, “Diaries and Silence,” in *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and, Uncreated Archives*, ed. Michael Moss and David Thomas (London: Routledge, 2021), 209, 210.

64 See Australian Institute of Family Studies, “Research to Inform Government Policy and Family Services,” AIFS, accessed August 11, 2022, <https://aifs.gov.au/>.

65 See Richard Broome, Charles Fahey, Andrea Gaynor, and Katie Holmes, *Mallee Country: Land, People, History* (Clayton, VIC: Monash University Publishing, 2019).

certainly not care for anything else, such as my letters home to Melbourne after arriving in Canberra in the early 1970s or my policeman grandfather's annotated law dictionary. And of course, providing selected copies of letters leaves the deprivatization option unresolved.

One final illustration concerns my father's first decade teaching in remote country schools in the Victorian Mallee. In 1987, when he was in his early 70s, his memories were recorded by historian Hank Nelson for a five-part Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) documentary series about bush schools. Selections of his and dozens of others' recordings were also used in a 1989 ABC book, *With Its Hat about Its Ears: Recollections of the Bush School*. Nelson "thought it important to acknowledge the part played in Australian history by those young people sent to the back of beyond to educate bush children, because these had all but disappeared from the scene."⁶⁶

The project had 50 ex-teachers as informants and included names that later meant something beyond their families: poet Les Murray, Indonesian scholar Jamie Mackie, and screenwriter Cliff Green. Having learned of Dad's existence while researching at the War Memorial, where I was working, Nelson arranged an interview. When his audio tapes were acquired in 2013 by the National Library, my father gained by default momentary status of national significance.⁶⁷ Of course, neither the interviewer nor the library was interested to document the wider multiple contexts of his life beyond bush schools or, indeed, his family. It does however have the papers of Les Murray, Jamie Mackie, and Cliff Green. Neither was it interested in his experience of polio, contracted as a young child, which shaped his life in innumerable ways, nor in his father, the farm labourer then soldier then policeman. The same point applies to Dad's siblings: the sister who died tragically; the youngest brother who destroyed family papers; the institutionalized oldest brother we were never told about as children; and the famous brother Max, whose bit part on the national stage arose from his war service and sporting prowess.⁶⁸ And what of Dad's utterly

⁶⁶ Brij V. Lal, "Hank of Coombs," in *The Boy from Boort: Remembering Hank Nelson*, ed. Bill Gammage, Brij Lal, and Gavan Daws (Canberra: ANU Press, 2014), 86, <https://press.anu.edu.au/publications/series/state-society-and-governance-melanesia/boy-boort>.

⁶⁷ See National Library of Australia, "George Piggott Interviewed by Hank Nelson in the Recollections of the Bush School Collection," National Library of Australia Catalogue, accessed August 25, 2022, <https://nla.gov.au/nla.cat-vn6255480>.

⁶⁸ See UNSW Canberra at the Australian Defence Force Academy, "Maxwell Piggott (Max)," *Australians At War Film*

loyal life partner and supporter, and her parents and five brothers – of fiercely Irish Catholic origins working marginal land in northwest Victoria? Families are untidy, collection development policies are neat, and those who manage to deprivatize their archives are few.

What, If Anything, Is a Family?

Who sits around the kitchen table? Crudely generalizing, the record-making parents and later, returning home, the archive-making adult children. Actually, there are a hundred variants, even within my focus, the cohort of baby boomers. When the kitchen formulation occurred to Condé, she had in mind a late 1920s family dealing with a father, son, or brother's death during the First World War and considering an inquiry from the Australian War Memorial about any letters and diaries. The parents whose family papers now confront their baby boomer children date from that war. My father, for example, was one of innumerable children conceived on either side of enlistment, and in his memory (as set down in an unpublished short story written in retirement), only met his father aged four years old, on his father's return from France.⁶⁹

In 2005, Australian colleague and master of the "What, if anything?" formulation, Chris Hurley, asked, "What idea is involved about what family means?"⁷⁰ Certainly, family is a troubled concept, and families' archives have had only limited interest for archival scholars.⁷¹ Even where the focus is personal record-

Archive, accessed August 15, 2022, <http://australiansatwarfilmarchive.unsw.edu.au/archive/1958-maxwell-piggott>. Uncle Max has additional claims, both within family memory and, to a degree, beyond it; see "Max Piggott," Wikipedia, accessed August 15, 2022, https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Max_Piggott.

⁶⁹ See Michael Piggott, "White Lies, Archival Truths, and George Henry Charles Piggott" (keynote address, National Family History Month, Adelaide, July 31, 2015), copy in author's possession.

⁷⁰ Chris Hurley, "Parallel Provenance Part 1: What, If Anything, Is Archival Description?" *Archives and Manuscripts* 33, no. 1 (2005): 110–45, 128.

⁷¹ Examples include Robert Fisher, "'The Grandmother's Story': Oral Tradition, Family Memory, and a Mysterious Manuscript," *Archivaria* 57 (Spring 2004), 107–30; Eric Ketelaar, "The Genealogical Gaze: Family Identities and Family Archives in the Fourteenth to Seventeenth Centuries," *Libraries & the Cultural Record* 44, no. 1 (2009): 9–28; Woodham, King, Gloyn, Crewe, and Blair, "We Are What We Keep"; and Sarah Higgins, Shaun Evans, and Julie Mathias, "Editorial: Estate Archives," *Archives and Records* 40, no. 1 (2019): 1–4. Relevant work of historians and cultural anthropologists includes John Randolph, "On the Biography of the Bakunin Family Archive," in *Archive Stories: Facts, Fictions, and the Writing of History*, ed. Antoinette Burton (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005), 209–231; and Bradd Shore and Sara Kauko, "The Landscape of Family Memory," in *Handbook of*

making, now largely confined to that of writers, the family context is secondary. Nevertheless, Catherine Hobbs' passing though fascinating mentions of poets Pat Lowther and John Newlove and Jennifer Douglas's discussion of the Montgomery, Atwood, and Plath papers hint at ways the contexts of individuals and their families and of personal and family archives interact and overlap.⁷²

Those concerned to develop descriptive standards, the latest iteration being the International Council on Archives (ICA)'s July 2021 draft conceptual model for "Records in Contexts," are a different matter. One can still sense the invisible mending of the expert group stitching together a definition acceptable to an international audience: "Two or more persons related by birth, or through marriage, adoption, civil union, or other social conventions that bind them together as a socially recognized familial group." The scope notes, confirming the difficulties of defining, allow, for example, that familial groups can include "dynasty, clan, house, tribe and others," and stress the wide variety of familial groups and the relevance of social conventions and social recognition.⁷³

Family was one of four basic elements of context control used by Australia's Commonwealth Archives Office in the mid-1960s, only to be dropped in the late 1980s and little missed, as Peter Scott himself conceded in 2010.⁷⁴ Indeed, considering that, in the ICA model, the higher order concept of *group* has "a socially recognized identity" in which members play particular roles, one wonders why the conceptual model saw any need for family. One wonders too about *socially recognized*, a vague question-begging formulation used several times by the model. Families, if we must use the term, existed, and do exist despite social recognition. They existed when self-identifying "congenital invert" Radclyffe Hall and Una Troubridge lived together in early 20th century England. And they emerge in Robert Dessaix's account of finding his birth mother, where he acknowledged an "unnatural number of mothers" in his life.

Culture and Memory, ed. Brady Wagoner (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), 85–116.

⁷² See Catherine Hobbs, "Reenvisioning the Personal: Reframing Traces of Individual Life," in *Currents of Archival Thinking*, ed. Terry Eastwood and Heather MacNeil (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010); and Jennifer Douglas, "The Archiving 'I': A Closer Look in the Archives of Writers," *Archivaria* 79 (Spring 2015): 53–89.

⁷³ International Council on Archives, "Records in Contexts – Conceptual Model: EGAD – Expert Group on Archival Description, 22 July 2021," ICA, accessed September 9, 2022, <https://www.ica.org/en/records-in-contexts-conceptual-model>.

⁷⁴ Adrian Cunningham, ed., *The Arrangement and Description of Archives amid Administrative and Technological Change: Essays and Reflections by and about Peter J. Scott* (Brisbane: Australian Society of Archivists, 2010), 36.

Aside from his mother, adoptive mother, and mother-in-law from a traditional marriage, “whom I still called Mum,” in addition, “there was Peter’s [his partner from 1982] mother” and “there were all those older women who’d shown what I might call a critical care over the years: Madam Z, Mrs Prokofiev, and a close friend in Canberra, Kate North, who mothered me only in the sense that she treated me with the same mixture of loving kindness and loyal disrespect she did her numerous children.”⁷⁵

Of course, the fundamental complication concerns the criteria for family as “two or more persons related by . . .,” an issue evident the moment we consider the ancient binary *human/animal* and ask, Should the archival multiverse be multispecies? It is evident too when we think why it is that, when a natural disaster threatens the family home, we feverishly gather up children, photo albums, and pets. My middle-aged stepson lives on his own, so outwardly does not live in a family home. He does, however, share his house with a cat, which he adopted after rescuing it from inside a mattress when he managed a recycling facility outside Canberra. They have a relationship socially, economically, and legally recognized by the vet, his neighbours, a cattery, other cat owners, and local government ordinances. He creates records arising from that relationship; it presents him with mice; they co-create a (kind of) family. I know a married couple who own a cat and several dogs. Given the emotional dependence involved, the dogs and cat definitely should be regarded as part of their family; indeed, some of their friends send those pets birthday and get-well cards.⁷⁶ So regardless of who incorporates them (or not) into the family’s household records system, in theory, its complete provenance of co-creators includes that

75 Robert Dessaix, *A Mother’s Disgrace* (Sydney: Harper Perennial, 2007), 97. On Radclyffe Hall and Troubridge, see Mollie Clarke, “‘I Need Never Have Known Existence’: Radclyffe Hall and LGBTQ+ Visibility,” The National Archives blog, April 29, 2021, <https://blog.nationalarchives.gov.uk/i-need-never-have-known-existence-radclyffe-hall-and-lgbtq-visibility/>.

76 For example, see Hallmark’s range at “Pet Memorial Gifts,” Hallmark, accessed August 20, 2022, <https://www.hallmark.com/card/sympathy-loss-of-pet>. Domestic pet ownership pales in comparison to the depth of connections possible between human and non-human animals. My informants more generally are John Bradshaw, *The Animals Among Us: The New Science of Anthrozoology* (London: Allen Lane, 2017); Raimond Gaita, *The Philosopher’s Dog* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 2002); Helen Macdonald, *H Is for Hawk* (London: Vintage Books, 2014); Helen Macdonald, *Vesper Flights: New and Collected Essays* (London: Jonathan Cape, 2020); David Brooks, *The Grass Library* (Blackheath, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2019); and Gavin Maxwell, *Ring of Bright Water* (London: Penguin, 1979). Brooks’s earlier text, *Derrida’s Breakfast: Poetry, Philosophy, Animals* (Blackheath, NSW: Brandl & Schlesinger, 2016), and the short stories by Ceridwen Dovey, gathered as *Only the Animals* (Melbourne: Penguin, 2015), were also highly persuasive.

relationship and thus all living relations. We can leave it to others to explore the archival implications of people such as furies adopting anthropomorphic animal identities, of animals in Indigenous Australian knowledge systems, and of humanoid robotic/synthetic companions. Here, once we allow, as many do, that humans (for example, dancers, trusted elders) can embody archives, we can readily entertain that the non-human animals themselves in such families (and indeed their own social groupings) generate internalized memory records to secure food, partners, and navigational direction.

Conclusion

My family papers project, begun during 2020, progressed little further than rehousing everything into proper containers, listing and assessing, and culling most of my father's books. Often, I drifted, getting side-tracked by rereading letters from my parents and embarrassed by my letters to them, written over 50 years ago. Indeed, the exercise was at times unsettling – if nothing like Sebastian Peake's experience of reading his father's "heart-rending" letters to his mother, pleading for the electric shock therapy to end⁷⁷ – and definitely nothing compared with Victor Rosenberg's "emotionally difficult" experience, given that his family papers documented experiences during the Nazi Holocaust.⁷⁸ I learned that affect, now of much archival academic interest, can accompany the most pedestrian engagement with family papers. My parents' courtship letters I found almost impossible to read, though profoundly meaningful and private to them. Equally disquieting were letters to them from a sibling who was struggling and isolated in early adulthood, teaching in a small rural town. Then there were the photos of a stepbrother and stepsister my parents briefly fostered but never proceeded to formally adopt. Only recently, I read in a family record of my mother's miscarriage about a year before their arrival, which triggered regret and futile speculation. Even the simplest note can be difficult to reread and affecting still to its recipient, who alone of the three children has 40 years of letters because he moved interstate to find work in Canberra. At the end of a letter from my mother – dated, as hers so often were, "Sunday night" [post-

⁷⁷ Sebastian Peake, *A Child of Bliss: Growing Up with Mervyn Peake* (Oxford: Lennard Publishing, 1989), 3.

⁷⁸ Victor Rosenberg, "The Power of a Family Archive," *Archival Science* 11, no. 1–2 (2011): 77–93, 93.

marked November 3, 1974], and mentioning her and my then-pet cat, as she so often did – she wrote, “I cannot think of much more news Michael Tom is asleep by my side, his (sic) a little friend. How is Dibs? Love & Prayers from your mum xx God Bless you Michael my Son.”

The options facing such material reduce to three: cull, keep, and deprivatize. Some readers will have recognized the influence of decluttering philosophies such as the “Triage Method of Clutter Control” and even perhaps echoes of the significance methodology that guides community heritage thinking. Swirling around those options are a million actual outcomes in individual cases at kitchen tables metaphorical and actual. Does anything link them?

Near the end of her brilliant unravelling of a family secret, art historian Laura Cumming arrived at a kind of acceptance of her grandfather’s behaviour toward his wife and daughter (her mother), then acknowledged, “Though he is my grandfather, and I have his blood, he is like all long-distant ancestors to me – these people of the past who elude us, no matter how hard we try to drag them back out of time’s tide. A photograph and an anecdote or two; if we are lucky, some writing or a headstone.”⁷⁹

Is there a common thread regardless of the option chosen? If there is, it is this double insight about time’s tide and the archival trace – what Inga Clendinnen called the “happenstance of available documentation”⁸⁰ – and a family’s past, which resists recovery. If we are extremely lucky, we may find a library or archives to care for these materials (more likely, just a portion of them), and if so, we will have made the case for the family’s significance. Equally, how parents and grandparents are regarded will shape the children’s deliberate culling or efforts to preserve the archives “in-house” – at least the archives that time, change, and forebears have bequeathed to them.

Hank Nelson ended his pen portrait of my father by observing that, after his first remote school, my father “went to bigger country schools, and finished forty years of teaching as principal of a major suburban school. He married a Mallee farmer’s daughter. Of their three children one is a graduate archivist and two are teachers. In his origins, his career, and his descendants, George Piggott is a

⁷⁹ Laura Cumming, *On Chapel Sands: The Mystery of My Mother’s Disappearance as a Child* (London: Chatto & Windus, 2019), 273.

⁸⁰ Inga Clendinnen, *Reading the Holocaust* (Melbourne: Text Publishing, 1998), 177.

representative bush schoolie.”⁸¹ Like Cumming’s intelligent acceptance, a more personal resignation is also needed here, and it concerns a fateful contingency at work in both its senses. It was fortuitous that Hank Nelson and I met. He just happened to be researching at the War Memorial, and just at that time on bush schools, when I, son of a schoolteacher who once taught in bush schools, just happened to be working there. And yet? Perhaps it was not pure happenstance that a descendant of a “representative bush schoolie” met him in this way. That meeting, however, meant his interview, deprivatized to the National Library 26 years later,⁸² is now the only recording we have of our father’s voice.

BIOGRAPHY Michael Piggott is a retired archivist living in Canberra. He has post-graduate qualifications in library science, archives, and history. Between 1971 and 2008, he worked for the National Library, the Australian War Memorial, the National Archives, and the University of Melbourne. A founding member and Laureate of the Australian Society of Archivists, he has received its Mander Jones Award four times and a President’s Award in 2013. He was appointed in 2017 as a Member of the Order of Australia in the Queen’s Birthday Honours List “for significant service to the community as an archivist with national and international educational and cultural institutions, and as an author.” In 2012, an anthology of his writing appeared as *Archives and Societal Provenance: Australian Essays* (Chandos). During 2018–19, he was a senior research fellow with a Deakin University–led project, Representing Multicultural Australia in National and State Libraries, and in 2020, he completed a three-year term as Chair, Territory Records Advisory Council. Recent book chapters appeared in *Community Archives, Community Spaces: Heritage, Memory and Identity* (Facet, 2020), “All Shook Up”: *The Archival Legacy of Terry Cook* (SAA/ACA, 2020), and *Archival Silences: Missing, Lost and, Uncreated Archives* (Routledge, 2021). He regularly reviews for and contributes to Honest History at <https://honesthistory.net.au/wp/>.

⁸¹ Hank Nelson, *With Its Hat about Its Ears: Recollections of the Bush School* (Crows Nest, NSW: ABC Enterprises, 1989), 63.

⁸² See National Library of Australia, “George Piggott Interviewed by Hank Nelson.”