

Truth-telling, Archives and Human Rights

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Abstract: Over recent decades there has been growing interest in the history of human rights – and the role of archives in both shaping and documenting this story. Archives play a key part in helping societies deal with painful histories and in building peaceful futures through dialogue and debate. As Australia continues to grapple with its history of colonial encounters, Indigenous calls for ‘truth-telling’ pose profound challenges to the nation. If the archive is a powerful source for determining what is true, how do we respond to the silencing of marginal voices, absences and mis-representations that have shaped our past- and instead forge a flourishing and just future?

I’d like to start by acknowledging that we are holding this event tonight on the Traditional Country of the Whadjuk Noongar people, and I pay my respects to their Elders, past and present. Thank you very much for your Welcome, Nick Abraham.

I’m very grateful to the SROWA for inviting me to deliver the 2019 Geoffrey Bolton Lecture, and I feel very honoured to do so. I salute its staff, especially Gerard Foley, Leigh Hays and Damien Shepherd, for their always-impeccable organisation.

I was privileged to have met Geoffrey Bolton shortly after I arrived in Western Australia in early 2013. I must confess that experience had prejudiced me to believe that very senior male colleagues with very big beards might be a little bit patronising, or at the very least, offer me fatherly advice. Within three minutes of meeting Geoff, he exploded all my expectations: almost immediately, he made a slightly wicked joke that poked fun at academic pretensions - and then laughed heartily at it himself. I was delighted to find a lively, generous, and somewhat subversive wit in this eminent historian.

By ‘somewhat subversive’ I mean an astute and amused grasp of the bigger picture and its ideologies - however as many have noted, Geoff’s work was characterised by strong attention to empirical evidence, and what we might call ‘facts’. Early in his career, in 1964, fellow historian John McCarty noted that he ‘rejected the search for metaphysical grand themes in Australian history in favour of the systematic collection and interpretation of data’. In this era of fake news, it’s not always clear exactly what the facts are – and then it becomes even more challenging to decide which facts are relevant, and what they mean. So Geoffrey’s insistence on evidence, combined with a complex and nuanced assessment of context, remains a timely example of what good history can do- and it relies fundamentally, on the archive. This becomes

especially important when we address issues of national and international significance, such as Australia's involvement in defining, protecting, advancing – or transgressing human rights.

1984 and the importance of archives

My teenage son recently read the novel *1984* - prompting me to re-read it myself after a gap of many years. I first read *1984* as a school-girl, and actually a little before that fateful year ticked around. The author, Eric Arthur Blair, is better known by his pen-name, George Orwell, and in the novel – first published in 1949 - he paints a grim picture of a future world in which totalitarian forces have taken over, and Big Brother watches over each citizen through ubiquitous telescreens. It is now 70 years since the book was published, and sadly, it remains uncomfortably relevant to our own time.

The protagonist, Winston, works for the Ministry of Truth, in the Records Department. His job is to 'rectify' the news as reported in *The Times*, so as to ensure that BB predicted the things that actually happened; when all the necessary corrections to that issue of the Times were made, it was re-printed and the corrected copy placed in the files instead of the original. As Orwell tells us, 'This process of continuous alteration was applied not only to newspapers, but to books, periodicals, pamphlets, posters, leaflets, films, sound-tracks, cartoons, photographs – to every kind of literature or documentation which might conceivably hold any political or ideological significance. Day by day and almost minute by minute the past was brought up to date.'

In her 2016 introduction to *1984*, novelist Charlotte Wood points out that Orwell's nightmare vision continues to resonate, writing,

We do not live in a totalitarian state. In our country we have a free media, human-rights law, separation of powers, transparency. And yet in the darkened rooms of our own consciousness flicker images of things that say otherwise: a hooded, half-naked boy strapped to a chair. Sewn lips. Lifeless bodies on police cell floors. No matter how many times the state holds up four fingers and tells us we see five, we know from Orwell's "mute protest in our own bones" that terrible things are being done, in secret. How should we respond? What are our responsibilities? We ponder these questions as we accept, as we obey, and let the images slip away again. Winston's first act of rebellion, and of courage, is to write down the date: April 4th, 1984.'

Winston's first act of rebellion, and of courage, is to write down the date.

As a novelist, Wood privileges art in responding to oppression, and suggests that no-one cares any more about falsifying history in this era of fake news - but despite my admiration for her, I very politely disagree: I think we do care about truth- and I think we must insist on not being cynical about it. We must bear witness, listen and give voice – and remember that freedom exists only in the moments when we exercise it. So archives remain our instrument of truth – and (as Orwell intimated in his dystopia) they play a crucial role in safeguarding rights in the present, and in knowing about the past.

So in the next 46 minutes I want to examine the role of archives in protecting and securing human rights – as well as proving violation and seeking justice. I start by examining what hr are, and why history and archives have become increasingly important in pursuing justice.

Human Rights

Over the last decade or so, there has been an explosion of interest in the history of human rights, as historians have traced the ideas and practices embodied in this framework back into the past. By producing a genealogy for our present-day system of human rights we are enabled to understand why it takes the form that it does. At the same time, it has been increasingly acknowledged that archives, and the histories based upon them, are essential tools for dealing with human rights in the present- either in securing and protecting rights, or, conversely, in proving their violation and seeking justice.

The United Nations tells us that human rights are ‘inherent to all human beings, regardless of race, sex, nationality, ethnicity, language, religion, or any other status. Human rights include the right to life and liberty, freedom from slavery and torture, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to work and education, and many more.’ The Universal Declaration of HR was proclaimed in 1948, at the conclusion of World War II, now more than 70 years ago. This framework is now supported by a substantial body of international conventions, state legislation, and institutional and corporate policies that specify state obligations to protect fundamental rights and freedoms. It is not a perfect framework, as feminist and Indigenous critics have argued. For example, its emphasis on the individual, such as in defining property rights, contrasts with common Indigenous social organisation, in groups such as clans, nations, families or communities. So the 2007 UN *Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples* specifically acknowledges rights to own country and hold cultural knowledge as a group, and the right to determine what that group looks like.

Confronting painful histories

One powerful reason for this interest in human rights history is the now axiomatic view that countries wishing to build a democratic future must confront the demons of their past. Where countries have suffered genocide, torture, massacres, and war, many believe that these events must be acknowledged. Since Nuremberg, trials of perpetrators have been considered key instruments for eliciting the truth about painful and horrible pasts, delivering justice and addressing the pain of survivors and the grieving, with the aim of achieving reconciliation and healing.

In processes of transitional justice, measures to redress human rights abuses and their effects have given rise to diverse forms of acknowledgement and remembrance. Transitional justice measures have included reparations programs, institutional reform, and Truth Commissions - for example in South Africa, Chile, and Guatemala. They have included official apologies, state-sponsored ceremonies, public monuments or installations, and attempts at healing through art, fiction, and film.

A principle increasingly utilised in the context of gross violations of human rights, in order to empower victims to find out about past abuses, is the right to the truth. In international law, the right to know the truth is most commonly used in connection to enforced disappearances and action to combat impunity. In international legal discourse it has developed as a multifaceted concept to urge an array of responses to State crimes, ranging from prosecutions and truth-seeking mechanisms to the preservation of archives and witness protection programs.

However this principle remains an ambivalent tool for pursuing justice. For example, in 1940, a series of mass shootings of Polish military officers and intelligentsia was carried out in the Katyń Forest and four other sites in Russia, by the Soviet Union's secret police (NKVD). With Stalin's approval, NKVD chief Lavrenty Beria oversaw the murder of all captive members of the Polish officer corps – in fact most of the victims were reserve officers who in peacetime worked as economists, doctors, lawyers, vets and botanists – in total, almost 22,000 Polish citizens. In 2007 and 2009 family members of the Katyń victims took their claims to the European Court of Human Rights but it ruled that it was ineligible to try them, due to the length of time that had passed between 1940 and Russia's adoption of the European Convention on Human Rights in 1998. Nor did the Court push Russia to meet its obligations to provide answers to families as a right to the truth. So far justice has not been served, pointing to the limits of such frameworks.

Archives and human rights

As well as in addressing the past as the basis for healing in the present, archives are profoundly important in securing and protecting human rights. So in recent years we have seen the proliferation of legal instruments, professional codes and studies of the uses of archives. In 2011 the *Universal Declaration on Archives* was adopted by UNESCO. The Declaration emphasizes the key role of archives in administrative transparency and democratic accountability, as well as the preservation of collective social memory.

As the 2016 International Council on Archives' Human Rights Working Group argues, history can help to access or prove rights, or to reveal their violation – and this is where archives are crucial. As it points out, archives are essential to secure rights and benefits: personnel records, or records military service. Other archives help prove civil rights, such as voter registrations, or citizenship records. Still others provide evidence of the abuse of human rights, such as the records of military, police and intelligence units from periods of dictatorship, even records of prisons, hospitals, morgues and cemeteries.

However, this brings us to another limitation of the human rights framework – that is, its tendency to perpetuate a false dichotomy between the public and private spheres, with an emphasis on the public. This division approximately corresponds to the governmental and the non-governmental domains, and has led to the relative invisibility of a range of forms of oppression – such as human rights violations within the home, or within religious or corporate domains. Recently, for example, the Royal Commission into Institutional Responses To Child Sexual Abuse found that more than 1,000 members of the Jehovah's Witnesses in Australia had been identified by the organisation as perpetrators of child sexual abuse since 1950, but not

one has been reported to police. The Christian Congregation of Jehovah's Witnesses (Australasia) has actually instructed its elders to destroy so-called judicial hearing records and certain congregation notes.

The 2017 Royal Commission's report into child sexual abuse noted that '[i]nadequate records and recordkeeping have contributed to failures in identifying and responding to risks and incidents of child sexual abuse and have exacerbated distress and trauma for many survivors'. It advised all institutions that engage in child-related work that '[c]reating and keeping full and accurate records relevant to child safety and wellbeing, including child sexual abuse, is in the best interests of children and should be an integral part of institutional leadership, governance and culture.' This can be difficult to enforce when the institutions are non-governmental.

Magdalene Laundries

So for example, the Irish state's response to its history of institutional abuse within its Magdalene Laundries has been criticised by scholars, survivors, and activists working for transitional justice. The Magdalene Laundries housed women who broke the strict sexual rules of the Catholic church by having children outside wedlock. These profit-making workhouses were run by religious communities. Magdalene women worked long hours, typically seven days a week, without pay, in harsh conditions, and frequently experienced mental, physical and, in some cases, sexual abuse. An estimated 30,000 women lived behind convent walls until the last laundry closed in 1996. The story of the Magdalene women was uncovered in 1993 when the Order of Our Lady of Charity in Dublin sold 12 acres of land to a developer. The bodies of 155 women who had died while working at the High Park Laundry were exhumed from unmarked graves, prompting a huge scandal.

The advocacy group, *Justice for Magdalenes*, lobbied the Irish government to investigate the history of the laundries, and in 2011 took the case to the United Nations, alleging that the abuse amounted to human rights violations. The UN found that the Irish government was complicit in torture by facilitating the operation of these places. This prompted an inquiry into the state's involvement with the Magdalen Laundries, whose findings were presented in the 2013 McAleese Report. A formal state apology was issued in 2013, and a £50 million compensation scheme for survivors was set up by the Irish Government. However, by focusing on the role of the government the inquiry evaded the wider role of the religious organisations. A major limitation in seeking justice has been the lack of compliance from religious bodies which have denied access to the archives of many of the orders, and rejected activist demands that they financially contribute to the compensation programme. The religious orders cremated all the unidentified remains before they were reinterred in Glasnevin Cemetery so no forensic evidence remains to assist any inquiry.

These places have now been abandoned. However, Irish archaeologist Laura McAtackney has been investigating the 'harsh and restrictive' spaces of former laundry buildings in order to direct attention to the women's experiences. McAtackney is using oral testimony to identify what is significant about the remains of the past and to interpret the site 'beyond what buildings, infrastructure and machines could tell us'. Survivors 'recalled the monotony and physicality of

work, the harsh names the women were called, how their femininity was attacked through hair cutting as punishment, how shame and worthlessness was educated into them consistently and constantly. McAttackney's interpretation draws upon the remaining material spaces and artefacts, and the oral histories that give them significance, as an alternative tool of transitional justice.

Changes in use of archives

The example of the Magdalene Laundries also alerts us to the increasingly broad and diverse understanding of archives, and the importance of their social contexts. We now understand archives as the embodiment of social or cultural practices of record-keeping, and we acknowledge the ways that they are constructed in multiple contextual ways over time and space. So while we look to the archive for 'facts' and for 'truth', we also need to understand that archives are constructions, and that people such as historians, archivists, or communities draw upon them selectively. It is the always-changing *use* of the archives that creates and delivers the 'truth'.

Monash University's Sue McKemish and her ground-breaking research team use the term archival 'multiverse' to describe the pluralistic role of archives in nation-building, reconciliation, social justice, and human rights. They emphasise 'trust and transparency' as guiding principles for archivists addressing ongoing legacies of abuse, and especially the responsibilities archives have to Indigenous communities.

Australian context

In Australia too, we have increasingly acknowledged and confronted shameful aspects of our past, particularly the legacies of colonialism, including official policies of assimilation, and the institutionalisation of children. Yet only recently have historians explicitly argued that the nationalist story of Australia's establishment of a free society is integrally structured by the counter-story of Indigenous dispossession. As Ann Curthoys and Jessie Mitchell have recently shown, for example, in their book *Taking Liberty*, the establishment of liberal and democratic institutions such as universal male suffrage and the secret ballot, and debates about liberty, self-determination and independence, relied upon the process of excluding and denying the rights of Indigenous people. One implication of this recognition is that we must bring together debates about a future Australian nation with those regarding the status of Aboriginal people. Today many consider that visions of a national future must begin with Reconciliation. This is certainly the view of our First Nations people, whose May 2017 'Uluru Statement from the heart' seeks constitutional reforms, and the establishment of a Makarrata (or reconciliation) Commission to supervise a process of agreement-making with government, and 'truth-telling' about Australian history.

The Uluru Statement builds upon a series of important public debates about the Australian past. Over the last three decades we too have widely adopted processes of transitional justice as a means of coming to terms with historical oppression and institutional abuses. In some of these processes official archives have played a crucial role – but others mark the limits of the

government archive. Diverse forms of acknowledgement, truth-telling and remembrance have been used that extend beyond the domain of criminal justice.

One seismic shift in public debate was prompted by the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families, undertaken over 1995 and 1996 (and prompted in part by the 1987 inquiry into Aboriginal deaths in custody.) The inquiry's 1997 report, *Bringing Them Home*, revealed the effects of official processes of assimilation— now known as the Stolen Generations — and made a huge public impact. Aboriginal people had of course always known these terrible stories. The work of leading historians such as Peter Read, Jay Arthur (who coined the term), Anna Haebich, Ros Kidd, and others, first provided public, mainstream, documented accounts given the status of history based on authentic archival evidence. The organization Link-Up was then formed in the early 1980s, and many people who had been removed began to speak out.

For the first time, many non-Indigenous Australians heard the stories of life-long grief behind state policies: the *Bringing Them Home* report opens with an account from Cape Barren Island, Tasmania, telling of the removal of 8 siblings in the 1960s:

So the next thing I remember was that they took us from there and we went to the hospital and I kept asking – because the children were screaming and the little brothers and sisters were just babies of course, and I couldn't move, they were all around me, around my neck and legs, yelling and screaming. I was all upset and I didn't know what to do and I didn't know where we were going. I just thought: well, they're police, they must know what they're doing. I suppose I've got to go with them, they're taking me to see Mum. You know this is what I honestly thought. They kept us in hospital for three days and I kept asking, 'When are we going to see Mum?' And no-one told us at this time. And I think on the third or fourth day they piled us in the car and I said, 'Where are we going?' And they said, 'We are going to see your mother'. But then we turned left to go to the airport and I got a bit panicky about where we were going ... They got hold of me, you know what I mean, and I got a little baby in my arms and they put us on the plane. And they still told us we were going to see Mum. So I thought she must be wherever they're taking us.

(Confidential submission 318)

The children were fostered separately.

Using such testimony in conjunction with traditional archival evidence the inquiry documented the history of the Stolen Generations, noting that after 1948 these official practices were in breach of Australia's commitment to an international human rights legal framework - which imposed obligations on Australia relating to the elimination of racial discrimination. The *Bringing Them Home* report recommended reparations, to comprise 1. acknowledgment and apology, 2. guarantees against repetition, 3. measures of restitution, 4. measures of rehabilitation, and 5. monetary compensation.

The inquiry drew upon research in the field of adoption showing the importance of information about one's natural parents and heritage, and often, of reunion, to most adoptees, who feel a deep emotional and psychological need to know about their origins. The importance of archives for re-connecting families was therefore a key principle of the recommendations. Recommendation 30a stated:

That the Council of Australian Governments ensure that Indigenous community-based family tracing and reunion services are funded in all regional centres with a significant Indigenous population.

As a result a network of such services was funded, through the National Link-Up Program. Official archives across all levels have addressed their holdings relevant to this tragic history, and the need to provide guides and support for family history researchers. Archives have played a crucial role in revealing, and now responding to the Stolen Generations.

Other inquiries

As well as drawing national attention to a troubling aspect of our colonial past, the Stolen Generations inquiry was influential in prompting two further investigations: the *Lost Innocents* report of 2001 regarding British and Maltese child migrants; and the *Forgotten Australians* report of 2004 which collected histories of children in institutional 'care'.

Again, the role of archives was a central focus of their recommendations. Although these three reports reflect separate categories - that is, 'Forgotten Australians', 'Former Child Migrants' and 'Stolen Generations' - and resulted from distinct government policies, many have argued that members of these broad groups shared many experiences as a result of being separated from family. These children often lived together in the same institutions, and experienced systems of 'care' and social attitudes that had failed to protect them.

As a consequence, the Australian Government funded the Find and Connect program, now renewed to June 2020. Run by the Department of Social Services, Find and Connect Support Services provide specialist trauma-informed counselling; referral services; peer, education and social support programs; and assistance to locate and access records and reconnect with family members (where possible) for Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants. Community agencies, and the states and territories, are encouraged to provide timely access to historical records to care leavers. One component of this program is the brilliant *Find and Connect* resource which brings together historical resources to allow users to read information about and view images of children's Homes; get help to find records; and to connect with support groups and services.

In addition, the National Museum of Australia created an exhibition, called 'Inside: Life in Children's Homes and Institutions', and the National Library of Australia undertook the Forgotten Australians and Former Child Migrants Oral History Project. As the online exhibition states, 'The stories, photographs and personal objects from Forgotten Australians, Former Child Migrants and members of the Stolen Generations provide a chance to understand something of a history that affected so many people and was hidden for so long'. They included

about 50,000 Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander children and 7000 child migrants from Britain and Malta. It also pointed out that

The difficulties of a past spent in institutions are compounded by poor record-keeping. Unlike for the rest of the community, there are most likely to be few or no photographs of former residents as children; few or no records of birthdays, Christmases, school concerts, holidays. There may be no known relatives or contact with a former staff member who can remember them as children to compensate for this lack of information. If the institution did keep records, they represent the kinds of information needed by the institution, such as medical information, or (often judgmental) comments on the resident children or their families. Many find the records kept heartbreakingly sparse. Others discover the records have been mislaid or even destroyed and the opportunity to find crucial personal information about themselves or their families lost forever.

The buildings that once were Children's Homes have now been 'repurposed, left derelict or been demolished. Although tens of thousands of Australians spent their childhood in such places, this history remains most often unmarked and the material culture that belongs to this history continues to be lost.' Perhaps we could learn from projects such as the Magdalen Laundries interpretation, in developing ways to listen and respond to former inmates, and understand their experiences?

Following the revelations of abuse documented by these investigations, in 2012 PM Julia Gillard established a Royal Commission into institutional responses to child sexual abuse, which presented a final report in December 2017. The report found an overwhelming amount of the abuse reported to the commission occurred in faith-based institutions, with almost 2,500 survivors testifying to sexual abuse in an institution managed by the Catholic church (or 61.8% of all survivors who reported sexual abuse in a religious institution). Among its recommendations were to make celibacy for priests voluntary and end the secrecy of confession, urging the Australian Catholic bishops conference to ask the Vatican to reform canon law. In August 2018 the Conference formally accepted more than 98% of the report recommendations. For example, it established a company called Catholic Professional Standards Limited which has developed a set of standards to help safeguard children and vulnerable adults. Within various offices, such as the Archives Office, within each diocese a new records management framework has been developed to improve the way that records are created and managed across the organisation. However, it supported retention of the civil law protection for the seal of the confessional. This position once again underlines the limitations of a human rights framework, and its weakness in intervening within the non-governmental sphere.

In the meantime, the commission provided an opportunity for survivors to tell their story and have it recorded and made public. Many expressed the fear of not being believed, as had so often been their experience throughout their lives. Many told how, in the absence of a listener they had blamed themselves or felt responsible for their own abuse. The participants believed that giving evidence to the inquiry was an important act that brought a traumatic and hidden

history of wrongdoing to the surface. It revealed the truth of their stories, and they became part of a shared national history. The commission compiled a ‘Message to Australia’, in which short messages to the community ‘about their experience and hopes for creating a safer future for children’ were published in a commemorative book given to the National Library of Australia in December 2017 and which can be viewed online. One survivor wrote, with hope, that,

I came to share my story, not only for me, but for the ones that didn’t make it, for all the stories not told, I came! For them I have become like a lighthouse, warning us of danger. Let us all become beacons of light, for all our children!

Transformation of the archives

As well as expanding to include diverse forms of evidence, the meanings of many archives are now becoming transformed. Where they may originally have been made to police and manage Aboriginal people, for example, their meanings have been radically revised, becoming a precious heritage resource. When the Western Australian Aboriginal Protector’s files were opened during the 1980s, Aboriginal researchers began to mine them for their own purposes. For example, Stephen Kinnane used official files about his grandmother Jessie Argyle, a Miriwoong woman of the East Kimberley, to tell the story of her life and family in his 2003 book *Shadow Lines*. Jessie was taken from her family in 1906, at the age of five. Later she met Edward Smith, a young Englishman, and Kinnane traces their struggle to stay together under restrictive state policies.

Earlier this year, Yamatji scholar Dr Robin Barrington won the 2019 Margaret Medcalf Award for her essay *A Race War: Tracing emotions on the Murchison frontier in Western Australia 1880-1915*. Drawing on a range of archival evidence, including historical photographs, in her essay Robin wrote about the history of frontier violence from an Indigenous perspective.

As well as the traditional written documents - letters, memos, reports, we see a wider range of sources considered archives –including photographs, objects, stories and art. This broadening reflects the limits of official archives, as well as a holistic approach to truth-telling. It reminds us that Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people have always had their own ways of recording and narrating the past.

One debate which perhaps highlighted the limits of the archives, was in the very polarised discussion regarding frontier conflict, sometimes called the ‘History Wars’, which pitted the so-called ‘black armbands’ against ‘white blindfold’ historians: that is, those who wished to acknowledge our history’s impact upon Indigenous people against those who wanted to feel pride in our colonial past. This public dispute reached a climax around the turn of the millennium, as a prominent strand of critique focused on the forensic analysis of archival sources and estimates of numbers of casualties - a highly politicized historical discussion that aroused widespread public interest, including from the nation’s political leaders. However, few Aboriginal voices were heard, and some Aboriginal people considered that its emphasis on archival evidence had distracted us from the moral implications of this history. Koorie writer Tony Birch, for example, termed it a ‘phoney war’, and dismissed those who questioned the truth of frontier violence. He declared: ‘And we know – viewers, community, and nation. And

how do we respond to this knowledge? We ‘wage a war’ around the footnote so that the waters of truth can be muddied enough that we can no longer see our reflection’.

A key debate currently underway among Aboriginal people themselves concerns the most appropriate way to memorialize this past and its legacies in the present. One important landmark was the Aboriginal Memorial curated by Djon Mundine and displayed at the National Gallery of Australia since 1987, comprising 200 log coffins painted by Ramingining artists from Central Arnhem Land. Recently, Indigenous artist Brook Andrew has been leading a team aiming to place Australia’s history in an international framework of commemoration. The *Representation, Remembrance and the Memorial* project is exploring possibilities for national remembrance of the Frontier Wars in Australia.

Recently, we have seen a range of important and innovative truth-telling initiatives. One powerful recent project led by historian Lyndall Ryan and her team at the University of Newcastle has produced a map of massacre sites across the country, based on deep archival research. This project delivers a stark message through the graphic pattern of dots across the nation. It builds upon and complements the traditional use of documentary sources to produce written histories – such as Battye historian Chris Owen’s book, *Every Mother's Son is Guilty*, about the ‘killing times’ in the Kimberley around the turn of the nineteenth century, based on archives held by the State Records Office.

Similarly, photographic and visual archives have now assumed an important role. Photographs held in official collections, like documentary archives, can be transformed and re-interpreted to satisfy Aboriginal objectives. Aboriginal people have begun to explain the importance of recovering such images in their quest to re-connect with family and place, in an emotional but often healing process. Pioneers in this work include the Ara Irititja database developed for Central Australian communities, now the basis for the very successful State Library of WA project, *Storylines*. This digitises photos and makes them available to communities. Another important initiative was undertaken in 1998 by the Berndt Museum at the University of West Australia under John Stanton’s directorship. This project explicitly responded to the *Bringing Them Home* report, by aiming to share its historical photographs from Western Australia with Aboriginal families.

In my own work I have also been privileged to participate in researching and returning photos to family. Since 2008 our team, including Donna Oxenham and now led by Dr Vanessa Russ and the Berndt Museum, has collaborated with European museums (the MAA at Cambridge Uni, the PRM at Oxford, the Volkenkunde in Leiden, NL, and the Musée du quai Branly in Paris), as well as many Indigenous individuals and communities, to research, digitise and share photographs, helping to re-connect families fragmented by assimilation policies. I have been fortunate to hear many stories of re-connection through this work.

For example, Shauna Bostock-Smith tells the story of discovering her Great-Great Grand-Aunt’s photo. She had spent much time researching her family history, and was at home one day when the phone rang and her aunty told her to turn on the TV. She watched a television

documentary which explored Australia's most famous 19th century photographer John William Lindt. Lindt's acclaimed 1870s series, comprised portraits of Gumbaynggirr and Bandjalung peoples of the lower Clarence River in NSW. Shauna explains that she 'gasp[ed] aloud' when Lindt's well-known image of 'Mary Ann of Ulmarra' was identified as Mary Ann Cowan, because, she says,

I have been researching my family history for the last few years, and I knew that Mary Ann Cowan was my Great-Great Grand-Aunt. This exciting news had such a profound effect on me. It is as though this lovely photograph taken last century has spiritually reached through time and altered my perception of her today. She has now magically transformed from being an abstract entity.... a name on her marriage and death certificates, into a real life, flesh and blood, beautiful young woman.

The image manifested her years of family research, and embodied a physical link with her ancestor that became the occasion to build further family connections, and to re-visit Mary-Ann's traditional country with her relatives.

Another example of the way that photographs may re-connect families and counter the Stolen Generations comes from Ngarrindjeri Country, in South Australia. The Ngarrindjeri nation comprises several peoples with a common language, whose land and waters (*ruwe*) take in the River Murray, Alexandrina and Albert lakes, the vast Coorong wetlands and the Southern Ocean coast. Ngarrindjeri elder Aunty Ellen Trevorrow and her friend, academic Karen Hughes, talk about how photos underpin Ngarrindjeri well-being. Ellen's family album elicits important stories that have the power to heal, connecting generations and helping to piece together lives fractured by the state.

In Ellen's family collection is a portrait of her maternal grandfather, William Brown, and his younger brother, Patrick (Paddy) Brown, as children. This image was recorded shortly after the boys had been taken from their family, near the Riverland town of Renmark. After being held overnight in a jail and placed under the control of the State Children's Council, the children were transferred to the Industrial School in Edwardstown, Adelaide, without their parents' knowledge or consent. The photo was published in the *South Australian Chief Protector of Aborigines* report in 1911 as an example of colonial ideas of 'uplift' used to promote the project of child removal and 'training'; the accompanying caption read, 'Fine boys doing well under the care of the State Children's Council.'

Ellen's mother never stopped searching during her lifetime for Uncle Paddy's family, the legacy of their removal a cause of ongoing pain and dislocation.

The photograph was recovered during research in 1988 and is now deeply cherished, and much copied and shared among Grandfather William's descendants — an image of connection, in stark contrast to its original intent.

More than a century later, photographs have incubated vital information to reunite William and Paddy's descendants, who were dislocated through government policy. From this family research, another, startling photo re-emerged, a studio portrait of the brothers as young adults

after their release from the Industrial School. It is held in the collection of Grandfather Patrick's daughter-in-law. Seeing for the first time the brothers pictured together as adults has enabled the segregated families to firmly recognise their shared identity, and begin to know the stories behind the forces that wedged them apart.

But sadly, the family circle is not yet complete, as Ellen says- a companion photo was re-discovered also taken in 1910 at the Industrial School on the same occasion, showing a larger group of kids. This reveals two smaller children to the left of William and Patrick. The boy, who appears about three or four years old, is their younger brother Robert Rollison. He later married a Ngarrindjeri woman and lived at Meningie. But the infant girl – she looks about two years old in the photo - is thought to be their missing sister Daisy. She has disappeared from available historical records. Ellen and her family continue to search for 'Aunty Daisy' and her descendants, whom they hope to find while they still have one member left of the first generation.

Recent research has also begun to identify early Aboriginal photographers, such as Aunty Charlotte Richards, a prolific Ngarrindjeri photographer from the 1940s to the 1980s. Born around 1930, Richards grew up in camps along the Riverland and Coorong, and lived for a considerable time at One Mile fringe camp, like many other Aboriginal people, excluded by official policy and popular prejudice from the region's towns. She was unusual in not having children to support, and used her income derived from sewing bags and picking fruit to pay for her photography, and to share the results among her kin. Her family remembers her love of camp life, 'fishing and rabbiting' and her strict care for her collection of photos, now a unique record of life beyond official surveillance, that constitutes a familial, not government archive.

Another significant Aboriginal photographer is Mavis Phillips, née Walley, whose collection is now housed by the State Library of Western Australia's digital archive *Storylines*. As a mother of 11, Mavis Walley took more than 300 photos with her Box Brownie camera at Goomalling, 145 km northeast of Perth, between the 1950s and 1970s. The collection was 'discovered' when Mavis Walley's daughter, Dallas Phillips, brought along a 'tin full of treasures' to a history workshop held in Goomalling. *Storylines* worked with Mavis Phillips's family to restore and disseminate 325 of these negatives in 2015. As researcher Lucy Van argues, this collection represents a Ballardong Noongar point of view in its choice of subjects, composition, and style, expressing the joy and spontaneity of the photographer and her sitters. As Battye Historian Kate Gregory has noted, the State Library's 'deeply colonial framework', is being challenged and addressed by projects like *Storylines*.

In conclusion, through these many innovative, open-facing, and Aboriginal-centred initiatives, we see archives and archivists, and those who rely upon them, responding to the Uluru Statement's call for 'truth-telling'. As George Orwell pointed out in his dystopian novel, archives are the foundation of our public truth. Just as in his novel, we acknowledge that the truth is made in the present, and it changes according to who tells it. Yet unlike in *1984*, for us archives are a precious trace not to be destroyed, that can reveal the untruths of Big Brother and the abuse of power in human rights violations. Using the archive, in its diverse and

sometimes slippery forms, those pursuing historical justice may give voice to the silenced, and fill the absences and mis-representations that have shaped our past. Through these diverse tools they are telling their stories in ways that demand acknowledgement and respect, as the basis for a flourishing and just Australian future.