

Every Story Has Its Nation: Reveries of an Accidental Archivist

Jonathan Wraith - 2016 ASRA Conference Alice Moyle
Lecture

I pay my respects to the traditional owners of the land on which we meet and acknowledge all the elders past, present and future who are the custodians of country, culture, and community.

Thank you to the ASRA Conference Organising Committee for the opportunity to speak to you today, in particular to your President MD [Matthew Davies], friend, colleague and (whether he likes it or not) mentor.

It is a very great pleasure for me to be here to pay tribute to Dr Alice Moyle and to reflect on her legacy in the context of the AIATSIS Collection, but also hopefully to draw out and underscore some of what I have come to understand of her really special qualities and ways of working, that I think remain important and instructive.

In 1954, Alice completed a Bachelor of Arts, Honours, at Sydney University with a thesis on the music of ancient Greece, that music would have accompanied the plays of Euripides or Aeschylus.

You can read what stimulated her (what I am calling) radicalisation and interest in Australian Indigenous music in *Problems and solutions; Occasional Essays in Musicology presented to Alice M. Moyle* in the useful article by Jill Stubbington. After completing her honours thesis, she spent virtually the rest of her life investigating, recording and analysing Australian Indigenous music and laying a foundation for scholarly work, ongoing collection, documentation and preservation of these amazing musical traditions.

Before I say another word I need to issue a disclaimer – my thoughts and opinions herein are just that and are not necessarily shared by my employer.

I talk today as a person, perhaps even a professional, with an enduring commitment to working with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander

people to achieve improved outcomes against the whole range of indicators as well as someone with an interest and, I like to think, some skill in enabling and promoting the use of archival collections as a basis for mobilisation and social change.

I call myself an accidental archivist because after leaving the profession in 1993 for the then fertile pastures of commonwealth public policy and programs, I thought I'd never return to it. The job I am doing now represents a confluence of my professional and personal interests over the past 25 years. A happy accident for me and I hope for AIATSIS and the excellent people I work with.

Over the next half hour or so I want to talk about what I have elicited from talking and reading about Dr Moyle, AM – her practices, her originality. These are summarised by Jill Stubbington as

- Collection and documentation
- The care of the material collected
- Analysis – in Alice's case musicological analysis – and
- The dissemination of the data and research results.

My formulation around that is a little less refined – I think of it as making, safe keeping and safe sharing.

I'll need to run through a bit of the history of AIATSIS and the development over the past 50 years of the AIATSIS collection – where it came from, where it is today and future directions that respond to shifting dynamics. It is here that I'll try to get to the conference theme – crunch time.

Along that path there will probably be some inaccuracies, a few diversions, wrong turns, meanderings, you might find me running on rims for a bit – it won't be linear, but bear with me, we may get somewhere by the end of it.

I guess most of us in the room work on cultural collections of some description or another, in some capacity or another. And aren't we fortunate to have that privilege?

We at AIATSIS view ourselves as particularly privileged, as well as being charged with a profound and solemn responsibility, to ensure the safe keeping and future growth of what has been independently assessed as the world's most significant and best contextualised collection relating to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture, heritage and history.

My discussion today won't be scholarly, or technical, or particularly focussed on the specific challenges of managing and preserving audio collections – many others over the course of the past few days have spoken with authority about those matters. That's best left to them who know.

However, if I manage to get past aphorism and motif, you may be able to glean from my rambling tergiversation a sense of the importance and urgency of the work of AIATSIS, and the crunch, or crunches, we face.

I will punctuate my ramble with some of Dr Moyle's recordings from the Top End mostly and one or two of other musicologists who were inspired by her considerable opus, as well as her practices.

I recall the wonder, as a boy aged about four, of hearing for the first time in my life different languages, walking through the grounds of the old Darwin Hospital, with all the people sitting under trees in family groups talking and laughing and singing.

Some of the recordings made by Dr Moyle are especially significant to me simply because of the places where the artists came from, these are places where I have worked with communities over the years, mostly on health related matters; they are significant because they form a part of the stories of the peoples of the nations who created them.

This (at last) brings me to the title of my presentation today.

Every story has its nation.

Some of you may recognise the mirrored reference. I have taken it from the Hon Dr Brendan Nelson's 2014 Geoffrey Bolton Lecture at the WA State Records Office, a very fine lecture indeed and I commend it to you.

In *Here is their spirit – the Anzac Centenary and the Generation that gave a nation its story*, Dr Nelson speaks compellingly and genuinely about the work of the Australian War Memorial to present and keep relevant the lives and sacrifices of Australia's women and men who were in the dreadful conflagration that we have come to know as the First World War.

I first heard Dr Nelson's lecture not long after I started working at AIATSIS in 2014, on loan from the Australian Government Department of Education, to assist the AIATSIS Executive with the development of a Budget submission to to seek additional recurrent funding to address urgent and catastrophic threats to the AIATSIS Collection.

In that lecture, Dr Nelson enumerates the lives lost in various WWI battles, he refers to individuals, quotes their letters home, quotes from Bean's official history, which includes pre-battle conversations between young soldiers, and seamlessly and poignantly brings together a mass of documentary information to support his thesis that-

“Beyond its indigenous history, the pioneering efforts of those who came on the first fleet and others who joined them throughout the nineteenth century, it was not until the cataclysm that unfolded in late 1914, that our nation had its story.”

He says – “Every nation has its story. This is ours.”

This got me thinking – an activity as rare as it is dangerous – about the nature of national narratives and mythologies, their usefulness, how we create them, the place of the archive, the role of records, the capacity of those narratives to exclude, marginalise, make irrelevant anything that might fall outside The Story we are being told and that we maybe even tell ourselves.

None of this is meant to diminish that story, and the people that are that story, which Dr Nelson so elegantly weaves from the marvellous AWM collection.

However, I am suggesting that there is value in recognising other stories, stories that are the heart, the soul and the head of many nations.

Every story has its nation.

Now, as a part of my thinking about the spectacular, dizzying collection that we are privileged to work with, I've had some stark realisations, especially when I look to the contrast of the known, the enumerable, the documented story that we tell, for instance, about the ANZAC generation. One single generation.

The most obvious realisation and one that does not surprise – we know but relatively little of the generations - how many thousands upon thousands of generations in fifty or sixty thousand years of continuous settlement? – that constitute the Indigenous history of this country.

Of those innumerable people who lived and died before colonisation, and after it, there are scant records, and even fewer created by or from the perspective of the original inhabitants, the first nations.

I heard recently that it is possible that the continent that we call home could have supported a billion people prior to the theft of their lands and systematic attempts to eradicate their cultures. We don't know this for certain, we never will, but we are capable surely of imagining that great swathe of time and people? We are capable of imagining the 'classical' civilisations of 'ancient' Greece, Mesopotamia, Rome on the basis of remnants – so we should be able to imagine, on the basis of continuing, evolving and living traditions that we can observe today, that civilisation which looked after this land for so long.

Important work has been done to begin to illuminate the stories of all the generations, of all the nations, and recognise those as fundamental and necessary to how we see ourselves. I say begin, because there remains a great deal to do.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, as well as non-Indigenous people, are active as historians, linguists, anthropologists, musicologists, artists, cultural producers of all kinds, documenting, sharing and preserving the majestic and practical ways of thinking and being that evolved over the millennia.

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander cultures are not museum pieces. They are not homogenous; they remain lived, at once both fragile and

robust; they are dynamic, responding to radical and cataclysmic social, psychological, economic and environmental changes and challenges.

The record of all that will never be complete. And nor can or should it be. It continues to grow and change.

I promised you a brief history of AIATSIS and the formation of the collection. That should, I hope, give you some background to the challenges and opportunities ahead of us. The description that follows is rough and impressionistic, may contain some errors of fact and it is not properly sequential - a historian's nightmare.

The Hon WC Wentworth, Member for Mackellar, in the Menzies Government wrote in 1959 of the need for the establishment of an Australian Institute for Aboriginal Studies In these terms –

“In summary –

The project is important.

The project is urgent.

The project is cheap.

If we do not undertake it now, humanity will lose something of permanent value and we Australians, as its custodians, will lay ourselves open to perpetual reproach.”

Minister Wentworth took a great interest in Aboriginal people and northern Australia, indeed he was the first Minister for Aboriginal Affairs from 1968 - 1971 .[He would often turn up with his good lady wife in Darwin or in other towns and communities in the NT, unannounced, in the long (winter) breaks from Parliament. An inquiring and reportedly somewhat erratic mind, there is a story of him in Darwin in 1972, when the supersonic Concorde first flew into Australia, skipping away from the small party of dignitaries assembled on the tarmac to view its take off, and getting himself poll position immediately BEHIND the jets as they were starting to fire up. This was obviously before the days of political minders, strict airport security, explosive trace detection, x-ray and millimetre wave body scanning. The poor airport officials, who were Commonwealth employees way back then, did persuade him to step back, before he was roasted alive.]

The Hon WC Wentworth managed, after years of agitation commencing in 1959, no doubt surrendering some political capital and in collaboration with notable academics like Stanner, to prevail upon the government of the day to see the establishment of the Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies under its own federal legislation in 1964. This makes it the oldest *national* institution anywhere in the world committed to the study of that nation's original inhabitants.

The mission of AIAS was to record language, song, art, material culture, ceremonial life and social structure before those traditions perished.

The original legislative charter of the AIAS was –

- (a) to sponsor and to foster research of a *scientific* nature on the Australian Aborigines.
- (b) to treat as a matter of urgency those studies for which the source materials are disappearing.
- (c) to establish and conduct a documentation centre on the Aborigines, and a library of books, manuscripts and other relevant material, both for the use of scholars and for public education.

Among the other functions was the requirement for the AIAS to encourage co-operation with and between scholars, with appropriate bodies concerning the financing of research, the preservation of sites, and the collection of records, to publish the results of research, to promote the training of research workers and to establish relations with relevant international bodies.

The AIAS was set up then, as a research centre, a 'rescue' archive and a publishing house. And it did commission and conduct extensive research, and as you know, made possible much of Alice Moyle's landmark work both directly and then through a collaborative arrangement with an AIAS Research Fellowship at Monash University.

These sorts of arrangements were how much of the collection was built in the relatively early days.

The AIAS engaged actively in its mission of documentation. Along with encouraging and funding the work of field researchers, it also

established its own film unit that operated until 1988 creating one of the largest assemblies of ethnographic films in the world.

It collected books and manuscripts as it was charged. It published a scholarly journal, and major texts. It built relationships with universities, it sponsored and trained white researchers.

I get the pretty clear impression the place was spread thin across these activities. And that they were conducted quite separately as the organisation grew. The 'collection' arms of 'library' – published and printed manuscript materials and what evolved into an 'AV' collection - operated largely independently of each other. This is another thing that adds to the complexity of the collection today.

The orientation and the governance of the Institute slowly changed as the call for self-determination and greater control of the services and programs impacting Indigenous peoples grew louder and more insistent. It also moved around that time to what is now the flash hotel at New Acton – before that it was a hostel for public servants. I worked there briefly in the early 1990s and recall it as a vibrant and somewhat chaotic place, sprawling across a maze of buildings and little rooms containing research, collections and administrative staff, with cupboards and stairwells used for archival storage.

In March 1974 the Institute's governing council was challenged in an open letter, ahead of the AIAS conference –

“Those involved in Aboriginal studies are in a particularly sensitive situation. They should not pretend that their studies are objective when the overwhelming factor in the lives of Aborigines is our oppression by the society, which the anthropologist is, to greater or lesser extent, a part of. Human relationships tend to be scarred by this social fact.”

And in this from Charles Perkins

“It's a scandal when they have invited the intellectual elite of the country and people from overseas to attend the conference but they won't have any Aborigines there. In future they will have to get their information on the Aboriginal culture from someone else because we are not going to give it to them.”

The now famous Eaglehawk and Crow letter of 1974, along with other strong representations, had an eventual impact. The dynamic was changing.

In the mid 70s the first efforts were made to engage Aboriginal people in governance as well introducing grants for Aboriginal researchers. Community research grants were successful in encouraging Indigenous people into academic research careers and engaging communities in increasingly collaborative projects.

These directions were finally cemented in the 1989 legislative amendment that saw the introduction of an Indigenous majority governing council, and a name change to also recognise Torres Strait Islanders as a distinct cultural group.

Progressively along this timeline we see a burgeoning development of Aboriginal studies in Australian universities schools of anthropology, archaeology and linguistics. This is both a measure of success for the Institute, in its role of incubator, as well as a driver for change and the next phase of the life of the Institute.

The AIATSIS Research program remained vibrant through the 1980s and 1990s and the collection continued to grow in various directions as a result alongside it – in some ways deliberately, in some ways, it appears to me, haphazardly.

Researchers, for instance, would deposit materials under all sorts of access and use conditions that have becoming increasingly problematic to administer over time, as the recognition of Indigenous cultural and property rights became central to the management of the collection.

A rock art identification and protection program commenced, ran for a number of years and then ceased. Significant and valuable artworks were acquired and then transferred to the National Museum.

We inherited volumes of materials from some government agencies as they ceased to exist – think ATSIC – or were unable to support their Indigenous resource collections.

A program of return of materials to Indigenous communities was commenced through community visits. These are complex and

intensive exercises that can take years rather than months to progress. Under growing funding pressure this program was also reduced and then ceased for a period.

The Institute moved again in 2001 – to today’s site, which is showing signs of age and wear and tear, which we are steadily outgrowing.

The problems facing the collection, both in terms of preservation particularly of ferromagnetic media, and in accessibility, were recognised as emerging issues.

Meanwhile, funding remained largely static, while costs increased and the organisation was faced with difficult decisions about how to allocate its resources. Research remained a strong priority, conducting critical work in the development and promulgation of ethical research standards and conducting essential research to support native title claims and landmark social research.

The collection received less attention. For example, the moving image collection was closed for a period as its condition deteriorated and its management became increasingly difficult.

There was a clear funding crisis as the Institute continued to attempt to meet its broad legislative charter. While some additional funds were provided by government for a digitisation program, these were not included in the funding base and were subject to annual appropriation. As we all know, this is a hard way to establish and manage an ongoing program.

AIATSIS has been reviewed a number of times over the years. Its contribution to and place in Indigenous higher education was included in a major Commonwealth review into Indigenous higher education conducted by Professor Larissa Behrendt in 2011, which recommended a further detailed review, in light of the changed landscape in Indigenous research and the support of Indigenous scholarship.

It was the subsequent review in 2012/13 that enabled AIATSIS to systematically examine the risks to the collection as well as to seek an independent view of the significance of the whole of the collection – an exercise not previously undertaken in almost 50 years of collecting activity.

Evidence that the collection was globally significant and in urgent need of a major program of consolidation provided the fulcrum for an approach to government that was purposeful, strategic and well supported by our portfolio agency of the Department of Education – remembering that AIATSIS is a part of the critical national research infrastructure, rather than a national cultural institution.

The risks identified were many and varied and, as with all of our collections, in some places potentially catastrophic.

This graphic realisation saw more difficult and radical change.

The AIATSIS Council determined that the balance between research and collections needed to be adjusted, which saw a major change in the directions and emphasis of the research program – which itself had been under increasing pressure – and a renewed focus on collection management.

And we remain in this state of change today. The Act was amended again in February of this year [2016] and along with some changes to governance, it provides a more contemporary set of functions -

1. to develop, preserve and provide access to a national collection of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
2. to use that national collection to strengthen and promote knowledge and understanding of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage;
3. to provide leadership in the fields of:
 - (i) Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander research; and
 - (ii) ethics and protocols for research, and other activities relating to collections, related to Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples; and
 - (iii) use (including use for research) of that national collection and other collections containing Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage.

Responsibilities to lead and promote collaborations and partnerships especially with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and to

provide advice to the Commonwealth on the situation and status of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander culture and heritage are also important functions.

The remit remains large.

Along with these changes government announced an increase in the funding base – a rarity in recent budgets for any of us – which critically is also seen in the forward estimates.

This has enabled growth in the collection's staffing profile to address the risks, to further develop the collection and to improve access to it. It has augured a new focus on rebuilding and consolidating our information architecture and collections infrastructure. Separate funding has enabled the staffing up of the Family History Unit and the creation of certified training in family history research, where demand is increasing and outstripping supply.

It has also and not unreasonably increased the expectations of our primary clients and constituents – Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples and communities – as well as academics and the general public – of more ready access to and discoverability of the collection.

This is one crunch. We remain, in my sober view, several years off being able to meet the demand for access.

I've roughly outlined how the collection has been built.

The kaleidoscopically complex acquisition arrangements of the past means that there is extensive work required on clarifying cultural and property rights – this is a large scale task that must be approached systematically and in partnership with the cultural owners of the materials – who are mostly different people of course from those holding copyright.

As these important materials age, inevitably the generations who were the 'subjects' are also passing. This is another crunch. The further we move away in time, the harder it becomes to ensure that the requirements of people and communities for control over their own property are understood and responded to appropriately.

There are really big, long term work programs that we need to develop collaboratively with Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, communities and organisations to ensure the safe keeping and safe sharing of the experiences of many nations.

There is seemingly limitless potential provided by digital convergence for the re-imagining of the AIATSIS collection by the people who were once subjects but who can now have control of their own precious materials.

And these convergent technologies are allowing really vibrant new expressions of culture and experience that pose challenges for collecting institutions which if we can't respond to adequately will mean that we are less relevant, less useful, than we should be.

There is an imperative to continue the re-balancing of the relationship between collections and the creators of the things that make it up. And to be led in that re-balancing by those creators.

So I circle back to Alice Moyle – and her rigour and enthusiasm and commitment. Our ways of doing things and seeing things must necessarily continue to evolve and change on the basis of greater understanding that comes from those overlapping circles of making, safe keeping and safe sharing.

And as I pay tribute to Alice and her work to increase our understanding, I would like to close with a few words about another major contributor to improving our understanding of the challenges of safe keeping and safe sharing particularly in the domain of sound recording.

As of last night, Matthew Davies formally retired from his position at the NFSA. I would like to add my voice of thanks and appreciation to him for his significant contributions to professional keeping practices - he's spent most of his professional life learning, investigating, creating solutions to hard problems - and sharing and inspiring people here at the NFSA, before that at the ABC, through ASRA and internationally as well. He is peerless in his sophisticated and broad ranging subject knowledge, generosity of spirit and in his irrepressible cheeriness – and a more likeable and humble fellow one could not meet. So from me,

Matthew, thank you and all the very best for you and Annie for a happy and productive retirement – which is a word that really doesn't suit you.

And thanks also to you, patient listeners.
