

The Contributions of Custodians: Welcoming Remarks and IASA 2009 Conference Launch

Chris Puplick AM, Australian National Film and Sound Archive, Australia

Presented at the IASA 2008 Conference, Sydney, Australia

I am pleased as Chair of the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia an active member of IASA since 1984 - to welcome you back to Australia and to Sydney in particular.

Australians have always valued the opportunity for international co-operation and participation: and I am pleased to acknowledge the leadership role of Kevin Bradley (your incoming President), my NFSA Board colleague Grace Koch, my archive mentor Ray Edmondson and others such as Peter Burgis, John Spence, James McCarthy and Matthew Davies who have made significant contributions to IASA.

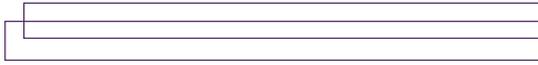
IASA itself has blossomed since its foundation in 1969 – growing out of the International Association of Music Libraries - to become a truly world-wide organisation with members in more than 60 countries and I congratulate you on that achievement.

You have an interesting and varied programme ahead of you over the next few days – one which I am sure will stimulate and lead to further insights. The work of your Cataloguing, Discography, Technical, National Archive, Radio Sound Archive and Research Archive subcommittees will keep you all busy and in many ways are the foundations of work from which we derive so much benefit from the sharing of experiences.

As you know Australia has an exceptional history in terms of its own audiovisual archives. We are one of the few countries that can say that our own political history as a federated nation is comprehensively captured on film. Our films of the 1896 Melbourne Cup and the Manly ferry (both still running!) predate our Federation. We have moving images of all of our Prime Ministers and sound recordings of all but (I think) four of them.

Again, as I am sure you know our film industry was in many ways the world's pioneer. The 1900 Salvation Army slide show/film *Soldiers of the Cross* developed an existing technology but the 1906 *Kelly Gang* was truly the world's first feature film. I hope that many of you will be able to get copies of the marvellous reconstruction and presentation of this epic recently issued by the NFSA – the first of a series which we are planning related to our historic silent era.

I am also immensely proud of the work of both the NFSA and the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Affairs in collecting and preserving so much of the record of our indigenous and original peoples. The capture of this history is vital, not only for its own intrinsic worth but equally for what it can tell us about so much that has been lost or is threatened and why this is so important for our collective indigenous and European futures. Managing this material is a matter of the utmost cultural sensitivity and I hope that through IASA we can learn more about the experiences of managing other unique indigenous collections. At the NFSA I am also immensely proud of our programme which repatriates copies of very old, rare and often sensitive/sacred material recorded in the 1920s and 1930s, usually by anthropologists or ethnographers (of course without the proper consent of the Indigenous people concerned) to their original communities. In this process we enhance



trust and dialogue with those communities, and they share with us much information which is uniquely valuable about the material in our collection.

Similarly our unique records of what our country once looked like: its rivers and its forests, its cities and its landscapes, its flora and fauna, are now vital markers against which we have an enhanced capacity to face the challenges of climate change, land degradation, urbanisation and social planning. We need to see what we have destroyed if we are to have any chance of restoration – and where will we find that but in our audiovisual archives?

Australian Governments have always recognised the importance of our audiovisual archive and the current NFSA is the descendent of the original National Historic Film and Speaking Record Library established in 1935. They have been great supporters of our work, never more so than now.

One of the great joys of archival work is to find a new treasure – a sort of Indiana Jones moment – only non-violent and legal. Such a moment occurred for us in August when we discovered (in the UK) a March 1927 ten minute film of the Duke and Duchess of York arriving in Sydney to open our first national Parliament House in Canberra. This unique film shot by Walter Sully (for DeForest Phonofilms) is our earliest sound film and indeed captured sound on film four years before the Jazz Singer introduced the world to the “talkies”.

Similarly in our fabulous Corrick Collection (some 135 silent films of the early part of the last century) we recently came across a copy of the 1904 Living London a 40 minute film produced by Charles Urban, one of England’s major film pioneers. It will be a pleasure for us to have it screened in Trafalgar Square at the opening of the forthcoming London Film Festival.

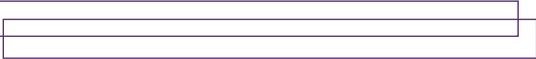
History is important – when George Santayana said that those who do not learn its lessons are condemned to repeat it he was right.

Two weeks ago today I walked along and stood at the end of an ordinary looking railway line. But this was no ordinary line; these were the train tracks into the Auschwitz/Birkenau extermination camps. What I saw there, felt there, experienced there is not capable of expression: there are no words of sufficient gravity.

Not everyone can visit such places – although everyone should. You can read about them in the history books or in the scarifying memoirs of Primo Levi or Imre Kertesz, but there is nothing like seeing the images. The archival films of this horror, this holocaust - kept safe and made available across the globe - are fundamental and vital to giving hope to the message on the walls of Auschwitz – NEVER AGAIN.

It is the audiovisual archives of the world which are the ultimate custodians of history, the keepers of truth and the repository of demonstrated values. That places on them – it places on us – a responsibility which is far greater than merely to be good at our jobs. It requires us to learn and to understand that the historical record of the past holds the key to the future.

It is no coincidence that George Orwell in 1984 reminded us that he who controls the present controls the past and he who controls the past controls the future. That is why, in the novel, Winston Smith’s job was to alter the past so as to pervert the future. We have a



responsibility to make sure that no such thing happens in our time, although many states have tried and no doubt many governments will.

When you chose as your theme “No Archive is an Island” you so clearly identified this grave responsibility. The loss of any archive diminishes us all because we are indeed involved in humanity. So let us strive to make sure that that fatal bell does not toll for any of us, but rather that it rings out, as bells should, a message of hope and comfort, of joy and celebration and of the dawning of a better tomorrow.

Through our shared and preserved past, our curated and accessible memories, our interpreted and understood records, our living sounds and images, we can ensure that we take from that past the flames of hope and progress and not just the ashes of despair and failure.