



"In the pursuit of colonial intelligence": the archive and the Australian colonies

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In this paper I give a picture of information as it related to the Australian colonies in the Belle Époque, focusing on the production of history and the formation of the archive. New scholarship relating to forms of intellectual sociability and correspondence networks within the British Empire has highlighted the importance of addressing archives as products of transnational exchanges, and demonstrates the centrality of the creation and dissemination of information in both the intellectual and political life of the empire. Transnational approaches privilege the globally constituted nature of intellectual sociability. My paper uses a transcultural analytical framework to address the Australian settler colonies' increasing fetishization of historical documents, the impetus to retrieve historical documentation to fill major gaps in the local record, and in information exchange and re-interpretation relating to history. These are examined through the activities of Australia's early historical researchers, and the creation and uses of the Australian archive in the principal 'national' libraries in the late nineteenth- and early twentieth centuries.

An increasingly important aspect of information exchange in the Belle Époque related to history. In this period redemptive, scientific, and nationalising history-making was increasingly the currency of historical consciousness across the western world. Because history as a professional discipline evolved in a period of rising nationalism and increasing bureaucracy, it was especially concerned with identity and documents. In the Australian colonies the construction of written history (although in some ways dangerous in revealing unsavoury facts) was important in establishing national credibility, in the past and for the future. One of Australia's earliest historians, James Bonwick, expressed this view when he wrote in 1895 'Australia is but making its history. The settlement thereof began in gloomy trials, it struggled against difficulties never again to be encountered, it emerged from deep shadows into brightsome sunshine, and its future will, doubtless, be associated with the real progression of our race, and the brotherhood of man'.

However, in a climate in which historical self-knowledge was increasingly important, Australia was at a disadvantage. The Australian colonies had suffered much record loss and destruction during the nineteenth century, particularly in the early decades of settlement. When interest emerged in writing history from the archives, the materials had to be sought in multiple sites around the globe: from official sources in Britain, from other colonial states, and Europe and America. This practical difficulty, in fact, stimulated a sustained process of information traffic and intellectual sociability, connecting individuals and institutions from the colonies with those who held records in many places around the world. This paper argues that in these contexts the Australian colonies were places in which much productive intellectual engagement was enacted in the period of the Belle Époque.

Biography

Heather Gaunt is in the examination stage of PhD candidature in the Department of History and Classics at the University of Tasmania, Australia. Her dissertation has examined identity and nation in the public library in Australia, specifically the effects of nationalism, historical consciousness, philanthropy and social engagement on the evolution of the major state libraries as cultural archives of locality and nation. This project evolved from a Research Fellowship at the State Library of Tasmania, awarded in 2005. She has presented conference papers and published journal articles in the areas of library history and private collecting (art and books), and contemporary museum practice. Prior to undertaking her PhD, Heather worked as a curator in the art museum field.