

## **Submission to the Functional and Efficiency Review of the National Archives of Australia**

### **Introducing the person making the submission**

Full name: Bruce John Pennay OAM

Title and institution: Associate Professor, Charles Sturt University

Address: Charles Sturt University, PO Box 789, Albury NSW 2640

I am an historian based in regional Australia with research interests in regional history and post-war immigration. Much of my work has focused on unravelling stories of the Albury-Wodonga Growth Centre experiment and both the Bonegilla and Benalla Migrant Camps. In these research areas I have been dependant on accessing records held in NAA. I have frequently requested and accessed materials online. I use NAA materials available online for teaching purposes.

### **Issues addressed**

I note that central to the review is the need for NAA to effectively and efficiently undertake its roles 'in the digital age'.

- I urge the review to seek funding to permit a faster pace of digitisation to better meet the needs of regional Australians.
- I urge the review to address how records are prioritised for digitisation.

### **Regional needs**

The Review Working Group will be aware of the parliamentary report, Joint Study Committee on National Capital and External Territories, *Telling Australia's Story – and why it's important: Report of the inquiry into Canberra's national institutions*, (Canberra: Commonwealth Parliament. 2019).

It will have noted the strong recommendation to expand the digitisation of records held in the institutions based in Canberra. The institutions are to serve all Australians and not just those in or with ready access to Canberra.

### ***Prioritising digitisation of records***

I am well aware of the principle of user-pays. As an individual researcher I have found the research funds I have had were almost all been spent on visiting a capital city for archive access or on requests for file digitisation. However, I also note and am pleased that since 2007 Government has supplied extra financial support to have war-related records digitised. It has been estimated that digitised repatriation records were accessed by over a million people in 2016 alone. This was a government initiative based on detecting community readiness for better access to these records. This was not the NAA waiting for individual readers to initiate and pay for an individual digitisation request

**I am disappointed there has been no government or archive initiated allocation of extra resources to meet community need for access to immigration records.**

I underline this disappointment with an account of an instance in which I was involved indirectly. This instance raises questions about how priority is given to digitising records. I think it points to the need for the NAA to take into account expressions of community need in addition to the user-pay principle when setting priorities for digitisation.

### **Illustrative instance**

In accord with its self-appointed role as the local custodian and manager of the Bonegilla Heritage Site, Wodonga City Council made application in 2018 to the Department of Environment for a National Heritage Grant of \$98 000 to have the Bonegilla registration cards and another series of Bonegilla files digitised and placed online at the NAA site.

The application received the support and, indeed, encouragement of the NAA. The application was unsuccessful. The Grant administrators are not required to explain why the grant failed.

- Perhaps they simply thought other projects were better at passing a cost/benefit test.
- Perhaps they thought it did not readily fit the remit they thought they had.
- Perhaps one government agency was uncertain as to why it was being asked to fund what it considered core business on another government agency. After all the NAA has the care of records and the remit to digitise them and make them available to all Australians.

### **More detail**

I explain in more detail that Australian Heritage Grants are to encourage community engagement with and thinking about Bonegilla as a National Heritage Listed place. The money, \$98,000, was to be used to enable the digitisation of three series of files in the National Archives of Australia, two related to the migrant reception name index cards, known as the Bonegilla Cards at A2571 and A2572, and a third comprised of correspondence files from the Bonegilla Reception Centre at A2567. Wodonga City Council proposed to use the digitised materials to mount an exhibition at the site of the former camp which it now calls the 'Bonegilla Migrant Experience'. However, the project was primarily for an un-curated web-based exhibition of place-related records on the National Archives of Australia website.

The Australian Heritage Grants are intended 'to improve conservation, preservation and access to National Heritage Listed places and/or to improve community engagement and improve awareness of the values the places were listed for'. This project moved sharply away from previously funded heritage projects to a web-based exhibition of place-related records. In this instance the shift from fabric care and interpretation interventions builds on an observation within the Australian Heritage Council's Statement of Significance that 'Bonegilla and the oral and written records which relate to the place provide valuable evidence and insights into post-war migration and refugee experiences'. With the proposed digitisation, visitors were to be given direct access to archival evidence and would have been able to ponder whatever insights that evidence provides.

### **Community readiness for access to the Bonegilla Cards on line**


For family historians tracking forebears, patrons and friends, the Bonegilla Cards sit alongside other records that detail something of the fortunes of individual arrivals. Indeed the Bonegilla Cards are a cousin archive to the Migrant Selection Papers which were one of the first Australian entries into the UNESCO Memory of the World. Such records are valuable resources for personal and family historians: for many they hold 'emotional significance as the interface between old European family identities and new Australian citizenship identities'.

The National Archives reports that the cards in A2571 were accessed 673 times in the last twelve months, making them one of the Archives 'most highly used series'. Those in A2572 are less numerous and were accessed less frequently, 269 times. (Email to author from Melissa Thomas, Assistant Director Reference Services National Archives of Australia, 19 February 2019). Readers using the 'Ask Us a Question' page to find out more about immigration records are (at the bottom of

the page) provided with three drop down prompts, one of which is 'Bonegilla Registration Card'. This indicates the frequency they are accessed.

For family historians and for the imaginative the magic is in the photographs stapled to each card up to 1956. Nearly all portraits conform to passport conventions and avoid smiles. These are stark, unsmiling images in black and white, occasionally softened with decorative scalloped edging around photographs supplied by migrant applicants. A busy and seemingly unfeeling bureaucracy has fastened the photographs to the cards with staples which sometimes pierce a forehead, an eye, a neck. The images were not intended to be aesthetically pleasing or pleasantly presented. They were simple and cheap identifiers. This actually increases their value to heritage place visitors as raw, unmediated, authentic evidence at a rare personal level. Further, the Bonegilla Cards stimulate and support inquiry into how the migrant experience varied for individuals according to age, gender, nationality and time of arrival. They can help inquirers track the elusive migrant category of 'womenandchildren'. Perhaps more than any statistical or documentary source the close up photographs of individuals invite empathy and prompt imaginative response. No longer used for surveillance purposes they implicitly invite viewers to a line of vision that is not aligned to the viewpoint of those in power. Together the cards offer a flicker of faces of assisted aliens arriving in the post-war years. Consequently the easier and wider public access that comes with digitisation should foster interest in and engagement with the former Bonegilla Reception and Training Centre. They may advance understandings of the role the reception centre played in post-war immigration – just as an award of a heritage grant should.

The Bonegilla card for Ludwik Kruszelnicki, NAA A2571 KRUSZELNICKI

64		Serial No. <i>211296</i>		
Surname <i>KRUSZELNICKI</i>		Christian Names <i>Ludwik</i>		
Nationality <i>Pol.</i>	Age <i>7.11.01</i>	Sex <i>M</i>	Description	
Date of Arrival <i>8 NOV 1950</i>	Marital State <i>M</i>	Religion <i>P.C.</i>	Height <i>5'</i>	
Ex Ship <i>Goya 4</i>	Date of Departure <i>29/11/50</i>	Weight <i>178</i>	Hair <i>gray</i>	
Destination <i>Metropol, Wat. &amp; Sewer &amp; Drain. Board, 341 Pitt St. Sydney, N.S.W., Trade Potts Hill</i>	Standard of Education <i>E.I. 6624</i>	Eyes <i>gray</i>	Complexion	
Address of Next of Kin (if known)	Scars	General <i>med</i>	Specimen of Signature <i>Ludwik Kruszelnicki</i>	
...wife <i>Rina</i>	...chld. <i>Karl Sven</i>	National Archives of Australia		
			NAA: A2571_145/1	

Three unnamed Bonegilla card identity photographs arranged as a collage by Helga Leunig, exhibition in progress, 2017.



### **Impact of digitisation on national heritage site interpretation**

The digitisation of a large body of evidence held in the National Archives of Australia was to enlarge rather than simply vary visitor experiences of Bonegilla. It was to position visitors as learners investigating evidence of the past related directly to this place. One of the best ways to help visitors make their own meanings of a heritage place might be to provide them with access to evidence that will help them unravel, as in this case, some of the complexities of receiving alien migrants and of experiencing migration at different times in the post-war years. Heritage scholars worry the vex question of what visitors want of heritage places. Historians might ask what more than ready access to at least some sources to support inquiries. Henceforth, it, was proposed, that the stories visitors told themselves as they tried to make sense of the former Bonegilla Migrant Camp would involve doing history, if there had been a an Australian Heritage Grant.

### **Meeting needs a regional community has expressed, over and over**

Please note that the national remembrance of the former Bonegilla Reception Centre was initiated at the grass-roots level, fired by former residents and by local advocates. Together they won the initial heritage listing on to the Register of the National Estate and prevented the demolition of the last remaining set of huts. The present-day the digitisation project pointed to local community ownership of a national heritage place. The proposal to digitise the Bonegilla Cards was locally initiated with proposals put to the National Australian Archives tentatively in 2010, then more determinedly in 2013, and finally put to the Department of Environment with NAA collaboration in

2018. This local engagement in Bonegilla story-telling fits a wider pattern of local involvement in remembering migration at the local level, 'not just floating around in the general idea of Australia'.

**It is not sufficient to look to local government or local volunteers to raise funds, in accord with the user-pay principle, for digitising NAA records like the Bonegilla Cards.**

**To better meet its remit NAA has to initiate projects that meet demonstrated community readiness in fields such as immigration, so crucial to the peopling of Australia.**

Associate Professor Bruce Pennay,  
Charles Sturt University  
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