

Submission to Tune Review of the National Archives of Australia

Fiona Douglas

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the National Archives of Australia (NAA) for the Review.

I am a now-retired, and non-practising, medical practitioner and former medical researcher. I have lived in Darwin for more than 34 years. I am a member of three small community groups, all of which at times have sought historical information for which I have consulted the NAA in Darwin.

I cannot comment on the financial side of the NAA, nor am I really able to address the criteria specifically without quite some repetition. However, I am an individual user of the service and my comments are from the standpoint of a non-specialist user, and my use of terms such as 'file' and 'item' may not accord with NAA usage.

I very much value the NAA having a collection in Darwin, and regret that much of the material relevant to the NT is still held elsewhere, particularly Canberra.

Access to non-digitised material held in Canberra is very expensive for us, involving a 4+ hour each way plane trip, and this does hamper research.

1. In Darwin the NAA and the NT Archives Service (NTAS) are co-located in the Northern Territory Archives Centre.
 - a. This seems to me an ideal situation for a small jurisdiction, and especially one that has been administered by several jurisdictions in its history, including the Commonwealth.
 - b. As a researcher, being able to seek assistance from both sets of staff in the same location when seeking historical information is incredibly valuable, as information on a subject is often split between the two archives services. The split may make sense from a document origin point of view, but it often appears rather arbitrary from historical, holistic and users' perspectives.
 - c. I get the impression that staff from both organisations find it useful to be able to collaborate when assisting enquirers.
 - d. Presentations and exhibitions put on by the Northern Territory Archives Centre, combining resources from both services, have greatly enhanced my awareness of the resources available, and have

assisted my researches directly by opening up new ideas and also, in one case, by making me aware of items I hadn't thought of.

2. Digitising of information

- a. As many NT records held by the NAA are not located in the NT, the only way we can access them with any kind of ease is digitally. A recent example was my need to explore details around construction of the landing site for the Ross Smith Great Air Race flight in 1919. The file in the NAA has been digitised and was pure gold. When combined with images obtained from other sources, maps available through the NT government's historic maps section, and even Hansard, a really thorough account of this event was obtained.
- b. I become very frustrated when I find that every fifth or sixth item only in a file is digitised, and the file is in Canberra. Inevitably what I probably want is not in the digitised items – but I cannot confirm this as it isn't digitised yet.
- c. Equally frustrating is a discovery that a whole file that is normally held in the NAA NT branch is not available as it is away being digitised – which will happen apparently sometime over the following several months!
- d. The quality of digitisation is generally very good, though a bit more manual quality control when scanning old bitty files with pages of very varying size (and preservation) would ensure that the whole page is actually scanned each time.
- e. The NAA has some unique photographs, and it is often unclear how they ended up there, rather than in collections in one of the State libraries, but they are very valuable. Access to digital copies, and ability to order a high resolution image at a reasonable price is much appreciated. If an item has not been digitised, we may not know of its existence as it is usually buried in a file.

3. Access to original records

- a. I have had much less need to do this recently, because I have had a narrower, and topical, focus. I have accessed a series of collections of original material in the past. I greatly appreciated being able to do this, as cataloguing of bulk collections of historic material depends on the expertise of the cataloguer, who may not be aware of the subtleties that permit the most comprehensive and therefore useful information being included with the record. Being able to examine collections with likely titles can reveal unexpected gems as well as the hoped-for records.

- b. NT people being able easily to access original NT material is likely to increase the quality of cataloguing, as they may well have specialised knowledge of the period/events to which the material pertains.
- c. Examination of original records permit closer examination when deterioration of some documents before digitisation rendered the digital image ambiguous.
- d. Apparent inconsistencies in reports on records can be resolved by examining originals, especially in situations where there may even have been misinterpretation of the content of the original documents.

In summary, as an ordinary community member rather than a historian, I really value having local access to both original records and specialist staff as at the NAA branch in Darwin.

The quality of my experience as a long-term Darwin resident has been greatly enhanced by being able to see original records of events in NT history – the actual format as well as the content – and correlate them with other locally-held records on the same events or subjects.

I believe the NT really needs to have easy access to its history, and much of this is in the NAA collection because of the way the NT was administered over its existence.

I would oppose any closure or transfer of the NAA NT collection from Darwin, and would welcome a way of getting easier access to items that are currently held so far away from the NT. It would be appreciated if they could be relocated to Darwin to permit a more complete picture of NT history to be easily available to local researchers.

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