

The reason we keep archives is so that they can be used. But what does using archives mean?

Most people would presume it means sitting in an archival reading room and conducting research using archival materials. However, only a small proportion of the population do this, either for work or for personal interest.

Far more people, though, are connected with the past indirectly through the use of archives. The most obvious example is the use of archives by historians to research and write history. This is certainly an important part of the role of archives as the memory bank of a society.

To help encourage the best possible use of archives, a new prize, sponsored by State Records, was added this year to the annual NSW Premier's History Awards. The winner of the inaugural John and Patricia Ward History Prize – Thom Blake's *A Dumping Ground: A History of the Cherbourg Settlement* – is an outstanding example of scholarship, combining the use of official documents and oral histories by Aboriginal people from the community. We take a closer look at this work elsewhere in this issue of *Vital Signs* (page 15).

Every reader of such archive-reliant works is, in a real sense, a user of archives.

TOUCHED *by* AN ARCHIVE



Guests attending the awards ceremony in September this year were reminded – by the presence as keynote speaker of acclaimed American documentary filmmaker Ken Burns – of other ways in which archives can be used to connect people with the past. We also take a look at Burns, perhaps best-known in Australia for the television series *The Civil War*, *The West*, *Baseball* and *Jazz*, elsewhere in this issue (pp12-14).

A hallmark of Burns' work is the extensive use of archives of all kinds. In *The Civil War*, much of the visual content comprises archival photographs, while the narrative is interspersed with readings from documentary sources, including memoirs, personal letters and official documents.

The range of these original sources may be gauged by the listing in the end credits of each episode of more than 150 archives institutions and other collections from which the materials were drawn. A much noted feature of the series was that no re-enactments were used: the imaginative use of original materials was enough to illustrate the story being told.

The popularity of this and other history series making prominent use of original sources, such as Simon Schama's *A History of Britain*, has made millions of television viewers into users of archives.

The custodians of archives, too, bring people in touch with exhibitions and other public programs. In an increasing number of archives institutions it is possible to visit, learn and enjoy without passing through the reading room door.

Online, virtual exhibitions educate and entertain those who visit archival websites without them having to use the in-depth search tools also available to aid research (our current *Sydney: Resort of Thieves* exhibition, for example, is complemented by the *Registry of Flash Men* website). *Vital Signs* and other publications like it bring their readers into contact with the archives without any necessary expectation or aim that the reader will get more serious and use the archives 'for real'.

If we keep archives so that they can be used, how can a custodian of archives like State Records – whose performance may legitimately be measured by how much the archives are used – determine how good a job, or otherwise, we are doing? Certainly a crude count of 'bums on seats' or website 'hits' cannot account for the multiplier effect of works, in whatever form, that bring so many people into contact with the past through archives.

David Roberts, Director, State Records, modelling a Deep Rogue t-shirt (see page 20)