

The central theme of the long-running cult television series *The X Files* was the search for the truth. The opening credits for each episode ended with the words 'The truth is out there'.

Archivists might be tempted to adapt that tag line as their unofficial motto: pointing to the archives and saying 'the truth is in there'. We describe archives as 'the raw material of history', the essential evidence in the search for historical truth. We value the way they come into being unselfconsciously in the course of work and life. We argue that they are a good source of objective evidence, rather than favouring a particular position

Historians do not accept the apparent evidence in archives and use it uncritically. They must judge the veracity and meaning of archives, both to establish the facts of what happened and to discern larger patterns and significance.

One thing that the controversy surrounding Keith Windschuttle's recent book, *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, has done has been to shine a bright light on the archival evidence in a debate of national significance.

But equally it highlights the shortcomings of the available evidence. The sources may be fragmentary

THE TRUTH IS IN THERE

SPECIAL ARCHIVIST

David Roberts

or ideological line. We believe that archives are the closest thing we have to raw evidence of what happened in the past.

Much of archival theory and practice is concerned with protecting the integrity and authenticity of archives — essential attributes if records are to function as reliable evidence — while in their original business context or as part of an archives collection. This has been an especially important concern in developing solutions for electronic records to be kept as archives, since such records can so easily be changed. If records can be changed — particularly if this can be done without leaving a trace — their value as objective evidence is fatally compromised.

For archivists and archives institutions, the idea that we are the protectors of the historical truth is an attractive one. But we need to be conscious of its limits.

It implies that there is an objective historical truth just waiting to be revealed by the use of the archives. Yet the study of history is not that simple.

or in some other way incomplete; there may be contradictions or inconsistencies between different sources; and the possible motives and inherent cultural biases of the actors who created the records must at least be considered for their potential impact on the evidence. In the *Fabrication* debate, the extent to which each of these shortcomings applies to the available archival evidence has, itself, become a contested issue.

None of this diminishes the value of archives as historical evidence, though it certainly adds some complications. I like to think that the truth is still in there, not because archives are a collection of recorded facts leading to an objective historical truth, but because archives reflect life and lives. Archives can be imperfect because they are the product of real people, living and working *and* keeping records. Archives, like so much in life, are open to interpretation.

David Roberts, Director, State Records

