



## UNESCO's Memory of the World Programme / Roslyn Russell

Documentary heritage reflects the diversity of languages, peoples and cultures. It is the mirror of the world and its memory. But this memory is fragile. Every day, irreplaceable parts of this memory disappear for ever. A considerable proportion of the world's documentary heritage disappears through 'natural' causes: acidified paper crumbles away, leather, parchment, film and magnetic tape are attacked by light, heat, humidity or dust. Natural disasters, such as the South Asian tsunami, result in widespread destruction of all categories of heritage, including documentary heritage. War is another major destroyer: we have all watched with horror as the documentary heritage of Iraq has been allowed to be destroyed or dispersed. The fate of documentary heritage in wartime has now entered the popular culture. Those who saw last Saturday's episode of the Inspector Lynley Mysteries may recall that the plot centred around a 'Golden Koran' looted from Iraq after the US-led invasion.

The *Memory of the World* (MOW) Programme is an international cooperative effort aimed at safeguarding, protecting and facilitating access to and use of documentary heritage, especially heritage that is rare and endangered. It aims to:

- bring world attention to bear on the task of safeguarding endangered and unique library and archive collections
- reconstitute dispersed or displaced holdings and collections
- improve access to these materials
- increase the visibility and status of documentary heritage and the work of libraries, archives and museums in caring for it.

The MOW Programme is administered at three levels: international, regional and national. The basic purpose of the structure is to ensure that member states are able to establish a mechanism at the national and regional levels in order to facilitate the final selection of the projects for the *Memory of the World* Programme.

The most visible product, if you like, of the MOW Programme is **the International MOW Register**, and its parallels at regional and national levels. Listing on a Register **identifies significant documentary heritage, raises its profile and that of its custodians, and helps to build a case for raising funds** for its continued preservation. To date there are no regional registers, and only two countries have national registers – China and Australia.

The *Memory of the World* Programme is administered by a Secretariat based at UNESCO Headquarters in Paris. The Programme's work is guided and overseen by an International Advisory Committee, which meets biannually. Australia currently has two members on the IAC – myself and Ray Edmondson. Between IAC meetings the work of the Programme is monitored by a five-person Bureau – a President, three Vice-Presidents and a Rapporteur, a position I currently hold.

The IAC has three sub-committees: Register, Technology and Marketing. I currently chair the Register Sub-Committee, which assesses all nominations to the International Register, seeks expert advice on each and recommends their inscription or otherwise in the International Register. The recommendations of the Register Sub-Committee are then put to the IAC, which makes the ultimate decision as to whether the nominations are accepted at its biennial meetings.

MOW's two principal means of protecting documentary heritage are **listing on a Register** – international, regional or national; and **conducting projects** to preserve documentary heritage. The latter mostly occur in the more disadvantaged parts of the world, so the major thrust of MOW effort here in Australia to date has been the conduct of the Registers. Before I turn to what we have done here, I'd like to say a little about the regional aspects of the Programme.

### **The Asia Pacific Area**

The Asia-Pacific region comprises 45 countries and in geographic extent covers over a third of the globe. Some characteristics:

- Wide political, linguistic and cultural diversity, and great disparity in economic level. Most countries are part of the third world.
- Great range in population size: the world's largest (China at 1.3 billion) and smallest (Niue at 2000).
- The tyranny of distance: much of the region is ocean, and many countries are islands. Communication and travel are costly.
- Cultures of great richness and antiquity, but many nation states that are relatively young in their present form. A general history of colonisation, creating particular issues in the repatriation of documentary heritage.
- Many countries have tropical conditions. High temperature and humidity is destructive of documentary heritage.
- Archives, libraries and museums are often without adequate funds, infrastructure and skills. NGOs are active in the region, endeavouring to address the need for training and other support: nevertheless, resources fall far short of need.
- The region is the furthest distant from UNESCO HQ in Paris.
- Some traditional cultures are orally-based, not document-oriented. Oral history and other audiovisual documents have a special importance.

The Asia-Pacific region contains almost half of the world's population and one quarter of UNESCO's member countries.

Nominations to the International MOW Register from the Asia-Pacific region have included the documentary heritage of minority cultures – Naxi Dongba manuscripts, China [**show 3 pics**]

[show Australian MOW Poster]

## **Australian *Memory of the World* Program**

Founded in 2000 as one of over 60 national *Memory of the World* programs and conducted under the auspices of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO, the Australian *Memory of the World* Program aims to:

- establish and maintain the Australian *Memory of the World* Register
- establish and maintain the Australian *Memory of the World* Register of Lost and Missing Documentary Heritage
- coordinate and propose nominations from Australia to the *Memory of the World* International Register
- raise awareness and promote the Program through publications and presentations
  
- encourage and seek government and private sector sponsorship for specific projects and activities.

## **The Registers**

*Each register – international, regional or national – is based on criteria for assessing the **world significance** of documentary heritage, and assessing whether its influence was **global, regional or national**.*

## **The Australian *Memory of the World* Register**

- Nominations are encouraged by email publicity on listserves and through short training workshops on ‘significance’ which assist potential nominators to prepare their cases. We will be calling for nominations for the next round later this month
- Nominations are assessed by an expert subcommittee of the national MoW committee, to whom it makes its recommendations
- The national register is maintained on the committee’s website, which is sponsored by the State Library of Victoria – [www.amw.org.au](http://www.amw.org.au)
- An annual public event to announce inscriptions and present certificates is sponsored by one of the major libraries or archives – to date we have had presentation ceremonies at the NLA and SLV
- Committee members volunteer their time; a small expense budget is provided by the National Commission for UNESCO.

## **Indigenous Australians on the MOW Registers**

**Mabo Case Papers** – inscribed on the Memory of the World International Register and the Australian Register (NLA, 2001)

In June 1992 the High Court of Australia, in its judgement in the Mabo Case, overturned the doctrine of ‘terra nullius’, that Australia was an empty land owned by no one at the time of European colonisation. The judgment unleashed profound change in Australia’s legal landscape, and influenced the status and land rights of its Indigenous peoples and

race relations in Australia generally. It is an extremely rare instance in world history of pre-existing customary law being recognised as superior to the law of the invading culture, regardless of the economic and political implications. The Mabo papers, dating from 1959-92, are significant for their documentation of a crucial period in the history of race relations in Australia, featuring a series of battles and legal cases over the ownership and use of land, growing awareness of racial discrimination, and the social and health problems of Indigenous peoples. The issues discussed in the papers have a bearing on the rights of both Indigenous peoples and the descendants of European settlers throughout Australia. The papers are also significant as documenting much of the life, experiences and thoughts of Edward Koiki Mabo, a man who was not widely known in his lifetime but whose name is now a household word around Australia.

Eddie Mabo (1936–1992)  
[Duar and Waier Islands?] 1964  
National Library of Australia

### **[show Mabo painting]**

### **Sorry Books** (AIATSIS, 2004)

The collection of 461 Sorry Books has powerful historical and social significance as the personal responses of hundreds of thousands of Australians to the unfolding history of the Stolen Generations. Many more Sorry Books dating from the 1998 campaign are yet to be located, but it is estimated that the entire movement generated perhaps half a million signatures. This represents a 'people's apology' for past wrongs to Indigenous Australians, and a vast public expression of opposition to Government refusal to make a formal apology.

### **Conclusion**

As chair of the Assessment Sub-Committee of the Australian MOW Committee, I urge you all to think about the possibility of nominating Indigenous documentary heritage to the Australian Register. Indigenous languages are among the most endangered documentary heritage on earth: do you know of oral history tapes of language that could be nominated? Of transcripts made many years ago? Of collections of photographs of people and country that could be nominated? We are very keen to hear from you about these, and will provide advice on how to prepare your nomination. Check out the Australian MOW website – [www.amw.org.au](http://www.amw.org.au) for contact details and assistance.



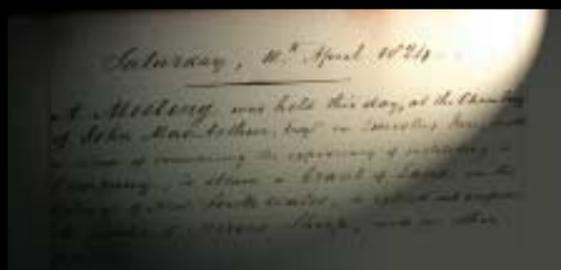
**UNESCO**  
AUSTRALIAN MEMORY OF THE WORLD  
Program

# IDENTIFYING PRESERVING PROMOTING

## AUSTRALIA'S SIGNIFICANT DOCUMENTARY HERITAGE

### The Australian Memory of the World Program

- **Develops and maintains** the Australian register of significant documentary heritage on its website
- **Searches** for and lists Australian lost and missing significant documentary heritage
- **Nominates** Australian significant documentary heritage to the UNESCO Memory of the World International Register



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OPERATING UNDER THE AUSPICES OF  
THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL COMMISSION  
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