2015

Just the Ticket! The Thomas Keneally Papers

Paul Sharrad

University of Wollongong, psharrad@uow.edu.au

Publication Details

Just the Ticket! The Thomas Keneally Papers

Abstract
Considers the nature of the archive as a shifting dynamic relative to the time and interest of users, highlighting some of the curiosities in the Keneally collection.

Keywords
papers, ticket, just, thomas, keneally

Disciplines
Arts and Humanities | Law

Publication Details
JUST OVER HALF A CENTURY SINCE Thomas Keneally’s first novel was published, now is perhaps a fitting time to be revisiting the extensive collection of his papers in the National Library. In fact, founding librarian Harold White was in touch with Keneally to acquire his material from the moment the author won a Commonwealth Literary Fellowship in 1965 to work on his first Miles Franklin-winning novel Bring Larks and Heroes. Eventually, several truckloads of manuscripts, review clippings, correspondence, family mementos, tapes and book covers arrived, and are now stored in some 320 boxes.

Like Keneally himself, the collection is an ebullient, compendious and exciting store of stories. It contains a letter from the editor of The Bulletin accepting Keneally’s first published stories, and a statement showing his first royalty payment, in 1964, for his debut novel, The Place at Whitton. There are also letters from Bill Clinton and Patrick White, cards from Gough and Margaret Whitlam and from Audrey Hepburn, and objects ranging from cufflinks to old passports and school ties. Both the extent and the variety of material present some interesting challenges for the librarian and the researcher.

We tend to think of archives as fixed repositories from which we derive some fundamental truth by excavating or ‘drilling down’ through strata to find the bones or the gold. If we shift to a more horizontal metaphor, the archive is a field that we move across to reach the end of whatever journey we are on. Both are goal-oriented narratives of beginnings and ends, implying that there is something beneath or beyond the actual material to which the material points: a person, a work, a truth or a historical reality.

The archive comes into being because we value a person, or a body of work, or a knowledge of social history. However, at some point what we actually confront is a collection of material: a pile of paper, a box of photos, a bag of trophies. This is at once a batch of raw ‘stuff’ and a trove invested with an aura of treasure, of the sacred relic. At the very least, such material appears to us as a collection of rare tools with which to produce cultural meaning. To get to the meanings we give value to, we sort the mere...
stuff into hierarchical categories: core material, curiosities, incidentals, impedimenta, trash.

The reality of dealing with ‘just stuff’, however, can be interesting in itself. Seeing the archive as a flattened, lateral, nomadic and mobile system, rather than a vertical system of greater and lesser values, allows it to meet new demands and provide surprising outcomes.

The Keneally collection is unwieldy in scope and organisation. This makes working with it a mix of a child’s excitement at a lucky dip and a researcher’s frustration at the same. It also leads one to reflect on the nature of archives, and what this particularly encyclopedic and messy one tells us.

Several attempts have been made to catalogue the collection. The numbered boxes, however, are not in any chronological order, and the contents of each box are not always chronologically consistent. Cataloguers, thinking of the possible needs of researchers, try to pull this into some shape for ease of access; that means selecting and reordering. Yet such a systematic arrangement might well destroy what the collection points to. A tidy archive gives the impression of orderly habits and a neat mind. That is not necessarily an accurate picture of Thomas Keneally, person or writer (one of the most frequent words of self-description in letters and interviews is ‘impulsive’). The variety of material in the archive reflects what critics have often noted about Keneally the novelist: the range of his topics and the multitude of his books. Selectively organising the collection might also interfere with unforeseen shifts in what people are interested in.

Take, for example, Box 30. It contains a large plastic bag jammed full of entry tickets and membership cards for rugby games and test cricket matches. In an earlier time, both the assiduous cataloguer short on shelf space, and the literary scholar fixated on how a writer worked at his style, may have regarded this bag of ‘stuff’ as low-grade impedimenta that might well be deaccessioned (got rid of) or, at best, filed as ‘other’ at the end of the collection.

However, these tickets can be used to interpret a whole range of things, especially when ideas of literary scholarship are expanded to include the study of historical contexts and the reading of objects as cultural texts. Approached from the point of view of social psychology, the bag of tickets might signify...
the pack-rat proclivities of the writer, the need to offload a lot of paper cluttering the house, or a concentration on the next novel that prevents discriminating between old manuscripts and other paper. Studied from a biographical or literary-thematics standpoint, they demonstrate the importance of sport to the writer, and of rugby and cricket to Australian culture. They may prove illuminating from a cultural studies perspective: sport can override political differences, so that John Howard and Thomas Keneally might, for instance, share a guest box at a cricket test match. Quite apart from a researcher’s interest in Keneally, one might find evidence of historical changes in sports management in this motley collection of ‘trivia’: populist bits of cheaply printed paper that let everyone in giving way to more selective membership tickets on cardboard and, finally, flashy plastic nametags showing the corporate marketing of sport. Thus the collection may provide insights when viewed through the lens of sports history, the history of marketing, and printing studies.

Since we cannot predict the intellectual shifts of the future and what will be meaningful or of use to future scholars, keeping the tickets might be not a rash act on the part of archivists but, in fact, a cautious one. Even from the narrow approach of the conventional literary scholar, this ‘frivolous’ bag of bits and pieces tells us that sport has been important to the writer. Following that cue, the researcher might read Keneally’s autobiography Homebush Boy (1995) and find his early goal to either play five-eight for Australia or win the Nobel Prize for Literature. The researcher might then look through Keneally’s fiction and read it as the compensatory activity of an asthmatic unable to fulfill the first dream, or find in his repeated adventuring, both in real life and in fiction (trips to Antarctica, Eritrea, Auschwitz, the battlefields of the American Civil War and the Western Front) more signs of sporting zeal converted into artistic output. Working with, rather than avoiding, the bag of sporting memorabilia, we come to see how the writer incorporates the would-be sportsman into his writing. Not only does Keneally attain notoriety as Manly-Warringah’s number-one supporter, becoming the unlikely star in a television advertisement for New South Wales rugby, but he also writes a biography of rugby league player Des Hasler (The Utility Player, 1993) and, after winning the Booker Prize, pens a novel (A Family Madness, 1985) in which the central figure is a rugby player for Penrith.

That superfluous jumble of paper and plastic ends up looking like something of significance after all. The archive no longer appears as a fixed, autonomous entity, memorialising a singular phenomenon. It is, in fact, an interactive site, constantly renewed and reconfigured in its encounter with readers from different backgrounds, times and disciplinary formations.

PAUL SHARRAD spent three months researching the papers of Thomas Keneally in 2014, courtesy of a Harold White Fellowship. He is Senior Fellow in English Literatures at the University of Wollongong

Read Thomas Keneally’s Ray Mathew Lecture on page 28