

Pre-history of the Australian Gay Archives

The first steps on the path of creating an archive of the record of the lives, achievements and struggles of gay men and lesbians in Australia occurred in the mid-1970s. Several individuals, acting quite independently of each other, had floated the idea of setting up a gay archives, but it was not until August 1978, at the 4th National Homosexual Conference in Sydney, that the idea of an Australian Gay Archives became a reality.

23 June 1975 Sydney activist, Leon Prollius, wrote to the Canadian Gay Archives informing them that he was 'trying to start a "Homophile Information Service and Archives" (HISA) here in Australia'¹ and asked for information about how the Canadian Gay Archives was formed and how it operated.²

March 1976 The Gay Librarians Group was formed in Melbourne, and the focus of one of its founding members, Liz Ross, was the compilation of bibliographies of resources on homosexuality. Liz had been compiling homosexual bibliographies since 1974. In a note for the group's third meeting, Liz outlined what might constitute a 'core collection' on homosexuality. In addition to books, the idea also included to special collections and ephemera files. At the fourth meeting, the idea expanded to include preparing bibliographies encompassing badges, photographs, pamphlets, journals and audio- visual materials.³

July 1976 A brief, unsigned article appeared in *Campaign* magazine announcing that 'Campaign is establishing an Australian Gay Archives and we need *your* help to do so.' The July issue of *Campaign* was Peter Langford's last issue as editor, and *Campaign* did not proceed with this proposal.⁴

August 1976 A Gay Archives workshop was held at the 2nd National Homosexual Conference held in Sydney 27-29 August 1976. Although we have no records from the workshop it is highly likely that *Campaign* was represented. A motion from the workshop supported the establishment of an 'independent national gay archives'.⁵ Despite this nothing happened. The motion also recommended the lodging of movement publications in the National Library in Canberra and local State Libraries.⁶

Circa July 1977 Graham Carbery, a gay liberation activist in Melbourne, began systematically collecting material of the record of the gay liberation

¹ This group did not get off the ground, however, Leon Prollius did publish *Gay Info Sheet* (one issue only) in October 1975.

² Copy of Leon Prollius's letter to James Fraser, dated 23 June 1975, held by ALGA.

³ Contemporaneous notes of the first four meetings of the Gay Librarians Group written by Liz Ross, 1976, held by ALGA.

⁴ 'Establishing Gay Archives', *Campaign*, Sydney, No.11, July 1976, p.41.

⁵ 'Special Report: Second National Conference', *Campaign*, Sydney, No. 13, Sept/Oct 1976, p.12.

⁶ 'Motions from Gay Archives workshop', papers of the Second National Homosexual Conference at ALGA. The handwriting of this motion has been identified as that of Jon Ruwoldt (no mover or seconder are recorded).

era.⁷ Graham was aware of the existence of the Canadian Gay Archives (established in 1973) and wrote to them seeking advice as to how best to organise and preserve gay and lesbian records.

August 1977 Motion 17 passed at the 3rd National Homosexual Conference in Adelaide supported the appointment of 'a resource contact' in each major city so that 'all resources can be sent to one central location'. This motion probably came from the Gay Publications Workshop.⁸ Nothing eventuated from this motion.

January 1978 Graham Carbery visited the Canadian Gay Archives in Toronto and became familiar with various aspects of their collection and how they operated.

Circa April 1978 Not long after returning from Canada Graham spoke with like-minded activists in Melbourne and a gay archives group was formed.⁹

20 June 1978 Members of various Melbourne gay groups met with Mike Bray, a member of the organising collective for the 4th National Homosexual Conference to be held in Sydney in August 1978, in Melbourne on 10 June, 1978. The meeting provided an opportunity for Mike to explain how the organisation of the conference was progressing and to ask about proposed workshops being organised by Melbourne groups. Graham Carbery, who attended this meeting, mentioned that a Gay Archives had been established in Melbourne and that he intended to discuss the proposal of establishing an Australian Gay Archives at the conference. Mike Bray's report noted: 'Graham was organising a National Gay Archives – assistance was required.'¹⁰

8 August 1978 The idea of creating an Australian gay archive was in the minds of Di Minnis and Craig Johnston, two Sydney gay liberation activists, when they published a document titled 'Homosexual Politics in Australia' announcing their intention to: '...produce a book on the political and social history of the homosexual movement in Australia since 1970.' In calling for material the document said:

'If you have any documents, such as leaflets, posters, newsletters, minutes, magazines, broadsheets, articles, press cuttings, media transcripts, photographs, etc., please send them to us.'

⁷ Graham Carbery's collection included Australian and selected international periodicals, newspaper clippings, journal articles, badges, posters, audio and video tapes

⁸ Records of the 3rd National Homosexual Conference, 1977, Adelaide, held by ALGA.

⁹ See article titled 'Gay Archives' published in *Lesbian Newsletter*, Melbourne, No. 12, August 1978, p.15. Note: The contact details were 'Gay Archives 45 Bennett Street North Fitzroy. Vic. 3068.', - this was the home address of Graham Carbery.

¹⁰ 'Report on meeting with various members of Melbourne Homosexual groups, Saturday June 10, 1978', *Mike Bray*, 20 June, 1978, held in papers of the Fourth National Homosexual Conference, Sydney, 1978, held by ALGA.

'If you want them returned, please indicate. Otherwise, when completed, we will donate them towards the establishment of a national gay archives.'

The reference to establishing a gay archive was intended 'as a spur to others' to act; Minnis and Johnston said they did not plan to do it themselves.¹¹

9 August 1978 In mid-1978, Robert French, an archivist at the Australian National Archives in Canberra, became actively involved in gay politics, having been involved with campus gay and lesbian groups since 1971. Because of his archives background he 'began to think about 'gay history' (as we then referred to it) and the archives of groups around Australia.'¹² This led him to write to the organising collective of the Fourth National Homosexual Conference in Sydney asking that they preserve copies of material produced for the conference.¹³

27 August 1978 A workshop was held at the Fourth National Homosexual Conference in Sydney where it was agreed to establish a gay archives. The workshop discussed 'A Proposal For An Australian Gay Archives'¹⁴ presented by Graham Carbery. The workshop submitted a motion which was passed at the final plenary session of the conference that formally endorsed the establishment of the Australian Gay Archives.

27 September 1978 In a letter from John Lonie, convenor of Adelaide Homosexual Alliance, to James Fraser of the Canadian Gay Archives, John mentioned that various people in Australia had been collecting material independently of each other and they came together at the archives workshop at the Fourth National Homosexual Conference in Sydney in August 1978. John Lonie wrote: 'A working group concerned with libraries and with archives met and the basics of a national organisation has been started. As it happened, people were all working away in isolation of each other and hopefully, now some coordination is at hand.'¹⁵

Prepared by Graham Carbery, December 2014, updated May 2015.

¹¹ A hand-written note by Craig Johnston at the bottom of a copy of the document 'Homosexual Politics in Australia' sent by Johnston to Robert French reads: 'Bob, we put this in as a spur to others, to put the idea into their heads. We're not actually going to do it ourselves.' Copy held by ALGA in Robert French file.

¹² Email from Robert French to various ALGA members, titled 'Foundation of ALGA', 5 April 2015, held by ALGA.

¹³ Letter from Robert French to the organisers of the 4th National Homosexual Conference, Sydney, 1978, held by ALGA.

¹⁴ This proposal was based on the Statement of Purpose of the Canadian Gay Archives obtained by Graham Carbery in January 1978.

¹⁵ Copy of John Lonie's letter to James Fraser dated 27 September 1978, held by ALGA.