Labour’s Memory: a Comparison of Labour History Archives in Australia, England, Wales and Scotland

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The writing of labour history depends on the survival and preservation of source material. Labour history societies in Scotland, England and Australia have played a major role in efforts to preserve the records of the labour movement. This article traces the origins of labour history archives in those countries and compares their development over the last few decades. It outlines the locations and strengths of the main collections and the variety and importance of other repositories, including regional collections. The authors discuss how to approach the search for sources and consider several national and international collaborative projects designed to facilitate access to finding aids and catalogues. They also discuss issues affecting the accessibility of labour history archives today, including legislative considerations and the challenge of electronic records. The article illustrates how archivists and those working with labour history collections can assist historians in the quest to produce truly comparative history.

History should be a reflective discipline based on research that is firmly rooted in primary source material, facilitating both new work and meaningful reflection on the work of others. Eric Hobsbawm has noted that the demand for historians to write history is more easily met by generalities than actual research. […Furthermore], theoreticians of all kinds circle round the peaceful herds of historians as they graze on the rich pastures of their primary sources or chew the cud of each other’s publications.¹

So, to write history you need to know what sources exist, where they are, and how to access them. The evidence may be flawed or incomplete but without evidence the process of writing history could not take place. One of the key roles of archivists is to understand which material has an intrinsic historical value and to make that material available to anyone who would wish to consult it. They are custodians of the evidence from which history is written.

The value of the source to the historian has been illustrated rather neatly by Ian MacDougall. In the introductory essay to his edition of the minutes of Edinburgh Trades Council, MacDougall noted that ‘the task of writing the history of working-class organisations and movements in Scotland before the late nineteenth century is made difficult by the frequent lack of documentary record’.² Without the evidence it becomes impossible to construct a meaningful picture of the past. MacDougall’s comments remain pertinent today as archivists face the challenges of twenty-first century technology. Electronic systems that are taken for granted in the workplace are posing new problems. If archivists are going to save electronic records for tomorrow’s researchers they need to take up a more pro-active stance. The Labour History Archive and Study Centre (LHASC), for example, has discussed with the British Labour Party central office the wisdom of the archive being included in all email distribution groups, since the majority of reports, agendas and memoranda
are circulated this way. This would allow the archivists to print out the ‘archive’
copy which would be made available to researchers once the specified closure
period (generally ten years for Labour Party material) had expired. There has
been increasing recognition of the need for a close relationship between archivists
and the associated profession of records management as part of the development
of such a pro-active approach. Records management as a discipline examines the
functional necessity of records as they pass through various stages of operational
effectiveness until ultimately they are no longer needed for a business function. As
part of the management of this process, records with an intrinsic historical value
can be identified at an early stage. This is particularly important in an environment
where the delete key can do a great deal of damage.

The aims of this article are fourfold: firstly, we consider briefly the development of
labour history collecting in Australia, England, Scotland and Wales to see whether
there are any common threads; secondly, to highlight collections of interest to labour
historians; thirdly, to examine ways that historians can access information about
labour collections via on-line guides and printed resources; and finally, to consider
some of the pressures faced by archival repositories when providing research access,
and the obstacles these may pose to historians undertaking research. By examining
these issues more closely, we hope to equip labour historians with a sharper
understanding of the sources that are available, where these are located and how
they can be accessed, as well as giving them a deeper appreciation of the pressures
that archivists face in trying to make these sources available.

Collection Development: Four Nations, One Process?

Writing in 1949, one of the pioneering historians of Scottish labour, W.H. Marwick,
noted that ‘the opportunity to write an adequate history of the Scottish working-class
movement has probably passed, because so many of the records have disappeared’. Marwick thought a general concentration on ‘high’ histories of empires, diplomats
and politicians, together with a failure of many working-class organisations to
appreciate the value of their own records had led to the destruction of many such
collections. Despite the work of the Webbs and developments such as the creation
of the Business Archives Council in the 1930s, it was not until the work of British
and Australian labour historians like Marwick, Hobsbawm, Thompson, Gollan
and Fry in the 1960s that a realisation emerged that such records had an intrinsic
value. It was only then that such records began to be collected in a coherent fashion
by archival institutions. Therefore it is useful to examine certain key areas of
collecting in Australia, England, Scotland and Wales to establish whether there
are any common threads in collection development. This will also allow historians
engaged in comparative study to better identify particular types of sources that may
be helpful in making direct comparisons.

In all four nations, records which document the experiences of the working class
were created by governments and other official bodies. In Australia, both Labor and
anti-Labor governments kept records relating to unions and industrial relations. For
example, there are records relating to industrial arbitration and the union registration
process. Security agency records document the activities of groups and individuals
of interest to the state. There are commonwealth and state royal commission records,
many relating to the building industry. Cabinet records, for example concerning
the 1949 coal strike, contain much useful information on a key national dispute.
Records also exist of governments as public-sector employers and of their conflicts
with public-sector unions. The British governments have created similar sources,
for example papers from the Ministry of Labour which contain material on a variety
of relevant subjects such as employment, industrial relations, and on very specific
areas such as the National Dock Labour Board. Papers from bodies such as the
Board of Trade, or Parliamentary reports into specific industries, also hold much
of value to the historian of labour.

It is not surprising that central governments have maintained – and continue to
maintain – such records. Indeed, dedicated repositories exist for this very purpose,
namely the National Archives of Australia (NAA) and The National Archive (TNA,
formerly the Public Record Office) in the UK. Britain also has the Parliamentary
Archive which provides access to the archives of the House of Lords, the House of
Commons and other records relating to Parliament. However a point of divergence
exists resulting from the distinct political and legal relationship of Scotland to the rest
of the United Kingdom. Whilst much official material pertaining to Scotland is to be
found in TNA, it is crucial to remember that the National Archives of Scotland (NAS,
formerly the Scottish Records Office), also holds large volumes of official records.

The records of the labour movement – from trade unions, co-operative societies
and political parties, to the personal papers of key individuals – are found in a range

Female workers at looms in a weaving shed at Dens Works, Dundee, c 1910
Source: © University of Dundee, Archive Services, GB 0254 MS 11/7/2

This image is from one of the business archive collections concerning the jute industry in Dundee held
by University of Dundee, Archive Services. It is illustrative of the fact that many useful sources for the
historian of labour are to be found outside the more easily identified trade union collections etc.
of repositories across Australia and the UK. Unlike government records there has been no coherent strategy for the preservation of the records of the labour movement. For example, many trade union records were simply passed from branch secretary to branch secretary and when secretaries changed or cupboards became too full records were destroyed. The Scottish Committee of the Society for the Study of Labour History (which became the Scottish Labour History Society in the mid-1960s) took up the challenge of trying to ensure the survival of such records. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s the Society’s official stationery carried a list of patrons who supported the ‘campaign to find, catalogue, and preserve all surviving records of Trade Union, Co-operative, and working-class political movements in Scotland’. The editorial in the first issue of the Society’s journal opened by stating that ‘the aims of the Scottish Labour History Society are to encourage and facilitate the study, discussion, and publication of labour history’. Evidence-based research is, of course, vital to the achievement of such aims.

The campaign of the Scottish Labour History Society to ‘find, catalogue and preserve’ the evidence relating to the history of the working class in Scotland lasted over ten years and culminated in the release of Ian MacDougall’s mammoth *Labour Records in Scotland*, published in 1978. The financial support of the trade unions, Strathclyde University and other bodies was vital to its production. A number of volunteers worked on the project, but it was MacDougall who undertook most of the work and it was his dedication (and personal financial support) which ensured the completion of the volume. This project remains the only comprehensive attempt to produce a union catalogue of sources of the working-class movement in Scotland. Many different repositories benefited from the campaigning work of MacDougall and his colleagues, and trade union material can be found in numerous local authority archives and university collections where it pertains to a particular locality. The bulk of material which was deemed to be of national importance was placed with the National Library of Scotland in Edinburgh. MacDougall continued to carry out this important work after the publication of *Labour Records* both through the Scottish Labour History Society and, more recently, through the work of the Scottish Working Peoples’ History Trust, of which he is Secretary.

The labour history societies of Australia and the UK have also played vital roles in securing records of the trade union movement for permanent preservation. Trade union records began to be collected in Australia in the late 1950s when historians Robin Gollan and Eric Fry, from the Research School of Social Sciences (RSSS) at the Australian National University (ANU), proposed that unions begin depositing their records with the University. Labour became the second collecting focus for ANU, as the University had been collecting business records since 1953. Collecting union records thus preceded the formation of a body to promote labour history, although many of the same individuals were involved. In 1961, Gollan, Fry and other labour historians founded the Australian Society for the Study of Labour History. One of the Society’s aims is to preserve the records of working people and the labour movement.

The first archivist at ANU, Bruce Shields, was crucial in building its trade union collections. Subsequently Ewan Maidment and other archivists were active in maintaining contacts with unions and encouraging them to remember their responsibilities to their records by depositing them in archives. Today the Archives, now known as the Noel Butlin Archives Centre (NBAC), has the largest collection of
union records in the country. At the University of Melbourne, Frank Strahan began collecting labour records in the early 1970s, adding to the University’s collections of the records of business in Victoria. Meanwhile, the state libraries and regional universities also entered the field. Records of trade unions and labour organisations were among the organisational records collected by state libraries under their broad brief to collect private records within their respective jurisdictions. The 1960s and 1970s were buoyant years for collecting and it was during these decades that the basis for patterns that continue today were laid down.

The British Society for the Study of Labour History (SSLH) was founded in 1960 and remains the UK’s principal organisation dedicated to the study of labour history. The Society organises meetings and conferences, represents the interests of labour history and labour historians and publishes the journal *Labour History Review* (formerly known as the *Bulletin of the Society for the Study of Labour History*). The Society’s origins can be traced to a group of labour historians, including Asa Briggs, Eric Hobsbawm, John Saville and Royden Harrison, who joined together to disseminate details of labour history research and teaching and to give ‘news of labour archives; their whereabouts; their contents; and steps taken to preserve them’.

In recent years the Society’s Archive and Resources sub-committee has published guidelines for trade unions and other labour organisations on how to preserve their records and also produced a guide to identifying and preserving
buildings of significance to the labour movement. So successful was the original British society that it led to the establishment of national societies in Scotland, Wales and Ireland. Regional groups were also formed including the North East Group (1966) and the North West Group (1973). The latter is still very active and produces an annual journal. The Communist Party History Group (established in 1946) was also significant in raising awareness of labour history records in the UK. Since the demise of the Communist Party of Great Britain in 1991, the Socialist History Society has taken on this role.

Another group that collected labour history material was the Trade Union, Labour and Co-operative History Society (TULC). Founded in the 1960s, the TULC established a collection of labour history records and ephemera and, between 1975 and 1986, ran a museum in Limehouse Town Hall, London. The museum, known as the National Museum of Labour History, was placed in storage until Greater Manchester authorities made a funding offer and a new trust was created. The museum reopened in Manchester in 1990 and has subsequently become The People’s History Museum. In the same year the archive of the British Labour Party moved to Manchester and joined with the Museum’s archives to form the Labour History Archive and Study Centre.

The Modern Records Centre at Warwick University owes its existence to renewed interest in labour records created by the SSLH and to the efforts of dedicated group of labour history academics, in particular, George Bain, Hugh Clegg and Royden Harrison, who submitted a bid to the Leverhulme Trust for a search and rescue operation for sources on industrial relations and labour history. The resulting accessions grew to become the Modern Records Centre. The Centre continued the tradition of collecting trade union and political material started by Sidney and Beatrice Webb, whose papers are deposited at the London School of Economics. Other key institutions predate the activities of the SSLH. For example, the Marx Memorial Library in London was founded in 1933 by delegates from various elements of the London labour movement including the Communist Party, the Labour Party, the trade unions and trades councils. Similarly the Bishopsgate Institute in London, which opened in 1895, rapidly developed collections relating to the co-operative movement and free thought, and has recently acquired the papers of the labour historian, Raphael Samuel. Further north in Salford, Lancashire, the Working Class Movement Library (WCML) was founded by two Communist bibliophiles, Eddie and Ruth Frow. Opened in the late 1960s, management of the WCML has been overseen by a charitable trust known as ‘The Working Class Movement Library, Manchester’.

In Wales, the South Wales Coalfield Collection (SWCC) was established in 1969 as an attempt to preserve the documentary records of the mining communities of South Wales. The collection was started in the wake of extensive pit closures. The National Union of Mineworkers (South Wales Area) recognised that records were in danger of being lost and began transferring its non-current records to the Library at University College, Swansea, while encouraging their constituent lodges to do likewise. In 1971 the South Wales Coalfield History Project was set up, funded by the Social Science Research Council, to locate and collect manuscript and printed material of archival significance. The project also included oral history recordings of people connected with the local mining communities. Since 1983 the Welsh Political Archive has co-ordinated the collection of documentary evidence of all kinds about politics in Wales.
The Collections Compared

Thus far we have outlined how labour history collections have been created. We now turn to consider the types of records which can be used for comparative research. While minute books, membership registers, correspondence, reports and printed material are obvious tools for the labour historian, more attention could be paid to photographic collections, sound and film recordings, badges, textiles and ephemera such as are more typically found in museum collections. The People’s History Museum in Manchester, for example, holds an extensive poster and cartoon collection, as well as the photographic collections of both the British Labour Party and the Communist Party of Great Britain. It also houses the largest collection of trade union and political banners in the UK. Similarly, the Peoples Story Museum in Edinburgh has a large collection of banners of Scottish unions, many of which were deposited during the campaign of the Scottish Labour History Society noted above.30

In an ideal world the websites of political organisations, trade unions and pressure groups will be a resource for the next generation of researcher. However, at present there is no comprehensive means of archiving the web pages of peripheral (or indeed mainstream) organisations. Several leading libraries and archives are currently investigating the best way to archive the complex electronic media displayed in web pages.31 Research is also being conducted into how to archive hybrid collections of both paper and electronic media. One of the key considerations when archiving electronic records is the need for authenticity. As a general rule records should
be preserved and authenticated in their original state to minimise the danger of tampering.32

Key oral history resources for labour historians are held at The British Library National Sound Archive which holds recordings on the British Labour Party, the National Co-operative Society Oral History Project, Fire Brigade Union Interviews, and the Labour Oral History Project. Historians at Manchester and Liverpool Universities have recently completed a two-year survey of the opinions and activities of members of the British Communist Party, which included interviews with communists and former communists. These sound recordings have also been deposited at the National Sound Archive.33 The Scottish Oral History Centre based at the University of Strathclyde is producing unique insights into history as it happens. On 15 February 2003 researchers, armed with recording material, set out on the streets of Glasgow to encapsulate the mass protest against the impending war in Iraq, interviewing a cross spectrum of marchers on the ‘Coalition for Justice not War’.34 Local oral histories are also often held in local libraries and archives, providing an insight into the day-to-day lives of the people recorded.

In Australia, the National Library of Australia (NLA) holds recordings and transcripts of interviews by Wendy Lowenstein with workers and working-class communities in its social history interview collection. The Oral History Projects of the [Federal] Parliament and the Labor Council of NSW are sub-collections of the NLA’s Eminent Australians collection with obvious interest for labour historians.35

The papers of political parties are another crucial source to the labour historian who may wish to examine not only Labor politics, but also the activities of anti-Labor politicians. The papers of parties and the personal papers of those associated with them have perhaps been more consistently collected than those of the trade union movement. There appears to have been a realisation of the importance of political records at a much earlier stage so that the papers of the ‘great’ politicians are held as parts of collections in major national repositories such as the National Library of Scotland, the British Library, the London School of Economics, the Bodleian Library in Oxford and Churchill College in Cambridge. Similarly, dedicated repositories in the UK exist for the Conservative Party and the Labour Party whilst papers relating to the Liberal Party/Liberal Democrats are held at the London School of Economics.36

It should be noted that the institutions mentioned above care predominantly for the national administrative records of political parties. Branch and district records of the Welsh and English political parties are generally held in the locality at local record offices. The LHASC, for example, has a policy of de-accessioning local Labour and Communist party records.

The papers of leading Australian Labor politicians are held in various locations. Both the NAA and NLA hold personal papers of national figures. The John Curtin Prime Ministerial Library in Western Australia is devoted to documenting the life of that wartime Prime Minister. The Bob Hawke Prime Ministerial Library in Adelaide and the Whitlam Institute in Sydney have similar goals. The NAA holds Gough Whitlam’s and Paul Keating’s official Prime Ministerial records, as well as the personal records of many leading Federal politicians. The pattern is different at the state level, with the papers of state Labor politicians being held by state libraries. For example Jack Ferguson’s papers are in the State Library of New South Wales (SLNSW).37
There is no dedicated home for the records of political parties in Australia. The records of the Australian Labor Party (ALP) are spread across many repositories, while those of the national body of the ALP and those of the Australian Capital Territory Branch are held by the NLA in Canberra. State, regional and local ALP records are held in state and regional repositories. Records of socialist and labour political groups and parties of the early twentieth centuries, such as the Socialist Labor Party of Australia, the Political Labor Council and the Victorian Socialist Party, are held by the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA), the State Library of Victoria (SLV) and the NLA. The records of the NSW Branch of the ALP constitute the largest organisational and private archives in the SLNSW.38

Records of state branches of the Democratic Labor Party (DLP), which existed from 1954 until 1978 after the tumultuous split in the ALP over the issue of communist influence in the labour movement, are held by state libraries in Queensland, Western Australia and Victoria. While the organisations had a permanent and bitter split, this is not necessarily so of the records themselves. For example, significant ALP records are noted as being included within a collection of DLP records held by the SLV.39

In Scotland the National Library holds the papers of four of the main parties active in Scottish politics.40 Records at local level will not always be strong, but arguably they have survived at least as well as trade union papers—largely for similar reasons. Astute branch secretaries have handed papers into libraries and archives and more concerted campaigns by archivists and other bodies have uncovered crucial records. Again, a commonality of experience can be observed in both collecting policies and circumstances of collection across the four nations.

The groups whose records survived least intact are those that exist outside the political mainstream. Unfortunately it is often smaller groups such as these that are particularly interesting to historians as they provide indicators of grass roots activity. One example of this would be the Scottish Workers Republican Party, founded by the Scottish Socialist, John Maclean, in the early 1920s. Printed papers from this small party survive in various places, but one of the few surviving manuscript items is one minute book of the Townhead branch, 1923-26, in the National Library of Scotland.41 Glasgow Caledonian University Archive has a pro-active policy of collecting the papers of more marginal groups and has, for example, established the Glasgow Caledonian Archive of the Trotskyist Tradition.42 However pro-active collection policies of this type are the exception rather than the rule.

The exception here is the material which has survived from the Communist parties in the four countries. The richness of the surviving Communist party records is attributable largely to the culture of central control which these bodies exhibited. This rigorous approach to record keeping is illustrated by the extensive archive of the Communist Party of Great Britain (CPGB). The archive numbers over 800 boxes and includes the minutes of the central committees and departments, correspondence, local districts papers, party statements, national congresses, speakers notes, subject files, personal files, miscellaneous individuals, youth organisations, circulars and publications. The extent to which the Party was under Moscow’s control is illustrated by the fact it was obliged to send transcripts of the deliberations of its leading bodies to the Communist International headquarters in Moscow. In general, copies of these documents before 1943 were not retained at CPGB headquarters in Britain, although LHASC does hold copies of some of these Moscow papers on microfilm. Following
the demise of CPGB in 1991 the Communist Party of Great Britain Archive Trust deposited the archive at the LHASC in Manchester.

There are also significant CPGB collections at the Labour Archive at the Brynmor Jones Library, University of Hull. These include the papers of Robin Page Arnot (1890-1986) and the papers of Communist militants such as Howard Hill, who was Sheffield District organiser for many years. The same collection also houses the papers of John Saville, which contain a wealth of correspondence with other Communist intellectuals. Saville’s papers also shed light upon the events of 1956 and the *Reasoner* group. In Scotland the CPGB Scottish papers are held at Glasgow Caledonian University Archive and are a rich resource for anyone interested in the operation of the party north of the border. Smaller collections relating to particular communist activists have also survived.

The main body of the records of the former Communist Party of Australia (CPA) is held by the State Library of NSW. Records of the Victorian State Committee of the CPA are held by the University of Melbourne Archives and of the Queensland Branch by the University of Queensland Fryer Library, with some smaller collections in the NLA and other repositories. The official records of the other communist parties which split from the CPA in the 1960s, the Communist Party of Australia (Marxist-Leninist) (pro-Chinese line) and the Socialist Party of Australia (pro-Moscow line), have not yet been deposited in public collections. However, material relating to these parties appears in personal collections in several repositories including the NBAC, UMA and the SLNSW.

It would be impossible to consider fully the historical experiences of working people without examining the interaction between the employers and those whom they employed. Business archives, therefore, are another key resource for the labour historian. Where a company is operational it is likely, especially with bigger companies, that they will have a company archivist, or at the very least some formal system for the maintenance of their records to ensure that their ‘corporate memory’ is properly maintained and that they have specific audit trails. Researchers may be able to access these records, although this will always be at the discretion of the company concerned.

Many companies have recognised the importance of their history and use it as a marketing tool. To this end their company archive may well be associated with a museum, heritage centre or other facility that is open to the public. For example in the UK the BT Group Archives, which preserves the historical information of British Telecommunications and its predecessors, allows public access to its archive. Moreover, archives at both local and national levels will collect the papers of businesses which have a particular historical value. For example, Perth and Kinross Council Archive in Scotland has the papers of Pullars Cleaners and Dyers, formerly one of the biggest employers in the Burgh of Perth, and Dundee University Archives has extensive collections regarding the manufacture of jute in that city with the papers of companies such as Baxter Brothers, or Cox Brothers Ltd. Employers’ federations and related bodies produce papers in the same way as trade unions and their records will often be collected in a similar fashion to trades unions and other bodies.

As well as collection at national and local levels there are archive repositories which have dedicated business sections. In England the Modern Records Centre
at Warwick University collects the historical records of both trade unions and employers’ associations, including the Confederation of British Industry. The Trades Union Congress (TUC) Library collections at the London Metropolitan University holds an extensive collection of published material on the British and overseas trade union movement. In Scotland, Glasgow University Archive Services has the biggest business archive and the most systematic collecting policy for the acquisition of business material.52

In Australia, business records are also collected by university archives and state libraries. The NBAC and the UMA hold the major collections, covering the pastoral, mining, manufacturing, finance, retailing and shipping industries, as well as small business. Like the Modern Records Centre in England, the NBAC collects records of employer and industry associations as well as those of trade unions and professional associations.53

Local administrations tend to follow the example of central governments in the way they make arrangements for the preservation of their records. In Australia the federal structure of government dictates how this functions in practice. At the state level, there are state archives and state libraries. Their collections are supplemented by collections held by universities, especially some regional universities. The University of Newcastle Archives in NSW has strong labour archives holdings, reflecting the Hunter region’s significance as the first industrial area in Australia. The University of Wollongong Archives has a solid collection of material relating to the Wollongong area and the south coast of NSW. Records of local government authorities are usually transferred to the relevant state archives or to regional university archives, although some are in local hands; for example, those relating to the Geelong area west of Melbourne are housed in the Geelong Heritage Centre.54

Although the local government structure in the UK is constituted on a very different basis, in Scotland there are distinct parallels with the Australian experience. Where local authority archives exist it is normal practice for the parent authority to pass on to them the records selected for permanent preservation. However, the coverage of local authority archives in Scotland has not always been as consistent as it is now. Many archive offices were only established in the 1970s and the local authority system has been subject to periodic reorganisations which have resulted in the transfer of archives between different offices.55 Consequently, universities in Scotland have at times acted as de-facto local repositories for their area in a similar vein to the situation in Australia. One very clear example of this is in Fife, which is the area in the east of Scotland between the Forth and Tay estuaries. A formal local authority archive service has only been formally established within the last five years leading to material being placed into the custody of St Andrews University Archive.

It would be wrong to assume that local authority archives hold only the papers of their parent body. In all four countries many such archives have a ‘gifts and deposits’ section of their collections, or a variant of that title. This section will normally be comprised of personal papers, papers of local businesses, or the papers of local branches of political parties, organisations, interest groups, and trade unions. While the official papers of the parent authority may prove vital to the labour historian trying to determine social conditions in a particular area or the interaction of the authority with its citizens, it is in the gifts and deposits where historians are most likely to have their interest sparked, simply because of the variety of information and experience contained in such records.56
There are often anomalies between where collections might be expected to be held and where they are actually housed. There are myriad reasons for this. It could be that local people did not want information to leave their area and so deposited it with the local museum or library. Sometimes records have been destroyed by their creator either in a misguided attempt at space efficiency or through sheer neglect. Sadly for comparative historians, ‘comparable’ sources do not always survive from one country to the next and the historian has to look more assiduously for alternative evidence. The key point is that researchers should investigate the locality in which they are working, but not expect to find all the material they need in the first repository they visit. The professional knowledge of archivists and librarians is especially useful to researchers here. The nature of the job demands that professional staff are aware of other collections that complement the collections in their care and will be part of various networks. By asking questions researchers will find that they can be pointed in new directions.

Archives and libraries have collection policies which they use to determine which records are kept within both local and national boundaries. Archivists exercise their professional judgement in consultation with the creators of records, the research community, and groups such as labour history societies. They maintain networks of contacts in an attempt to ensure that the right material is held by the right repository. While this does not always work as smoothly as might be desired, the general rule is that the profession as a whole is working to make sure that records survive and that ‘labours’ memory’ is maintained in one place or another. This is true of all four of the nations discussed in this article.

Paths to the Evidence

There is not the space in this article to itemise the many key collections, but there are websites both in Britain and in Australia that describe the various institutions and specialised repositories which hold primary sources for labour history research. A description of such institutions in the UK, along with contact details, can be found at www.sslh.org.uk. Similar information on labour history sources in Australia can be found at http://www.archives.anu.edu.au/nbac/html/labourhistorysources.html.

In this section, we consider some of the specific ways in which historians can be assisted in locating evidence relevant to their particular projects. The development of the internet has changed the resource discovery stage of research beyond recognition and it is now the key resource for the location of archival material. Institutional websites now carry information on collections which can range from simple source guides and summaries of the repository’s holdings to fully searchable online catalogues. In this way, the internet has allowed the development of portal sites that allow the researcher to search on themes and keywords and to be given results from many different institutions.

In the UK the best place to begin is the National Register of Archives (NRA), which is maintained by TNA. The NRA contains information about the location and nature of British historical records that have been created by individuals, families, businesses and organisations. Searches can only be undertaken on personal and corporate names and on place names. A subject entry exists but is not yet available for remote searching. The site gives full contact details for the holding repository and often a hypertext link to the repositories own website. Where available there
may be a direct link to an online catalogue, although at the time of writing this is not the case for the bulk of entries. Although it deals only with British historical records, material which is held outside the country is also recorded. For example a search for ‘Keir Hardie’ will also pick up correspondence held at the State Library of Victoria, Melbourne. The National Archives also maintains the ARCHON Directory, which holds contact details for record repositories in the UK and also for institutions elsewhere in the world which have substantial collections of manuscripts noted under the indexes to the NRA.58

The principal archival gateways in the UK are: (i) A2A (Access to Archives) which is maintained by the UK National Archives and provides detailed catalogues for collections held across England; (ii) the Scottish Archive Network (SCAN) which allows researchers to see collection level descriptions (rather than full catalogues like A2A) for historical records held in 52 Scottish archives; and (iii) Archives Network Wales, which allows easy searching of collections held by record offices, universities, museums and libraries in Wales. Another significant project is the Archives Hub, which provides access to collection level descriptions of archives in UK universities and colleges. There are also a number of theme-based projects including the CASBAH website for locating resources relating to Caribbean Studies and the history of Black and Asian peoples in the UK, and Genesis, a mapping initiative for women’s history collections from libraries, archives and museums from around the British Isles.59

The catalogues of printed resources held at UK institutions are also widely available online. For example the union catalogue, COPAC, provides free access to the merged online catalogues of 22 of the largest university research libraries in the UK and Ireland, as well as that of the British Library. Similarly newspaper catalogues can be viewed at the site of the British Library’s newspaper collection at Colindale in the north-west of London. The Newspaper Library web catalogue includes entries for over 52,000 newspaper and periodical titles from all over the world. Labour periodicals and journals are included in this vast collection.60

A word of caution is required here, however. While it may be easy to get the impression that such online resources represent the entire holdings of UK repositories, this is simply not the case. Recently acquired material will not usually be represented and, indeed, many archives hold a great deal of uncatalogued material. After using the online catalogues it would be wise to email the appropriate archivist to ascertain if there are may be other relevant records yet to be publicised online.

Electronic access to information about most Australian sources for labour history research is now available. However the level of detail varies considerably and depends on the approach taken by archives and other institutions in presenting their information online. In many cases, descriptions at collection level are online, while more detailed information is available only by visiting the institution. Some institutions offer online lists and online request services. To locate websites for state archives and other major archives on a state-by-state basis, see http://www.archivenet.gov.au/archives.html. The Directory of Archives in Australia at http://www.archivists.org.au/directory/asa_dir.htm is more comprehensive and can be searched by name or by state. Libraries can be found through the Australian Libraries Gateway at http://www.nla.gov.au/libraries/, which indicates whether a library’s catalogue is available online.
Some institutions have comprehensive databases of their specialised holdings and in many cases these have powerful search capacities. Examples of these are the National Film and Sound Archive http://www.screensound.gov.au/screensound/ screenso.nsf/ and the Australian Institute for Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies http://mura.aiatsis.gov.au/.

The main Australian resource for finding collections of non-government records and personal papers is the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM), maintained by the NLA, see http://www.nla.gov.au/raam/raamabout.html. RAAM can be searched by name and occupation, with entries providing information on the creator, title, date range, summary of contents and location of the records. Some entries give links to online finding aids, but others provide only a link to the website of the repository holding the records. The value of RAAM is that it is a national resource and thus has broad coverage of many different institutions. It can be searched using names of people in the labour movement, labour organisations and names of campaigns. ‘Conscientious objectors’ are included among the searchable occupation terms, as well as ‘trade unionists’. Some archives have lists of their labour holdings on their websites.

Australian Trade Union Archives (ATUA) is the specialised online gateway for researchers and scholars of labour history. Launched in 2002, it aims to link together historical detail, the location of archival resources available in public hands, published material, and current information about Australian industrial organisations, particularly trade unions, from the late nineteenth century to the present. See http://www.atua.org.au/atua_contents.htm for ATUA’s scope and advice on how to use this resource. ATUA is based on Parties to the Award: a guide to the pedigrees and archival resources of federally registered trade unions, employer associations and their peak councils in Australia 1904-1994, published in 1994 by the NBAC. This guide was published in response to the major amalgamations of unions in Australia in the 1980s and early 1990s, partly to assist researchers trace the history of the many predecessors of today’s mega-unions.

ATUA provides a comprehensive list of trade unions, trades hall councils and employer associations registered under the federal industrial relations system since 1904. A number of organisations that were registered under their respective state’s industrial legislation have also been identified and included in ATUA. The entry for the Maritime Union of Australia at http://www.atua.org.au/biogs/ALE0595b.htm shows how ATUA provides a brief administrative history, with its antecedents listed and links to archival and published sources on that union. The published sources now include the titles of articles published in Labour History.

not in Bellamy and Saville’s work. Other potentially useful research aids include:
J.O. Baylen & N.J. Gossman, *Biographical Dictionary of Modern British Radicals*, 3 vols,

**Challenges to Access**

Having discussed ways to access information it is also worth alerting historians to some of the challenges that archives and archivists currently face which may affect access to collections. The first of these is resource constraints. Archives need specialised storage conditions, properly trained staff, buildings that can cope with the demands of archival storage and reading room requirements, money to conserve and list collections, and funding to meet all the usual costs associated with running an office of any type. This is not a recipe for low-cost facilities, and makes archive offices a particular strain on parent bodies who may well have other priorities. Consequently all archives conduct complicated balancing acts with the budgets available to them and one common outcome is restricted hours of opening. Furthermore, many archives are expected to be self-sufficient with services such as reprographics. As many offices will have comparatively small demands for copying this can result in high costs per unit, particularly where more complicated process are involved, such as microfilming, photography or digital imaging. Finally, it is not always possible to list new material as quickly as researchers would like. In a small office it can be difficult to find time to list collections as well as running the public search room and answering enquires. In large offices that are accessioning large collections or large amounts of material it can be difficult to keep up with the volume of listing.62

These remarks are not intended to be excuses for poor service. Rather, they are mentioned here to provide a sense of the organisational context within which the services that researchers receive from repositories are delivered. Local legislative requirements are another factor affecting archivists’ ability to offer access to collections. For example under the UK *Copyright Designs and Patent Act 1988*, researchers can only photocopy five per cent of a book or pamphlet which is still in copyright, and then only when other certain conditions are met. In the UK the *Data Protection Act 1998* governs the way in which personal data can be held and processed. In Australia there is also the issue of federal and state privacy legislation, although this does not extend to private records in all cases. Australian archives legislation does not cover non-government records and there are no requirements for organisations such as trade unions to retain their historical records nor to make them available for research.
The Freedom of Information Act 2000 (England and Wales) and The Freedom of Information (Scotland) Act 2002 provide a general right of access to information held by public bodies from 1 January 2005. These Acts oblige public authorities to produce a ‘publication scheme’ which explains what information they put into the public domain as a matter of course and how to access that information. Publication schemes may well become a useful tool for researchers. However access to information under this legislation will be subject to certain exemptions to the general right of access and to the operation of a fees regime. While there are similarities between English and Scottish legislation, there are sufficient differences to cause confusion in the initial stages of implementation.

One important impact of the Freedom of Information Acts is that they oblige public authorities to take record keeping and records management seriously. The Acts prescribe a maximum amount of time that public authorities are allowed to take when answering requests for information. Without proper record keeping systems it is impossible for authorities to ensure that they have provided all relevant information to an applicant, or indeed to find that information in the first place. Furthermore, both the UK Act (for England and Wales), and the Scottish Act have associated codes of practice on records management. In Scotland, at least, the indication from the Office of the Scottish Information Commissioner, who promotes and polices compliance with the Scottish Act, is that where public authorities are seen to be failing to comply with the code of practice they may well be found to be in violation of the Act. Better application of records management techniques should ensure that more records with an archival value are identified at an earlier stage. However, unlike the Data Protection Act which applies to all organisations holding and processing personal data, the Freedom of Information Acts only apply to public bodies, so are only a driver for change in such bodies and do not effect private-sector businesses and other groups.

A final area that researchers should keep in mind is the status of the collections that they are consulting. Not all collections within Archive offices are held on the same basis. Many collections are gifted or purchased by the archive and these are owned outright. Generally the archive service is free to deal with these collections as they see fit, unless particular contractual agreements were entered into at the point of purchase or donation. The other means by which an archives acquires material is by deposit which means that the ownership of the collection remains with the depositor but the archive service is permitted to make the collection available. Theoretically, however, the owner can ask to vet all potential researchers, impose restrictions on the copying of material or withdraw sections of the collection at their discretion. While such restrictions can have a negative impact on the services an archive offers, thankfully they tend to be rare.

Conclusion

This article has endeavoured to provide a greater understanding of the development of labour history collecting in Australia, England, Scotland and Wales and, in particular, of how such resources can be used for writing of comparative labour history. We have been struck by the remarkable consistency of records and records collecting across the four nations despite their different historical experiences. We have concentrated on highlighting the key online gateways for accessing information
on labour history collections and offered a taste of the types of records available. Although the internet is increasingly the first port of call, we also recommend that readers consult printed resources and ask archivists and librarians for advice. Barriers to access have also been discussed, including restrictions posed by data protection, freedom of information and copyright legislation, along with more mundane restrictions on service.

To conclude: without authentic sources of evidence there can be no scholarly history. Without the work of archivists, archive staff, concerned volunteers and campaigning groups such as the labour history societies, the volume of such evidence available to historical researchers would be far less.

Endnotes

* This article has been peer-reviewed for Labour History by two anonymous referees. The authors advise that all URLs cited were correct as at 10 March 2005.


4. For examples of guidance on some of the operational issues surrounding records management and its interaction with archives, see the website of The National Archives http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/recordsmanagement/. For an example of a key contribution from Australia in the records management field see the DIRKS manual (Designing and Implementing Record Keeping Systems) http://www.naa.gov.au/recordkeeping/diks/diksman/diks.html on the website of the National Archives of Australia.


6. For information on the Business Archives Council see http://www.businessarchivescouncil.com/home/welcome.html. For an example of a non-specialist institution (in terms of the collection of labour history material) with labour history material as part of a broader acquisitions policy, see the Manuscripts Acquisitions Policy of the National Library of Scotland (NLS) at http://www.nls.uk/professional/policy/index.html. See also the collection policy of Hull University, Brynmor Jones Library, http://www.hull.ac.uk/arc/collection/acquisition

7. The Archives Around Australia page on the National Archives of Australia site provides a quick entry point for websites of the various state and territory governments, which can then be searched for government records relating to labour regulation, see http://www.archivenet.gov.au/archives.html (accessed 15.07.2004).


9. The BOPCRIS website gives researchers access to a full set of 18th, 19th and 20th century British Official Publications consisting of approximately 250,000 Parliamentary Papers. See http://www.bopcris.ac.uk/.

10. See, for example, the Board of Trade Labour Gazette, HMSO, 1905-17. Parliamentary reports can concern very specific incidents as well as broader issues. The Mines Department Report on the Causes of and Circumstances attending the Explosion which occurred at the St Helens No 3 Colliery, Workington on the 27th November 1922, HMSO, 1923, is an example of one such report. However, this report is of particular interest to one of the authors of this article (Alan Bell), as it commends the heroism of his great-grandfather, Robert Thomason, and a number of other men in helping to rescue their fellow workers, p. 11.


17. For the development of the project and notes of the names of those who supported and were involved with it see I. MacDougall, *An Interim Bibliography of the Scottish Working Class Movement*, Scottish Committee: Society for the Study of Labour History, Edinburgh, 1985, pp. i-iv, which was the first published results of the campaign to find and list material, and MacDougall, *A Catalogue of Some Labour Records in Scotland*. The reference to MacDougall’s own financial support for the project is based on conversation with Alan Bell, 2003.
20. See http://sslh.org.uk See also an interview with John Halstead on the Society in *Mitteilungsblatt des Instituts für Soziale Bewegungen*, vol. 27, 2002, pp. 201-212. On page 205 Halstead notes that preservation of labour history records was central to the organisation and cites the establishment of an archive and resources sub-committee which continues to meet to this day.
22. See http://sslh.org.uk
24. The Communist Party History Group’s records are held at the Labour History Archive and Study Centre.
28. See http://www.llgc.org.uk/lc/awg_s_awg.htm. The Welsh Political Archive produces a newsletter twice a year which lists all the relevant accessions which have come in during the preceding six months. See also ‘Guide to the Department of Manuscripts and Records’, 1994. See http://www.cac.org.uk/.
29. For example, see the UK Central Government Web Archive which is being maintained by the UK National Archives, http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/preservation/webarchive/.
30. Digital preservation is a complex issue. Further information can be found on the digital testbed website at http://www.digitalduurzaamheid.nl/index.cfm?page=kanzeigen-181&categorie=2 For examples of ‘off the shelf’ records management systems which meet professional functional requirements see The National Archives recommended products list at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/. Most of the systems on the list will highlight their ability to offer records management solutions in hybrid environments. This site also has links to further information on digital preservation.
31. See http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/holdings.html
32. Digital preservation is a complex issue. Further information can be found on the digital testbed website at http://www.digitalduurzaamheid.nl/index.cfm?page=kanzeigen-181&categorie=2 For examples of ‘off the shelf’ records management systems which meet professional functional requirements see The National Archives recommended products list at http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/electronicrecords/. Most of the systems on the list will highlight their ability to offer records management solutions in hybrid environments. This site also has links to further information on digital preservation.
33. See http://www.bl.uk/collections/sound-archive/holdings.html
36. The best place to find out more about the papers of political parties in the UK is via a group called the Political Parties and Parliamentary Archives Group, United Kingdom (PPPAG UK). The group is co-ordinated by the Conservative Party archivist at the Bodleian, Oxford. PPPAG UK maintains a website which gives contact details and a detailed description of records held. See http://www.bodleian.ox.ac.uk/pppag.htm
37. The Prime Ministers’ website maintained by the National Archives of Australia provides biographical, bibliographical and online access to information on Labor prime ministers, including National Archives of Australia sources – see http://primeministers.naa.gov.au/.
38. In all, there are 84 entries in the Register of Australian Archives and Manuscripts (RAAM) for the
Australian Labor Party (ALP), indicating that the party’s records are held across 12 repositories (accessed 13/05/04). The total ALP NSW Branch archives in the Mitchell Library exceed 450 linear shelf metres.

http://www.nls.uk/catalogues/online/political-mss/index.html

See http://www.lib.gcal.ac.uk/archives/newarchives.htm for information on the collections in Glasgow Caledonian University Archives.

The Reasoner was a journal produced by the communist historians John Saville and E.P. Thompson. The group which formed around this publication comprised disillusioned members of the CPCB, many of whom left the party after the extent of Stalin’s crimes were revealed by Khrushchev in 1956 and the subsequent invasion of Hungary by Russian troops.

See, for example, NLS MSS Division, Acc.11479.


In the UK the National Register of Archives maintains a register of privately owned archives. See http://www.nra.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/ A guide to business records is being developed in Australia, where very few companies maintain their own archives.

See http://www.dundee.ac.uk/archives/welcome.htm


The Directory of Archives in Australia, maintained by the Australian Society of Archivists, is the best starting point for a search for regional archives. It can be browsed by alphabetically or by state and territory, see http://www.archivists.org.au/directory/asa_browse.htm


In Australia there are some local archives with significant holdings for labour history, such as the City of Sydney Archives and the Outback Archives (part of the Broken Hill City Library in far western NSW). For examples of holdings in the UK see the information sheet ‘Sources for Labour History in England, Scotland and Wales’ produced by the Archives and Resources Sub-Committee of the Society for the Study of Labour History, available from http://ssdh.org.uk.


See http://www.nra.nationalarchives.gov.uk/nra/ and http://www.archeron.nationalarchives.gov.uk/archives. Each year The National Archives contacts approximately 250 of the principal record repositories in the British Isles in order to discover which major and unusual accessions have been received. This information is added to the indexes of the National Register of Archives. It is also edited and used to produce 33 thematic digests, including one relating to labour history. The digests are made available through The National Archives website and distributed for publication in a number of learned journals and newsletters. See http://www.catalogue.nationalarchives.gov.uk/RdLeaflet.asp?LeafletID=366

60. See http://www.copac.ac.uk/copac/ , http://www.bl.uk/collections/newspapers.html


64. For information on the Scottish Information Commissioner see http://www.itispuknowledge.info/.