

'Thinking in Papua New Guinean Terms': the Sensitive Files Case of 1972 and Australia's Migrated Archive by Jon Piccini

On 1 February 1972 a short, seemingly innocuous press release was issued by the Australian Minister for External Territories, Charles Barnes. It revealed that officers of the Commonwealth Archives Office (CAO – today the National Archives of Australia) were beginning to 'examine records of the Papua New Guinea [PNG] Administration with a view to completing Australia's record'. The 'examination, copying and transfer of some records to Australia' was being undertaken to 'avoid administrative disruption should the people of [PNG] indicate that they wanted self-government'.¹ While 'some records, which were essentially Australian' would be removed to Commonwealth jurisdiction, readers were reassured that the 'great majority. . . would remain as an essential part of the heritage of the new nation'.² Internal correspondence of the Department of External Territories (DET) reveals that this statement followed months of planning, and was designed to 'avoid precipitate rumours circulating' in the colony as it geared up for the vital elections slated for April 1972 that would pave the way for formal independence. Initially, it appeared that this had been successful. While 'press representatives in Port Moresby had indicated that they might write adversely on the press release', a Departmental memo noted that there had been 'no unfavourable mention in the Australian morning press'. It was hoped that the matter might be buried.³

This silence was broken two weeks later, when a campaign of letter writing, lobbying and petitioning united the PNG branch of the Library Association of Australia (PNGLAA) with academics at the University of Papua New Guinea (UPNG) and nationalist elites in the Papua and New Guinea Union (Pangu) Party. After a meeting of the PNGLAA on 10 February President Elizabeth Sillano composed an open letter pronouncing that 'members at the meeting unanimously deplored any removal of documents', which was published widely in Australian metropolitan dailies.⁴ Sillano's letter argued that records produced in the territory 'belong more to this country than to Australia', and noted ominously that 'The Australian Government's actions have already been interpreted by one source as an attempt to remove "sensitive" material to avoid political embarrassment in the future'.⁵ Pangu Party secretary Albert Māori Kiki included this correspondence

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word for word in a six-page petition submitted to the United Nations Trusteeship Council, in whose name Australia administered the northern portion of modern PNG.⁶ Claiming to be ‘deeply disturbed’ by Australia’s action, Pangu leaders protested that Australian actions were taken seemingly ‘without any regard as to whether the removal of the documents could be detrimental to the incoming [PNG] government’. To Māori Kiki and the Pangu Party, who would lead a coalition government following the April elections, such actions demonstrated ‘a callous disregard of the interests of the indigenous people of this country’.⁷

Widely publicized revelations in 2011 that British colonial authorities had removed thousands of files concerning imperial administration at the time of independence gave rise to a small cottage industry concerning the fate of colonial archives in the era of decolonization. Beginning with a 2011 special issue of *Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, scholars of the British empire have considered how and why colonial authorities retrieved these documents, and the contribution this newly opened archive might offer to our understanding of late colonialism. A decade on, historians have begun to ask new questions of the ‘migrated archive’ – how secret were the removals? Was the process of migrating archives uniform across the empire? And what role did representatives of newly independent states play in contesting the theft of their national heritage? Equally, critical archival scholars have turned their attention to what they term the ‘displaced archive’, examining the imbrication (and co-emergence) of their profession in the justification and execution of empire. The ‘sensitive files’ case of 1972 brings an antipodean perspective to this emerging field of research, locating Australia not only as a former colonial appendage of Britain, but a colonial power in its own right.

Perhaps most intriguingly, Papua New Guinea offers the only extant example where protest by the colonized and their supporters succeeded in keeping colonial-era archives in place. By closely examining the records of the PNGLAA’s Australian Secretary, Nancy Lutton, and recently opened documents from the DET, this paper identifies how government, archivists and nationalists engaged with the archive controversy. It has four parts. First, I discuss the present state of literature on the migrated records and the ‘decolonial’ turn in archival studies. Second, I turn to the Australian administration of Papua New Guinea, considering why the DET decided to withdraw documents considered ‘sensitive’ in late 1971. Third, I explore the particular set of circumstances that saw librarians like Lutton, who would ‘normally avoid controversy’, make an anti-colonial stand by ‘thinking in Papua New Guinean rather than Australian terms’.⁸ Last, I turn to the impact of the campaign, analysing how the arrival of a new Minister of External Territories, Andrew Peacock, marked a dramatic change in the DET’s approach to the archive question, and locating this forgotten conflict in what was a transformative year for PNG politics. In concluding, I will consider why this instance of archival removal played out so differently from others, and offer some reflections on how this episode might recontextualize understandings of Australia’s own decolonization.

'MIGRATED RECORDS' AND THE DECOLONIAL TURN

It is now more than a decade since a 2011 UK court case, brought by five Kenyan survivors of Britain's 'colonial gulag', revealed what had long been denied.⁹ Thousands of 'sensitive' files had been collated and returned to the metropole by colonial officials during the era of decolonization. Historians have long interrogated the nature of the colonial archive, which Thomas Richards memorably describes as 'not a building, nor even a collection of texts, but the collectively imagined junction of all that was known or knowable'.¹⁰ At the same time, this imperial archive was revealed to be rife with silences – of women, sexual minorities, and of course 'native' peoples themselves – that required reading 'against the grain' to be heard. More recently, Ann Laura Stoler has insisted on 'attending not only to colonialism's archival content, but also to its particular and sometimes peculiar form', which rather than against, needed to be read 'along the grain', noting the idiosyncrasies and anxieties of its formation.¹¹

The 2011 revelations refocused scholars' attentions from what is hidden in the archive to hidden archives themselves. Initial scholarship focused on Kenya, written by historians who had served as expert witnesses in the case that had first seen the files' existence revealed.¹² The admission by the Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) that it possessed around 300 boxes of files removed from Kenya was followed by another bombshell: that some 9,500 further files from thirty-six other former British colonies had also been secreted in the organization's sprawling Hanslope Park complex. Though the release of this material was slow, it has allowed scholars to take a wider view, analysing British removals from other corners of the empire, principally Asia and the Pacific.¹³ This has revealed the extent of the British government's undertaking: the first removals took place in 1948, as Ceylon (present-day Sri Lanka) gained independence, and the last took place in 1979, amidst the independence of a swathe of island possessions in the Caribbean and Pacific. The migration of archives was an evolving process, with lessons learned in Ceylon codified in the Gold Coast (present-day Ghana), which served as a model for later removals. Over time, Shohei Sato argues, this process became officially racialized, as non-Europeans were banned from the process of sorting and removing records in Uganda and Kenya in the early 1960s.¹⁴

Besides establishing the geographic scope of removals, scholars have questioned how files were selected, and the different methods employed for their concealment. Mandy Banton has shown that documents could face removal if they met any of the following criteria:¹⁵

- a) might embarrass H.M.G. [Her Majesty's Government] or other Governments;
- b) might embarrass members of the police, military forces, public servants or others (such as police agents or informers);
- c) might compromise sources of intelligence;
- d) might be used unethically by Ministers in the successor Government.¹⁶

Banton has moreover considered those documents that did not survive the archival purge which independence occasioned. Upon Malaysian independence, at least five truck-loads of documents were taken for destruction at the British naval base in Singapore, and while the exact quantity of lost material is unknown, 'it is not difficult to imagine the volume that five army trucks might have held', she argues.¹⁷ Such possibilities suggest that in order to understand 'the official mind as it relates to decolonisation', one must be attuned to both 'the highest levels of strategic planning but also... how it worked at the lower levels in each colonial administration on the ground'.¹⁸

These underhanded actions imply a high level of secrecy, and indeed this was how the initial release in 2011 was received. Even then, though, voices were raised questioning how hidden these files were, and warning against fetishizing their concealed nature.¹⁹ Tim Livsey, drawing on the sociology of secrecy, dubs the migrated archives a 'classic open secret': the archives were available, if you had the right connections. From the 1990s onwards, historians and other researchers were able to access the migrated archives provided they had the support of former colonial officials, who vouched for them with the FCO. Thus, the open secret was also racialized to 'maintain colonial-era hierarchies amidst the political changes of late colonialism'.²⁰ Furthermore, former British possessions made numerous representations seeking the return of 'migrated' records, entreaties that met the stone wall of FCO intransigence. African and Asian archivists, working in forums such as UNESCO and regional professional organizations, publicized the realities of the migrated archive decades before such claims were taken seriously in the West.²¹

Scholars in Critical Archival Studies in their work on the migrated archive have theorized two distinct approaches of particular relevance to this paper: colonial fragility and radical empathy. Riley Linebaugh argues that 'cosmetic interest in protecting the UK's reputation as a "good" state... in turn propagated harm along racialised lines by dislocating evidence of the colonial past'.²² She describes this desire to conceal crimes of the past so as to ensure good standing in the present as being motivated by 'colonial fragility', and the possessive nature of colonialism. Linebaugh and James Lowry in their co-written article on archives and the 'colour line' argue that 'the UK Foreign and Commonwealth Office's unsubstantiated insistence that the Migrated Archives are the property of Her Majesty's Government resembles the method of ownership through coercive assertion that characterized' the broader colonial project.²³

This focus on possessiveness reflects work by Aileen Moreton-Robertson, a Goenpul scholar who argues that 'possessive logics... underpinned by an excessive desire to invest in reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control, and domination' are central to settler-colonialism, in Australia and worldwide.²⁴ Australia did not govern PNG by the logic of extermination, but employed a more extractive model associated with formal colonialism. However, as Lorenzo Vernacini argues, both modes of governance are predicated on theft and (dis)possession – of land or labour.²⁵ In this article I demonstrate that the desire both to save face and to possess colonial records no matter their legal standing

motivated the DET's actions, demonstrating the continuity of Australian colonial practices at home and in its territories. Archival practices have been deeply implicated in colonial processes, as Jamila Ghaddar points out:

When archivists treat [colonial] records as reliable and authentic documents with a singular judicial and cultural context – the colonial one – they facilitate the institutionalization and legitimization of the *legal fictions* designed to subjugate Indigenous nations to western legal orders.²⁶

Decolonial archival practice, therefore, needs to be framed by a commitment to 'radical empathy', which for Michelle Caswell and Marika Cifor positions archivists 'as caregivers, bound to records creators, subjects, users, and communities through a web of mutual affective responsibility'.²⁷ Lowry applies this to the displaced archive, arguing for a decentring of the 'rights of the record creators' – the colonial powers – towards that of their subjects.²⁸ I utilize 'radical empathy' here to consider the motivations and actions of Australian archivists like Nancy Lutton, who made a choice to side with record subjects rather than their supposed owners. This case demonstrates both the possibilities and limitations of such an approach for understanding individuals in a particular historical context where ethics and professionalism were not always seen as synonymous.

WHETHER THE LAW IS ON OUR SIDE OR NOT: FRAGILITY, OWNERSHIP AND THE MAKING OF A CONTROVERSY

Australia came to possess present-day Papua New Guinea via its own Monroe Doctrine – which aimed 'to keep this territory and others adjacent to the mainland out of the grasp of competing powers'.²⁹ Queensland attempted to annexe what would become the Territory of Papua in 1883, before Britain declared it a crown colony in 1886, and transferred sovereignty to the newly-federated Australia in 1902. The northern portion of modern PNG, the territory of New Guinea, became a German protectorate in 1884 and was administered by Australia as a Mandate territory under League of Nations auspices from 1921.³⁰ After the Second World War, New Guinea became a United Nations Trust Territory, which committed Australia to promote 'the political, economic, social, and educational advancement of the inhabitants. . . and [their] progressive development towards self-government'.³¹ Both territories were joined in 'administrative union' in 1949, becoming the Territory of Papua and New Guinea.³² International oversight notwithstanding, Australia ruled PNG as an external colony. Its inhabitants were excluded from anything but tokenistic political representation until the 1960s, and the country's few profitable industries – mostly cash crops – were largely in white hands.³³ This was an expensive colony – a World Bank survey in 1960 found that the country imported thirty-three percent more goods than it exported, mostly paid for with Australian aid – but its value had been demonstrated during the Second World War as providing vital protection of the mainland from northern invasion.³⁴

Like all colonies, PNG produced a substantial – if sporadically maintained – paper trail. Between the violence of Japanese invasion and natural disasters, most pre-1945

records were destroyed – including much material from the pre-1914 German administration.³⁵ After the Second World War Australia began to take more seriously its responsibility to develop the territories, and the problem of records management became apparent. A 1955 survey conducted by the CAO proposed the establishment of a local archive, and the appointment of an Australian archivist to run it.³⁶ In 1962 records of the PNG Administration held in Canberra were transferred to this new repository, and the Territory's Chief Archivist became independent from the CAO.³⁷ This bifurcated the colony's records: those associated with the local Administration – including Native Affairs, Treasury, and the various Legislatures – were housed in the new archive in Port Moresby, while local branches of Commonwealth departments remained under CAO jurisdiction. These later papers, without a stand-alone storage facility in the Territory, were largely housed in Australia.

As the 1960s progressed, and international pressure on Australia to move PNG towards independence mounted, self-determination for the territory went from a distant prospect to one with an imminent timeline. UN pressure saw the Territory's first election on the basis of universal franchise in 1964. In the next, in 1968, thirteen members of the nationalist Pangu Party, which advocated immediate home rule, were elected, including future Prime Minister Michael Somare.³⁸ In 1970 Australia began devolving responsibility for 'departments and instrumentalities performing functions of internal self-government . . . outside the aegis of the Administration' to local elected ministers.³⁹ This quickening pace of self-governance posed the question of archives in a new way. On 8 March 1971, George Cavendish of the CAO's Brisbane office wrote in a letter to the Head Regional Engineer of the Commonwealth Department of Works in Rabaul that 'in view of political developments...it is vital that the safety of Commonwealth records be assured'.⁴⁰ Which of the territory's records were in fact Commonwealth possessions was, however, an open question. Kevin Green, the Territory's recently appointed Chief Archivist, noted in a memo from September 1971 that it was 'disappointing' to see that the CAO 'apparently considers records of the Administration to be "public records of the Commonwealth" . . . particularly at the present stage of constitutional development'. Green protested that responsibility for archives had been vested in the PNG Assistant Ministerial Member for the Department of Social Development and Home Affairs in August 1970, and now sat outside Commonwealth jurisdiction.⁴¹

Green's missive, sent under signature of the Territory's Administrator, L.W. Johnson, sparked panic in the DET, which was exacerbated by the visit of a senior FCO official to Canberra in October. David A. Scott had an impeccable record of imperial service in South Africa, Malaya, Rhodesia, Uganda and Rwanda, and in 1970 was made an Assistant Under Secretary of State. Having 'completed a tour of Fiji and British territories in the south Pacific', Scott wished to 'exchange information on progress and policies towards dependent Pacific territories', in keeping with the close collaboration between the United Kingdom and Australia.⁴² After a meeting on 14 October, long-time DET official E. J. Wood summarized Scott's advice regarding the question of archives:

It has been the practice of Great Britain over a period of the few years before self-government and independence to build up a registry of sensitive files which at self government are located in the Governor's office. . . These files would of course be retained by Great Britain. Mr Scott commented that [Ghanaian leader Kwame] Nkrumah would have dearly loved to have been able to see on the files that Special Branch had reported regarding him.⁴³

The casual and jocular way in which Scott conveyed this information to representatives of another white nation demonstrates the status of the removals as a 'racialized secret'.⁴⁴ It is also clear that Scott's words had an impact in Australia, even down to the use of the term 'sensitive' to describe these files in internal documents.

DET officials began to seek appropriate legal precedents for archival ownership. DET first drew on advice from the Attorney General's Department in 1951 regarding whether archives of German New Guinea now belonged to Australia. Opinion at this time, informed by a reading of James Brierly's *Law of Nations* (1928) and L.F.L. Oppenheim's *International Law* (1912), was in the affirmative: 'The full use and disposition of government files and records is indispensable to the business of government and. . . such files and records should be regarded as transferring to the new administration'.⁴⁵ D.C.S. Berryman, an officer in DET's Justice division, thought the principle of the 1951 advice applied in this case as well. The devolution of authority over archives to Papua New Guinean control – a move apparently made without sufficient thought as to its consequences – meant that 'it could be argued that the Commonwealth has sufficiently divested itself of its power over archives. . . to be unable to claim any rights of access or disposal now'. But in any case, 'Whatever the legal position, to enforce any such power in relation to the sensitive files may be politically unwise'.⁴⁶ In light of the changed situation, Berryman thought it best that DET seek fresh legal advice.

Departmental opinion was, however, split. One line of thinking was that to request new advice would be a mistake, as 'we must regain the sensitive files whether the law is on our side or not'.⁴⁷ Rather than seek a legal solution, or worse yet approval from the relevant PNG minister for access to the files, owing to 'political difficulties' that may emerge if they were 'not agreeable', it was preferable that 'a directive from the Administrator be given to Mr Fenbury to let the Commonwealth have such archives as it wants'.⁴⁸ This proposal, that the Australian Administrator direct the Australian Secretary of the Department of Social Development and Home Affairs, David Fenbury, so as to avoid the non-white decision maker to whom the later was directly responsible, highlights the constitutive role that 'colonial fragility' could have on policymaking.⁴⁹

This option was however overruled by Wood and other DET officers, who approached the Attorney General's department for new advice, which wasn't received until March 1972. The draft advice explained that the Administrator 'could not with any propriety' make a decision regarding the archives without consulting the relevant PNG minister. The only other option was for Australia to

legislate so as to allow for Commonwealth intervention, something that might not be ‘politically feasible’.⁵⁰ Attached to this advice, however, was a handwritten note by the author in which it was suggested that its contents be ignored. By this stage, the CAO had already begun removing documents in accordance with its own agenda of ensuring ‘the safety of Commonwealth records’.⁵¹ After discussion with Wood and others in DET the Attorney General’s representative felt it would be better for ‘Territories to proceed along the lines they had been following’, rather than ‘to base their actions on legal premises, which were shaky’. As such, DET ‘would be better placed without formal legal advice’.⁵²

Barnes’s February 1972 press release, which skirted this contested issue of archival ownership, gave substantial leeway to CAO staff on the ground to decide what records fit the definition of ‘essentially Australian’.⁵³ The breadth of this operation, and the degree of local initiative, is revealed in guidelines drawn up on the definition of a ‘sensitive’ file. The two-page document, dated 11 January 1972, noted that ‘it is difficult to set down absolute measures of “sensitivity” [and] to some extent criteria and methodology will crystallize as the exercise progresses’; however as a ‘general guide’ a list was provided of papers that could have a ‘possible adverse impact on Australian interests’, including:

- a) The internal and external security of Australia;
- b) Australian relations with Papua New Guinea indigenes at
 - i. Government to government level
 - ii. Individual level;
- c) Australian relations with groups and individuals of other races in Papua New Guinea;
- d) Corporate bodies in Papua New Guinea;
- e) Planning for . . . internal security;
- f) Reports on individuals including persons considered for statutory appointments;
- g) Application of Commonwealth Immigration Act and Commonwealth Nationalist and Citizenship Act to individuals in Papua New Guinea.⁵⁴

This sweeping definition of sensitivity empowered CAO staff to take a liberal reading of their remit. During the first few weeks of the operation, one DET memo noted that ‘the practice has been to call the whole file sensitive as soon as one definitively sensitive paper is found in it’, which saw a sizable quantity of files marked for removal, and stored in a safe at the Commonwealth Department of Works offices.⁵⁵ Of sixty feet of files marked ‘classified’ in the Administration archive, six feet had already been set aside for return to Australia.⁵⁶

By the time controversy broke regarding the ‘sensitive files’, much covert work had been undertaken. The removal was designed to circumvent non-white decision makers, who ironically had been installed by Australia not long before to demonstrate adherence to international norms of self-determination. This highlights the contradictory manner in which law functioned under colonialism: it was constitutive of order and good governance, but could also be ignored in

highly racialized scenarios.⁵⁷ Equally, this controversy emerged out of the possessiveness of Australian colonialism. At the core of settler-colonial studies is the idea that dispossession is not an event, but an ongoing phenomenon, which is apparent in Australia's external colonies.⁵⁸ The Australian attempt to remove these archives was but one of many acts that worked toward 'reproducing and reaffirming the nation-state's ownership, control, and domination'.⁵⁹ But this process did not go unchallenged: decolonization produced unlikely alliances and affinities.

PRINCIPLES AND PROFESSIONALISM: ARCHIVISTS, THE 'SENSITIVE FILES' AND RADICAL EMPATHY

Nancy Lutton was an unlikely activist. Born in 1931 in Sydney, Lutton became a librarian at age 18, a calling to which she committed her life. After working in Australia, Canada and the UK, Lutton accepted a position as assistant librarian at UPNG in 1966, becoming a foundation staff member at this new institution. Thousands of Australians followed a similar itinerary, serving in a plethora of roles across the territory at a time when the number of university-qualified locals was miniscule.⁶⁰ Their experiences were diverse. Administrators and officials in Port Moresby lived in segregated communities, only engaging with 'natives' who served as their *haus bois* (house boys), while *kiaps* or patrol officers brought law and 'civilization' to the territories' many far flung villages.⁶¹ Australian colonialism was sustained by an ideology of humanitarian governance. It was hoped that a new world power like Australia could improve on the colonial practices of the old and avoid the sort of violence that had been inflicted on Indigenous Australians.⁶² These ideas, reflected across the world, continued to be formative as more radically-minded Australians made the move to a PNG that was quickly developing towards independence.

In her letter of application for the position at UPNG, Lutton expressed sentiments characteristic of the well-meaning colonizer: 'I have been keenly interested in the territory and its special problems for some time, and have been reading everything I can lay my hands on.'⁶³ This fascination with local culture, history and politics saw Lutton complement her librarian work with part-time studies at the new institution. As well as an elected parliament, a 1962 Trusteeship Council visiting mission led by Sir Hugh Foot had suggested the founding of a national university in the territory, which opened in 1966. While foundation history lecturer Bill Gammage recalls that one Australian accused him of running a 'Mau Mau factory', UPNG proved to be a vibrant centre of political ideas.⁶⁴ Later in life, Lutton fondly recalled having been taught by Australian luminaries like Charles Rowley, Hank Nelson and Ken Inglis. Many appointees at UPNG, including Donald Denoon, had backgrounds in contemporary African politics, and students engaged in close analysis of decolonization abroad.⁶⁵

Such study equipped Lutton with a commitment to what was called 'localization' – the training of Papuans for roles then largely reserved for Australians. Lutton's resignation letter from UPNG in March 1971 expressed regret that 'the library is no place for one who has come to this country to serve

the people of Papua and New Guinea', noting that 'the work I am actually engaged in, should be being taught to local people'.⁶⁶ As the 1960s progressed, demands for greater PNG responsibility in the state bureaucracy grew at a rate that far outstripped the number of qualified graduates being produced. The Pangu Pati's 1971 election manifesto called for rapid localization, which by necessity would involve the elevation of inexperienced PNG candidates over better qualified Australians.⁶⁷ Lutton's commitment likely reflected her experience as a student at this new institution, where she brushed shoulders with a new generation of increasingly radical PNG nationalists and was exposed to radical ideas through her studies.

Upon leaving UPNG, Lutton became Chief Librarian at the House of Assembly, which unlike the University hired many locals. Lutton worked with one other expatriate, who was a registered librarian, and 'five indigenous girls' who she was assisting through their training. Such an endeavour was 'one of the most important aspects of expatriate service in this country', for failing to sufficiently educate locals 'will only leave a state of affairs where our work will come to naught, hardly a memorial to be proud of'.⁶⁸ Lutton here appealed to a sense of 'Australian patriotism' which she saw reflected in the outlook of many expatriates in the territory – a desire for the record of colonial administration to reflect well on the colonizer.⁶⁹ Furthermore, her new position meant continuing to work closely with Pangu leaders Somare, Cecil Abel and Ebia Olewale, as they were among the few representatives who made use of the Library's collection and research services. Julius Chan's People's Progress Party, which governed in coalition with Pangu after the April elections, 'used to actually meet in the library' owing to a lack of suitable spaces in the capital, 'they'd sit around a little table . . . and plan their policies'.⁷⁰

Because of her senior role in the House of Assembly Lutton was encouraged in late 1971 to become Secretary of the PNG LAA, the local branch of the Australian librarians' association, founded in 1967. She was 'increasingly dissatisfied' by the organization, which spent 'all our time talking about Australian things, not about Papua New Guinea things'.⁷¹ The solution, she believed, lay in creating an independent local body, which it was hoped might be easier to accomplish 'from within the LAA rather than in opposition from without'.⁷² Such ambitions were interrupted by the outbreak of the sensitive files case, news of which first appeared in the *Papua New-Guinea Post Courier* on 2 February, in a short article summarizing Barnes's press release.⁷³ That same day, a longer piece appeared in the *Inside New Guinea* newsletter, edited by former Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC) journalist John Ryan. Clearly drawing on a highly-placed source, Ryan's piece was titled 'Removing "Sensitive" Files', and informed readers that the removals were to be completed prior to the swearing in of a new parliament on 20 April.⁷⁴ Lutton credits Kevin Green, the Administration's Chief Archivist, with 'urging the Library Association to mak[e] an issue of it'.⁷⁵ Green was one of the few Administration staff privy to DET's secretive criteria for removal, but due to his senior role had to avoid

direct involvement. At a meeting of the PNGLAA on 10 February a plan was developed to publicize the removals, up to and including petitioning the UN.

First, the local branch requested that the national leadership of the LAA protest directly to the new Minister for External Territories, Andrew Peacock, which it did promptly. President Elizabeth Sillano's letter to the editor of the *Sydney Morning Herald* on behalf of the branch was published on 17 February 1972. It was also quoted in an editorial of Port Moresby's *Post-Courier*, the colony's key newspaper, on 21 February, which protested that 'the operation may well remove records essential to the well-being of a future independent [PNG]'. Sillano also appeared on ABC current affairs programme *Contact*.⁷⁶ A week later, discontent spread to the University. An 'extraordinary meeting of the Students Representative Council, attended by representatives from all faculties', passed a motion that 'deplored the move...to take away Administration records', noting not only that 'the Australian government had no right to do so', but also that the removals 'can only mean that Canberra is trying to cover up past mistakes'.⁷⁷ The Pangu Party's petition to the Trusteeship Council, initially delivered to a visiting UN mission overseeing the impending elections before being sent directly to New York, located the removals in a long line of racialized dismissal of indigenous Papua New Guineans.

While the protestors presented a united public front, within the LAA itself tensions quickly emerged. A dedicated core of PNG-based librarians – local and Australian – 'burnt the midnight oil' to keep the issue in public discussion, seeing it in clearly ethical terms that were not shared at the national level. Sillano wrote a letter to the LAA's national secretary in mid-March protesting that the PNG branch's 'outspoken criticism' of Australian actions had not been reflected in the Association's communication to Peacock. Instead, it 'avoided comment on the real issue at stake'.⁷⁸ The LAA's protest letter, sent on 18 February to the Minister for External Territories (Peacock), dwelt on 'the professional rather than the political aspects of this matter', requesting that 'the qualifications of the persons who are culling the records' be made public, as well as seeking further clarity on what files were actually being removed.⁷⁹ What was for some a Papua New Guinean matter was recast as part of a broader dispute around Australian professional standards. Since the movement of the CAO from jurisdiction of the National Library to the Department of Prime Minister and Cabinet in 1962, the LAA had protested that the office lacked 'a professional structure for archivists', nor 'even recognised the need for its base grade professionals to be graduates'. Robert Sharman, the association's president, noted in a letter to chief librarian at PNG's Administration College, John Yocklunn, that those conducting the removals were 'clerks' who lacked 'professional judgement'. 'I can say quite confidently', Sharman wrote, 'that if they had...proper archival qualifications they would have thought about the matter...in a much more sophisticated way'.⁸⁰

Sillano did not mince words, protesting that 'the qualifications of those assigned to remove the documents are irrelevant': the 'ethics of this decision' were the crucial point, as 'the removal of any documents from the country would have the same effect...as their complete destruction'.⁸¹ To Sillano and her fellow

librarians, Australia had a ‘moral obligation. . .to leave behind a complete record of its administration’, as ‘[a]ll government documents. . . whether in Commonwealth or Administration Departments must be related to Papua New Guinea and are therefore more a part of the heritage of this country than of Australia’. Furthermore, the suggested microfilming of records was ‘not an appropriate substitute for the original files’, owing to issues of completeness and accessibility.⁸²

Having played such a central role in forging colonial regimes, ‘decolonization held a new mirror up to the professional class’, forcing a rethink on virtues they had spent a century cultivating.⁸³ Archival professionals faced similar challenges. The PNG branch’s approach at least in part reflects a politics of ‘radical empathy.’ Rejecting a ‘rights-based’ approach to records management, which gifts ownership to those who produced the archive, Sillano and Lutton ‘attempt[ed] to understand the possible desires of the records’ subjects’, while considering ‘potential users who are. . .excluded from using the records by. . .custodial arrangements’.⁸⁴ Furthermore, Lutton saw the campaign to stop archival removals as a pivotal one for the profession in PNG. The controversy forced Australians to ask ‘where our loyalties lay’, and branch meetings became ‘much more lively and. . .better attended’.⁸⁵ A local journal was founded, *TokTok Bilong Haus Buk* (Library Journal), edited by Lutton until 1982, and in September 1972 a decision was made to reconstitute the PNGLAA as the Papua New Guinea Library Association, independent of Australian control. Lutton’s position as secretary was ‘localized’, as she had long wanted. In a clear rejection of the LAA’s obsession with professional standing, the rules of the new organization were amended to allow ‘anyone who worked in a library’ to seek membership.⁸⁶

Lutton’s engagement with PNG continued, however. She curated the New Guinea collection at the UPNG library from 1973 to 1980, and in 1988 was invited back as Chief Archivist at the PNG National Archives. Her regular attendance at conferences of the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA) throughout the 1980s, where ‘on every occasion complaints [were heard] from Pacific archivists that their records have been removed to the metropolitan countries’, demonstrated how important the stand taken in 1972 had been.⁸⁷

WE WERE GOING TOO FAR: ARCHIVES AND DECOLONIZATION IN PNG

Andrew Peacock flew into Port Moresby on the morning of 3 March 1972 to ‘quell his first storm’ as Minister for External Territories, a position he had been sworn into only a month earlier.⁸⁸ Early 1972 was a busy time in PNG. The April 1972 elections saw 107 seats contested in what would become the nation’s first independent parliament. Albert Māori Kiki, the Pangu Party’s secretary, protested in a letter accompanying their petition to the Trusteeship Council that the removals were ‘deliberately timed to coincide with the elections when there is no parliament operating in which the matter can be fully debated’. Claiming to speak as ‘representatives of the interests of the people of this country’, Kiki used

the incident to argue that the administrative division between the territory's south and north was redundant, as 'the interest of Papuans in this issue is obviously identical to that of New Guineans'. That this move was being undertaken 'behind the backs' of PNG leaders seemed to contravene Australia's supposed role in shaping the territory into a new nation.⁸⁹

Much scholarship has discussed the Trusteeship system, the ways in which it created hierarchies of statehood and legitimized certain types of nationalist claim-making.⁹⁰ This was a form of 'suspended sovereignty', which reflected the long usage of paternalistic, biological metaphors to define the emergence of nation-states into fully-fledged subjects of international law. Furthermore, it imposed various gradations of potential self-determination for subject peoples deemed insufficiently developed for true independence.⁹¹ Barnes, Minister for External Territories from 1968–72, doubted the capacity of PNG to exercise full sovereignty, and entertained ideas of the territories becoming a new Australian state, and of various forms of indirect rule via political and economic federation.⁹² The *Canberra Times* noted that Peacock's thinking represented a dramatic departure, insisting that Australia could not 'sit back and wait for self-government to happen', but rather needed to 'encourage' a desire for independence as a self-governing nation state. While such ideas had been put on the table by increasingly vocal interventions from Labor opposition leader Gough Whitlam (Prime Minister 1972–5), they nonetheless represented 'a new trend in Australian government thinking' and 'broke new ground'.⁹³ Peacock's rhetoric was soon to be put to the test.

On the 28 February, Peacock issued a statement expressing his 'concern. . . that documents which would ultimately form part of the heritage of Papua New Guinea were not removed in the examination of records now taking place', adding that he was dispatching a 'Senior Officer' to the territory who would 'examine the procedure on-the-spot'.⁹⁴ A quick change in approach was noted in DET internal correspondence. While CAO officials had previously removed entire files if one problematic folio was identified, their guidelines for removal were amended to ensure that 'extreme care' be taken in removals, which were to be kept to an 'absolute minimum: ie. When in doubt the paper should not be removed'.⁹⁵ Files that had been marked for removal were reassessed in accordance with these new guidelines, and the vast majority 'handed back to the administrators department'.⁹⁶ The Pangu Party's Trusteeship Council petition had left open the possibility that 'certain highly classified documents in the custody of the Department of the Administrator contain[ing] details of recent Cabinet decisions which have not been made public' could be removed with the consent of local decision makers.⁹⁷ On 5 March, Peacock met with Pangu Party representative Tony Voutas to secure just such agreement. That Voutas was 'satisfied with the assurances given on behalf of the Administering Authority' was communicated by Australia to the Trusteeship Council in May.⁹⁸

Later that day, Peacock held a press conference where the archives featured prominently. Under fairly intense questioning, the Minister admitted that the senior DET official had been dispatched after 'representations. . . had been made

to me' by concerned parties in PNG and Australia 'to see whether in fact we were going too far'. He added that 'I believe in certain instances we may have been'.⁹⁹ This back-down was widely reported in Australian newspapers the next day as a diplomatic win for the new Minister. Yet by demonstrating its capacity to speak for 'the people' of PNG, the case had also cemented Pangu's nationalist reputation, and by inference, the decline of Australia's authority. In fact, the controversy revealed substantial existing gaps in administration records, put down to wartime damage, which sparked a copying project to complete PNG's own records prior to decolonization.¹⁰⁰ Peacock's hosing down of the situation was welcomed by senior Australians in the territory. Historian and UPNG Vice Chancellor Ken Inglis wrote to the minister expressing his thanks 'for the actions you have taken over the PNG records', which 'has caused much immediate relief and satisfaction...from academics and officials in Moresby'.¹⁰¹ Kevin Green believed that the 'agitation' around this issue, that he played no small role in fomenting, had 'been successful in preventing (or at least lessening considerably) the removal of records'.¹⁰²

CONCLUSION

To this day, governments across Africa, Asia and the Pacific actively seek the return of records 'migrated' by Britain at the time of decolonization. While the 2011 revelations saw much of this material opened to the public, their return to the now independent nation states from which they came seems only a remote possibility.¹⁰³ This poses the question: why did the case here examined play out so differently to the plethora of British removals, ensuring that unlike other Pacific nations, Papua New Guinea maintained its archival heritage? The answer, I proffer in this article, lies at the intersection of multiple agendas and agencies. The Department of External Territories, driven to possess its records, subsequently mishandled their removal to such an extent that they become a public 'hot potato'. For Papua New Guinea-based librarians, local and expatriate, the case proved a need for independence: of their own organization from what was perceived as self-serving Australian leadership, and of the archives themselves from Australian control. For the Pangu leadership, the case both demonstrated the inseparability of the two territories and solidified their own nationalist credentials. Lastly, the agency of a new minister was pivotal. An ambitious politician, the case served to demonstrate Peacock's capacity as a diplomat, and to distance him from an ineffectual predecessor. This confluence of factors, occurring as it did at a critical juncture in PNG's path to independence, ended up making the blowback from any large-scale removal of 'sensitive' files a larger liability for Australia than diplomatic damage that might have resulted from their possession by a perhaps hostile post-independence government.

As well as re-threading this overlooked episode back into the history of PNG's decolonization, the 'sensitive files' case also hints towards a need to re-read Australia's own end of empire. A.G. Hopkins posited in 2008 that the history of the settler colonies should be read through the prism of decolonization, given the dramatic cultural, economic and political disruptions that Britain's decline and

turn to Europe caused for her former dominions.¹⁰⁴ Treatments of Australia and decolonization tend to address this question only in its cultural dimensions, and rarely consider the end of Australia's own empire within this process.¹⁰⁵ In a way, my argument here has demonstrated the longevity of empire's apron strings: Australia followed the British model of the migrated archives closely, replicating much of its secrecy, racism, and possessiveness. Yet that this case placed expatriates who saw their role in PNG as 'an extension of Australian patriotism' – then an idea only in its infancy – in conflict with those who saw it as an issue of what we might now call 'post-colonial justice', should make us question the desirability of conceptualizing Australia's decolonization in the singular.¹⁰⁶ Instead, the nation faced many interlinked decolonial moments, each of which forced Australians from all walks of life into often uncomfortable encounters with their place in a post-colonial world.

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