

East Timor: Thoughts on document collections in Australia.
by John Waddingham, Perth, Western Australia. 6 September 2000

What follows are some proposals on the preservation of a wide range of documentary material on East Timor - produced and gathered by individuals and organisations in Australia for 25 years from 1974 to the dramatic independence vote in 1999.

These thoughts have their origins in my own work with Timor Information Service (1975-84) but have solidified with my recent experience of sorting the collection of Gordon McIntosh and preparing his materials for lodgement in a public-access repository.

The primary assumption underlying these thoughts is that the documentary record of Australian work *for and against* East Timorese aspirations should be preserved for future historical reference.

Gordon McIntosh

Gordon McIntosh was a Labor Senator for Western Australia from 1974 to 1987. His visit to East Timor in March 1975 as part of a Federal ALP Caucus Committee delegation marked the beginning of a rest-of-life interest in the future of the East Timorese.

Representing Australian NGO's and activist organisations, his address to the UN Decolonisation Committee in 1982 was a significant counter to ex-PM Gough Whitlam's campaign to get East Timor off the United Nations agenda.

He was a member and later Chairman of the Senate Standing Committee on Foreign Affairs and Defence which conducted the 1982-83 inquiry on East Timor.

He was part of the politically-charged Australian Parliamentary Delegation visit to East Timor in 1983. His dissent from the majority report of the Delegation (a time of great personal stress, he says today) damaged a Hawke Government strategy to defuse the Timor issue in foreign policy and Labor Party arenas.

He was one of the few Labor politicians to regularly and openly question the direction of the Hawke government's approach on East Timor. Since his retirement he has maintained close links with the East Timorese community in Perth and an active relationship with other Australians working for East Timorese self-determination.

By any measure, the documentary record of Gordon McIntosh's work on Timor is a significant fragment of Labor Party, parliamentary and Australian work on Timor. As such, I believe it deserves to be preserved – and preserved as a distinct collection.

McIntosh Collection

Since his retirement from Parliament in 1987, the bulk of the McIntosh papers have been in my 'care' and have languished in two different back sheds. Despite occasional vermin attacks and damp, the papers are essentially intact - though some of the original file order has been lost. Gordon has recently incorporated other material he has accumulated personally since 1975.

Like many similar collections, it is a mixture of unique or rare material combined with a considerable bulk of widely published or distributed background material.

The unique material includes McIntosh's correspondence files, material relating to his 1975 and 1983 visits to Timor and the 1982-83 Senate Inquiry, as well as a consolidated collection of speeches, media releases, discussion papers etc.

Unique or rare material from Timor itself includes photographic slides, Super8 film and political pamphlets from Timor in March 1975 as well as the original document secretly passed to McIntosh by prisoners on Atauro in 1983.

While question marks remain over the future of a miscellaneous collection of media clippings and other received background material, most will be kept together as a distinct collection. Where background material can be clearly associated with particular McIntosh work, it will be retained in the collection *in that context*.

The dispersal of the collection would mean the loss of the most tangible documentary representation of the role of this significant player in the Timor story. That should not be lost.

CHART WORK

Working with the McIntosh papers has firmed up my own plans for Timor archive work in Western Australia. These plans will be implemented under a self-created entity known as *Clearing House for Archival Records on Timor (CHART)*. I am hopeful these plans might be taken up elsewhere.

Steps to be taken here in Western Australia include:

Identify material holders

These will range from well-known non-government church, union and community and activist organisations to lesser-known individuals outside public life. My limited attempts so far indicate the importance of a direct personal approach. Many people don't think their material is significant enough to warrant preservation.

Encourage Preservation

Material holders will be encouraged to

- Keep materials safe.
- Seek professional guidance on proper preservation of records
- Retain, where possible, the filing order of the material as it was used.
- Document their collection holdings.

Encourage Accessibility

While each holder must make their own judgements about this, they will be asked to:

- Consider publication of their list of holdings
- Consider lodging their records in an established repository and/or
- Make their records available for research

Define Collection Types

For those material holders interested in lodging their material for public listing and/or access, I envisage three types of collections. Material holders will decide for themselves which category they feel best defines their particular collection.

- **Major Unique Collections:**

In WA the McIntosh papers and the Friends of East Timor (FOET) papers are the two most obvious sets which I believe should be retained in their entirety as distinct collections. There may well be many others here.

- **Minor Unique Collections - Consolidated**

Organisations and individuals who have made some modest contribution to the Timor story should be encouraged to locate and preserve their original self-created material. My own miniscule efforts in ‘the wilds of Bunbury’ (1987-94) and a flurry of attempts at ‘letters to the editor’ of *The Australian* during 1999 are a small example of this category. I would happily lodge such material as an *identifiable* fragment of a bigger collection of similar fragments. (Suitable repositories would need to be found to house and manage the growth of such consolidated collections.)

- **Background Collections – Consolidated**

Each of us has our own miscellaneous collection of newsclips, periodicals or photocopied articles from them, books, pamphlets – even not-widely distributed material such as photocopies of letters from Timor or Indonesia. By themselves they don’t amount to much and they can’t *meaningfully* reside with our unique creations. In addition to this, some repositories may, for reasons of space, balk at including such material in collections they agree to house.

If these ‘bits and pieces’ were pooled with other people’s background material, however, they could add up to a very useful research collection. For example, despite the day-to-day limitations of newspaper coverage, a thorough newsclip collection on a specific issue is a timelessly invaluable research tool. This collection idea requires both a suitable repository and a centralised gathering and sorting program.

Identify Repositories

Special research collection libraries in two WA universities have indicated interest in Timor material. The State Library has a more restrictive approach to material of this sort. My desired conditions for deposit would include:

- Acceptable standards of physical and environmental security of the material.
- Public access to material but with procedures to protect the integrity of the collections.
- Agreed protocol for relocating the collection if repository can no longer hold it.
- Open-ness to transfer of some original material (or copies) to a future properly constituted and secure National Archive in Timor.

Encourage redundancy and decentralisation

Holding many unique collections in a single repository may increase the risk of accidental catastrophic loss or malicious ‘filleting’ of the records. I envisage WA collections will not be housed in a single place – but in as many different suitable and secure places as possible.

Similarly, some duplication of materials in different collections is not a problem – for the same reason of security. In the case of particularly significant unique material, I will be exploring strategies to have them professionally copied. (Microfilm?)

Develop Collection Guides

While I am convinced of the need to preserve, where appropriate, the original working file order of a major unique collection, I am aware that this can increase the difficulty of finding particular source material for research purposes.

One solution to this problem is the preparation of well-developed guides to the content of the collections. I envisage the development of a Web-based set of 'finding aids' to both identify the location of a given collection as well as indicate its detailed content. Such guides will be the essential 'glue' for a geographically dispersed collection.

A draft version of a guide to the McIntosh collection has been prepared and is being tested. I am keeping a close eye on developments within archivist circles on the use of XML and so-called *encoded archival description* to build searchable, internet-based collection guides.

East Timor National Archive

How do these plans relate to proposals to establish a national archive in Timor itself?

There will be a national archive in East Timor. There is a wealth of material in Australian hands which might appropriately be deposited there one day. It seems to me however that it will be some time before a secure, professional, nationally constituted entity will exist and it will take some time for subsequent collection policy development etc to occur.

My instincts are that the best thing Australian material holders can do in the interim is to both *preserve* and *document* their collections. Good documentation of collections will provide the essential tool to facilitate both the preservation of the Australian historical record *and* the identification of prospective materials for East Timor's archive.

For those wishing to offer original material to East Timor's archive, I strongly recommend that an archival quality copy of the material be retained in Australia within the original holder's collection. This will preserve the historical context of each particular document and add a level of security to its existence.

I envisage that the prospective development of the so-called 'background collections' defined above might also be of interest to future Timorese record keepers.

A national approach?

The ideas presented here are the product of work started in Western Australia. East Timor materials here, however, are just a tiny portion of the broader Australian collection which needs to be secured.

My hope is that at least some of the ideas here will strike a chord with interested individuals and organisations in other parts of Australia (and in other countries, for that matter). Through the vehicle of this CHART project, I am willing to offer whatever assistance I can to facilitate work elsewhere to preserve this important historical record.

I would very much welcome feedback on any aspect of this document. [END]

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