

The Fifth Column

First, a word on the title of this column, which replaces 'Don't get me started.' 'The Fifth Column' has been chosen for its twin allusions to newspaper columns and to subversive activities. With respect to the latter, here is part of the entry in the Encyclopaedia Britannica 1986:

'A fifth column is... a clandestine group... who attempts to undermine a nation's solidarity.

A cardinal technique of the fifth column is the infiltration of sympathisers into the entire fabric of the nation under attack and, particularly, into positions of policy decision and national defence. . . . fifth-column activists exploit the fears of a people by spreading rumours and misinformation . . .'

Many in the world of cultural institutions have regretted the absence of real critical appraisal. Barry Jones recently penned an article in the Age (26 April 2002) espousing the same opinion about the wider Australian community. This column does not have any pretensions in this direction.

Although the topic of this issue of Insite is Special Interest Groups (SIGs), I do not want you to gain the impression that I consider SIGs to be Fifth Columns. Quite the contrary! Special Interest Groups cater for the various sections of the museum profession and they are very open about their activities. SIGs and Museums Australia should be all about open communication – with your colleagues and with visitors and users.

However there is as yet no SIG for one very important group, namely Posterity. You should stop reading now if you agree with the Irish Parliamentarian, Sir Boyle Roche, who asked in 1780 "What has posterity done for us?" I believe he was oppos-

ing some welfare measures that would benefit generations yet unborn.

Cultural institutions communicate with Posterity through, for example, the databases that describe collections. For this reason, it is absolutely necessary that, as we complete our database entries, we keep future generations in mind, checking all the time the assumptions behind the sentences that we write.

To illustrate what I mean, imagine we are reading the record of, for example, a camera.

'This is an early form of box camera manufactured by the well-known Victorian firm of Needle Orifice in 1899. Unfortunately, the camera was stolen between 5 p.m. 26 April 2002 and 9 a.m. 29 April 2002. A jpeg of the camera can be found in the digital image archive reg #12345.'

Now assuming we answer 'We do' to the question 'Who cares?' we are faced with a degree of uncertainty in all this apparent precision. Here are a few questions we might ask. Was the camera valuable, significant or rare? Was it part of the Museum collection? Was it the only item stolen at that time? Was it stolen whilst on display, in storage or in transit somewhere? Can we trust the so precise times and dates? Why was the firm well known? Was the camera an early form of box camera or an

early example of the firm's products? Who wrote this record and when? What's a jpeg? What will people in 2052 make of this record? Will a hard copy of the picture be available given how quickly computers become obsolete?

And talking about obsolescence, the challenges involved in communicating with Posterity are exacerbated by our use of digital technology. As machines and software are constantly updated, previous systems become obsolete. The people who knew how to use them disappear and the machines become rare or cease to work through lack of use or decay. Records, data and information become inaccessible in only a few years, let alone 50.

So let's form The Posterity SIG. Its motto could be: 'The Future is that time when our current assumptions can no longer be assumed to be obvious. In fact, the Future is now!' What do you think? Email me on ddemant@museum.vic.gov.au.

– David Demant

David Demant is presenting a seminar entitled 'What has posterity done for us? Making collection databases accessible to users in the future' at the Infozone, Melbourne Museum, July 10th at 1pm. Bookings essential on (03) 8341 7251

