

Technological innovation to illuminate the shadows of our past

“One of the main scholarly tasks of the last half century has been to retrieve women’s history from its ‘unspokeness’, from the shrouds of silence and obscurity.”

With these words Quentin Bryce, Australia’s first female Governor General, re-launched the *Australian Women’s Register*, <http://www.womenaustralia.info/>, on the 13 October 2009 as part of the 50 year celebrations for the Baillieu Library at the University of Melbourne. While the Australian Women’s Archives Project (AWAP), a collaborative initiative of the National Foundation for Australian Women and the University of Melbourne, has been developing the *Register* as a central part of its strategy to encourage the preservation of women’s archival heritage and to make it more accessible to the community since early 2000, the re-launch marked a significant milestone in its development and provided recognition of its role as national information infrastructure.



Their Excellencies, the Governor-General and Mr Bryce, greeting guests at the re-launch of the Australian Women’s Register.
Photo provided courtesy of The Age newspaper

The *Australian Women’s Register* is a specialist central access point to information about Australian women and their achievements and the multifarious resources in which varying aspects of their lives are documented. It provides a gateway to archival and published material relating to women held in Australian cultural institutions as well as in private hands. A series of small and large grants have contributed to the development of the content of the *Register* and the

technology in which it is captured, managed, and made available to as wide an audience as possible via the web.

The latest of these grants, an Australian Research Council Linkage Infrastructure Equipment and Facilities Grant (ARC LIEF) awarded in 2008, has allowed the *Australian Women’s Register* to play a part in emerging technological innovation in the provision of resource discovery services. With the National Library of Australia as a key industry partner, the grant allowed for the establishment of a mechanism for harvesting Encoded Archival Context (EAC) records, using the Open Archives Initiative Protocol for Metadata Harvesting (OAI-PMH), so that rich biographical and contextual information from the *Register* is incorporated into the NLA’s exciting new Trove discovery service.

This builds on two strengths of the *Australian Women’s Register*, namely the granularity of its description and its coverage. Resources, particularly archival material, relating to women tend to be very fragmented and dispersed and are often found buried deep within collections. Library catalogue entries and institutional finding aids generally do not extend to this level of description for a variety of reasons, not least of which is the resourcing implications. The *Register* provides this fine-grained description of archival and other resources linked to biographical information about the women, women’s organisations, and events to which they bear witness. It also extends coverage to resources held outside of traditional archives and collecting institutions,

identifying and documenting material held in community and personal archives that are otherwise very difficult to come by. Harvesting this information into Trove significantly augments traditional catalogue records, not only enhancing the experience of users searching for resources in the distributed national collection, but also in support of collection development and reference activities for information professionals in a variety of institutions.

Establishing harvesting capabilities is a first step in exploring their implications for all those associated with the creation, maintenance, and use of source material for historical research in all its contexts. The ability to exchange content between Trove and the *Australian Women’s Register* means that the focus can be on adding value to existing biographical and resource descriptions rather than manually re-creating them.

It is illustrative of how digital and networking technologies change the roles and relationships of scholars, information professionals, universities, and the wider community in order to build greater capabilities, connectedness, robustness, and resilience into historical/archival/humanities information systems. Above all it asserts the value of scholarly principles, re-imagined, and re-distributed for the digital and networked age, and places women’s history firmly in the mainstream rather than being consigned to the margins.

The Governor General’s speech from the re-launch is available at <http://www.gg.gov.au/governorgeneral/speech.php?id=625>.

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