

Memory of the World: the Treasures that Record our History from 1700 BC to the Present Day

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For those whose knowledge of historical archives is almost exclusively confined to the developed English-speaking world the contents of this book will come as a revelation. The Memory of the World programme was inaugurated by Unesco in 1992:

to guard against collective amnesia calling upon the preservation of the valuable archive holdings and library collections all over the world ensuring their wide dissemination. The Programme vision is that the world's documentary heritage belongs to all, should be fully preserved and protected for all and, with due recognition of cultural mores and practicalities, should be permanently accessible to all without hindrance.

The programme's most visible aspect has been the creation of a World Register of documents and collections of international significance based on submissions from individual countries. This publication lists and describes the first 245 inscribed from 1997 to 2011, beginning with the Hittite cuneiform tablets from Bogazkoy in Turkey from the second millennium BC and ending with the Baltic Way, photographs of the human chain that took place on 23 August 1989 connecting Estonia, Latvia and Lithuania to highlight the 1939 non-aggression pact between Hitler and Stalin. No narrow definition of archives, manuscripts or documents here, and the range between is extraordinary and unbelievably rich, with over 100 countries and international organisations contributing.

Each document or collection, or in some cases whole library or archives, is described and handsomely illustrated, with notes on its provenance and world significance. The standard for inclusion is high, the top tier only, with subsidiary regional and national registers (including New Zealand) for inscriptions of more limited interest, though one suspects that the boundaries between are often difficult to define.

An unsurprising emphasis on Europe shows the leading contributors to be Germany and Austria, 13 each, followed by Russia with 11 and Poland with 10. The representation, however, is surprisingly uneven. Spain has but two, whilst Portugal has five. Denmark contributes eight, with only

three from Italy and none at all from Greece. Across Asia, Africa, Latin America and Oceania, representation may be thinner but is widespread. Almost every country in Latin America is here, and from Africa there are single contributions from Ethiopia, Namibia, Angola, Benin, Senegal, Ghana, Tanzania, Madagascar, Mauritius, Morocco, Tunisia, Zanzibar, and Egypt (3), with South Africa adding four. Most Asian entries come from Korea (9), China (7), India (6), and Iran (5), but just one from Japan. Considering our small populations Oceania shows up well—Australia (5), New Zealand (2) and Fiji (1). The big surprise is the United States with just six entries (the same as Trinidad and Tobago), none from either its National Archives or the Library of Congress, reflecting perhaps that country's lack of enthusiasm for Unesco.

However, not to worry too much about that. Within the overall ambit several themes emerge. Amongst the earliest are holy scriptures and other sacred writings: the Rigveda, a collection of Sanskrit hymns and prayers (India 17th to 11th centuries BC), the Mashtots Matenadaran collection in Armenia, Codex Argenteus ('Silver Bible') held at Uppsala University, Codex Purpureus Beratinus gospels, 6th and 9th centuries, in Albania, the Holy Koran Mushaf of Othman, the oldest known surviving copy, 7th century, in Tashkent, and of course the Book of Kells, 9th century at Trinity College, Dublin, amongst others.

Foundational documents also feature strongly, including Magna Carta 1215, The Treaty of Tordesillas 1494 dividing South America between Spain and Portugal, Original Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen 1789 and 1791, our own Treaty of Waitangi 1840 and Women's Suffrage Petition 1893, and most recently the Mabo case manuscripts, 1959–92. Conspicuously not here, however, are England's Bill of Rights 1689 or the United States Declaration of Independence and Constitution, even though by any standard they stand at least equally with those included.

Closely allied are collections documenting oppression, human rights, struggle and liberation, which can also be viewed as foundational. Amongst these are the Registry of Slaves in the British Caribbean, Network of Information and Counter Information on the Military Regime in Brazil (1964–1985), Human Rights Archive of Chile, documentary heritage on the resistance and struggle for human rights in the Dominican Republic 1930–61, Nelson Mandela's 1963 arrest papers, diaries of Anne Frank 1942–44, the Warsaw Ghetto archives, the construction and fall of the Berlin Wall, and perhaps most tragic of all Tuol Sleng Genocide Museum archives in Cambodia. Not yet here, but surely to be expected

in due course, are the records of South Africa's truth and reconciliation commission and the East Germany's Stasi domestic espionage files.

Overseas trading companies are also prominent, often as joint inscriptions by the metropolitan power and former colonial territories. Notable are the Hudson Bay Company archives, those of the Dutch West and East Indies companies, Dutch trans-Atlantic slave trade records (Middelburgsche Commerce Compagnie) and similarly for the archives of the Danish overseas companies. Again one might have expected here the archives of Britain's East India Company archives and those of its French equivalent. Also of business interest, and as fascinating, are Denmark's Sound toll registers 1429-1857, Antwerp insolvency archives 16th to 18th centuries, and in the same city those of Officina Plantiniana publishing house 1555 to the present day.

Europe also contributes the papers of prominent thinkers, scientists, writers artists, and composers, among them Andersen, Beethoven, Bergman, Brahms, Chopin, Goethe, Ibsen, Kierkegaard, Leibniz, Lindgren, Linneus, Nobel, Rousseau, Schönberg, Schubert, Swedenborg, and Tolstoy. None, however, are from English-speaking countries.

Even this listing gives only a small idea of the Register's diversity. To illustrate, at random, may also be mentioned the archives of the League of Nations, records of the introduction of the decimal metric system 1790-1837, the first record of the Phoenician alphabet, pre-Christian Latvian folksongs, Benin colonial archives, annals of Korea's Joseon dynasty 1392-1863, Russian turn-of-the-twentieth-century posters, and most recently the US Geological Survey Landsat Program (Multispectral Scanner) records 1972 on.

Despite the unevenness of representation (as further examples, no Vatican Archives, no Domesday Book) the World Register is remarkably successfully in opening eyes to the richness of humanity's documentary heritage, particularly its lesser known parts away from the mainstream of public or indeed professional awareness. Deficiencies of inclusion from the 'Anglo-Saxon' world remain to be rectified, though I fear that this will not happen quickly. However, amongst inscriptions since publication of this volume are Eleanor Roosevelt's human rights papers, and among recommendations for 2015 are the Churchill papers and our own Sir Edmund Hillary papers. None of this, however, detracts from the incredibly rich diversity of our world documentary heritage, of which this publication is but a marvellous foretaste.

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