

DEPARTMENT: EVENTS AND SIGHTINGS

Capturing an Oral History of Computing in Australia

As we prepared the special issue on Oceania for the *IEEE Annals of the History of Computing*, the question arose: What collections of primary data are available that may be used by current and future historians? We noticed the absence of oral histories that capture accounts from early pioneers of computing describing their work as entrepreneurs, researchers, educators, IT journalists, and legislators. First, taking Australia as an example, searching relevant sources yields very little available material (Table 1). This is surprising, for instance, Australia was an early innovator with Trevor Pearcey and Maston Beard building one of the first half dozen of computers in the world in Sydney [1], the first computer to play music [2]. Likewise, the first UNIX port happened Down Under [3] and WiFi came out of CSIRO and Radiata. The situation is similar in New Zealand, where there are only limited resources available, namely two small collections in the National Library of New Zealand, recorded for the 25th and 50th anniversaries of the New Zealand Computer Society, respectively (Table 1).

To overcome this situation, at least for Australia, researchers at the University of Sydney together with the Pearcey Foundation undertook a project capturing accounts from over 40 outstanding individuals in the field of information and communication technology (ICT) in Australia. The series interviewed recipients who had been admitted into the Pearcey Hall of Fame from 2003 to 2020. Capturing viewpoints of acknowledged leaders in the ICT field, the collection outlines the wider ecosystem underpinning ICT innovation in Australia: from education and basic research; the development of innovative ICT-based solutions to challenges in organizations and society; their commercialization into products and services; and successful

TABLE 1. Oral history material on ICT related to Australia and New Zealand.

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| National Library of Australia (NLA)—History of ICT in Australia oral history project | Nine interviews 2012–2015 |
| Computer History Museum (CHM)—Oral History Collection | Eight interviews with some relevance to Australia |
| Charles Babbage Institute (CBI)—Oral History Collection | Eleven Interviews on Control Data Australia |
| | One Interview with some relevance to Australia |
| National Library of New Zealand—New Zealand Computer Society 50th Anniversary Oral History Project | Eight interviews with members of the New Zealand Computer Society, conducted between 2010 and 2012 for the society’s gold jubilee. |
| | https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.1079703 |
| National Library of New Zealand—New Zealand Computer Society Silver Jubilee Oral History Project | Fourteen interviews with members of the New Zealand Computer Society, conducted between 1984 and 1985 for the society’s silver jubilee. |
| | https://tiaki.natlib.govt.nz/#details=ecatalogue.144984 |

scaling up of Australian innovations in a global marketplace.

The significance of this collection is that the information is gained directly from individuals who are acknowledged by their peers to have played leading roles in ICT in Australia. Each oral history captures a short biography of individuals who made an outstanding contribution to ICT in Australia. They also collect insights on aspects that had a lasting effect on ICT innovations in Australia, positive as well as negative, from approximately the 1960s to the 2010s. The complete set of interviews in this series is archived by the Pearcey Foundation and accessible to researchers in the future. A report

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on the study and a subset of 20 interviews are publicly accessible through the Sydney eScholarship Repository [4].

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