



Presidential Address for the Australian Population Association

Wednesday December 6, 2006 5-5.45pm

Napier 102

The Strange History and Problematic Future of the Australian Census

Professor Terence H. Hull, *Demography and Sociology Program, The Australian National University*

When looking back into the first century of Australian history following white settlement we often rely on the records of musters, listings and censuses to provide information on individuals and communities. The first census of New South Wales in 1828 was little more than a directory of names of settlers and settlements, but both professional historians and genealogists regard it as invaluable. As the scientific principles of censuses were developed over the course of the nineteenth century the information collected became ever more important for social scientists and economists. Analysts looked to the census for insights into education, occupation, income, family relationships and the classic demographic variables of fertility, mortality and migration. In the twentieth century professional historians in the UK and USA opened wholly new perspectives on society by looking to the census for records of common families who were not recorded in the newspapers or diaries of the time, and the community structures in which they lived. Unfortunately such innovations have not been possible in Australia. The individual records of colonial and Commonwealth censuses are not to be found in the libraries or archives, and concerns about privacy have forced generations of statisticians to destroy their most important data collections soon after the basic tables have been completed. This paper explores the history behind the anomalous practice of destroying census records in Australia, and poses some questions about the role of the census in the writing of histories of Australian people.