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Sealed Up Tight: The Endurance of Low Priority Collections.  
A Case Study of the Laing Seal Collection at Otago Museum

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of  
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Abstract

This thesis is a case study examining a collection of Victorian era glass seal matrix casts, titled the Laing Seal Collection. Held by Otago Museum (OM), these glass casts make up what this research terms a “low-priority collection”: a collection that does not place highly within the collection policy and as a result receives no resources or research and little staff attention.

By examining internal documents from Otago Museum, and interviewing key staff members, the objective of this research was to divine why these low priority collections endure. By examining the history of the Seal Collection this research aims to better understand how collections come to be decontextualised. Through tracing both the provenance of the Seal Collection and its history at Otago Museum this research hoped to discover how and why the collection became unknown. The lenses of material culture and organisational memory are used to better understand how staff memories become the last bastion for historical collection data that is not recorded. This makes that information susceptible to forgetfulness and staff transitions.

The research shows that the Laing Seal Collection has no discoverable accession documentation, nor historical records indicating when or why it came to Otago Museum. However, this research did succeed in beginning the process of cataloguing and identifying the Collection and revealed a connection from Laing to Dunedin. It also argues that for the Laing Seal Collection to flourish as a collection, agency must be taken by staff members and the collection be fully integrated into Otago Museum’s Collection Management System. The future of the collection will entirely depend on how many staff resources are dedicated to it.
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Finally, to Bill. Hoc sine te non factum esset. Ego quoque Latine scribere possum!
Table of Contents

Abstract ............................................................................................................................. ii
Acknowledgements ......................................................................................................... iii
Table of Contents .............................................................................................................. iv
List of Figures .................................................................................................................... vi
Abbreviations ................................................................................................................... vii
Reader’s Note .................................................................................................................... vii
Chapter 1: Introduction .................................................................................................... 8
  1.1 How this research began .......................................................................................... 8
  1.2 The Research Question, Methodology & Design .................................................... 8
  1.3 Ethical Considerations .......................................................................................... 11
  1.4 Scope & Rationale ................................................................................................ 12
  1.5 Chapter Outlines .................................................................................................... 12
  1.6 Sigillography .......................................................................................................... 15
Chapter 2: Literature Review ......................................................................................... 17
  2.1 Material Culture Studies ....................................................................................... 17
      2.1.1 Collection Policies ....................................................................................... 18
      2.1.2 Low-Priority Collections ........................................................................... 21
      2.1.3 Discoverability ........................................................................................... 22
  2.2 Organisational Memory Studies ............................................................................ 24
      2.2.1 Organisational Memory & Agency ............................................................... 27
  2.3 Conclusion ............................................................................................................... 29
Chapter 3: Collection Context - The Collection and Otago Museum ................................ 30
  3.1 Henry Laing ............................................................................................................ 31
  3.2 The Henry Laing Seal Collection .......................................................................... 33
  3.3 Otago Museum - A Brief History ......................................................................... 56
  3.4 Otago Museum - Policies & Mission Statements .................................................. 59
  3.5 Organisational Memory within GLAM ................................................................. 65
  3.6 Museum Resources .............................................................................................. 71
  3.7 Ethics Requirements ............................................................................................. 77
  3.8 Conclusion .............................................................................................................. 79
Chapter 4: My Research .................................................................................................. 80
  4.1 Evidence .................................................................................................................. 83
      4.1.1 Interviews ..................................................................................................... 83
      4.1.2 Boxes .......................................................................................................... 89
      4.1.3 Sleuthing & citizen science ......................................................................... 96
4.1.4 Archives, ARFs, Card Catalogue ................................................................. 106
4.2 Summary of the Research.............................................................................. 113
4.3 Conclusion........................................................................................................ 115
Chapter 5: Discussion & Analysis .................................................................... 117
  5.1 Chapter Outlines ............................................................................................. 117
  5.2 What’s Next? .................................................................................................... 118
    5.2.1 What Next? Deaccessioning...................................................................... 119
    5.2.2 What Next? Rehousing & Research ......................................................... 123
    5.2.3 What Next? Status Quo ........................................................................... 127
  5.3 Conclusion........................................................................................................ 128
Chapter 6: Conclusion ......................................................................................... 130
Reference List ........................................................................................................ 133
Appendices............................................................................................................. 144
  1.1 Interview Information Sheet & Questions .................................................... 144
    1.1.1 Information Sheet ................................................................................... 144
    1.1.2 Interview Questions ............................................................................... 145
  1.2 Otago Museum Copyright Agreement ......................................................... 146
  1.3 Henry Laing Last Will & Testament .............................................................. 147
List of Figures

All of the photos in this thesis are held in copyright by Otago Museum, Dunedin, New Zealand unless otherwise stated. All Otago Museum images have been taken by the author.

Figure 3.1: Assassination of Julius Caesar ................................................................. 33
Figure 3.2: Catalogue of Heads, Figures, Devices and Mottoes for Sale .......................... 35
Figure 3.3: Bill of Sale p. 28-29 .................................................................................. 36
Figure 3.4: Catalogue of Heads, figures. Ancient & Modern ........................................... 37
Figure 3.5: Manuscript Book of Drawing of Seals in the hand of Henry Laing, c. 1850 ........ 38
Figure 3.6: No. 242: Reverse of Ganymede carried off by the Eagle ............................... 39
Figure 3.7: Heads - No. 62: Diana, with the bow .......................................................... 40
Figure 3.8: Figure - No. 176: Coliseum [sic], The Ruins of the ......................................... 41
Figure 3.9: Sporting & Miscellaneous Subjects – No. 311: A Greyhound sitting .................. 42
Figure 3.10: Names – No. 432: Beatrice. In the Italic character ........................................ 42
Figure 3.11: Single Initials – V, N & H.......................................................................... 43
Figure 3.12: English Mottoes – No. 536: Beware of Writers and Accountants .................. 43
Figure 3.13: The Following Devices are Expressed in Hieroglyphics – No. 580: Time flies but
Friendship stays ............................................................................................................ 44
Figure 3.14: References to Scripture Texts – No. 596: Romans xii. 12.- (“Rejoicing in hope; patient in
tribulation; continuing instant in prayer.”).................................................................. 44
Figure 3.15: Devices with Mottoes in English – No. 621: The world – “In expectation of a better.” ... 45
Figure 3.16: Scotch Mottoes & Devices – No. 737: A Deer – “Scotland for me.” – (Dear Scotland for
me.) ..................................................................................................................................... 45
Figure 3.17: Irish Devices and Mottoes – No. 742: An Irish harp, entwined with Shamrock –
“Innisfail,” one of the ancient poetical names of Ireland. ............................................. 46
Figure 3.18: Welch Mottoes and Devices – No. 745: “Cofiwch fi.” – surrounded by a serpent – Forget
me not .................................................................................................................................. 46
Figure 3.19: French Mottoes – No. 751: “Une Lettre adoucit les peines de l’absence,” inscribed on a
Letter. – A Letter soothes the pains of absence. ............................................................ 47
Figure 3.20: Devices with Mottes in French – No. 758: Ivy twining round an oak – “Je meurs ou je
m’attache.” – I die where I attach myself ....................................................................... 47
Figure 3.21: Italian Mottoes – No. 824: “Debo credere a quel che veggo.” – I must believe my eyes!
........................................................................................................................................... 48
Figure 3.22: Devices with Italian Mottes – No. 831: A Watch – “Cheto fuor commoto dentro.” – Quiet
without, active within ....................................................................................................... 48
Figure 3.23: Device with Motto in the Spanish Language – No. 836: A Sunflower turning to the Sun –
“Espero a mi Sol.” – Hope is my Sun........................................................................... 49
Figure 3.24: Latin Mottoes & Devices – No. 848: Some books on a Table – “Vita, sine litteris, mors
est.” – Life without literature is death ........................................................................... 49
Figure 3.25: Greek Mottoes & Devices – No. 858: The Genius of Death descending – “ὰΑΠ Η ΖΩΗ
ΥΜΩΝ?” – For what is your life? – (James iv. 14.) ......................................................... 50
Figure 3.26: Hebrew Mottos – No. 861: לечаיהים שלום, Health, Peace............................ 50
Figure 3.27: Heads (Ancient) & Heads (Modern): Unidentified Seals ................................. 51
Figure 3.28: Ancient Figure: No. 223: Neptune & Amphitrite in car .................................. 51
Figure 3.29: Early Reformer ......................................................................................... 52
Figure 3.30: Kings and Queens of England: Henry 1st and Elizabeth ................................. 52
Figure 3.31: Coloured Seals ............................................................................................ 54
Figure 3.32: Metal, plaster, unfinished and damaged Seals ................................................ 55
Figure 3.33: Significance 2.0 Criteria ........................................................................................................64
Figure 4.1: Photo of drawer labelling: Drawer 10, Box 11 ........................................................................90
Figure 4.2: Cabinets & how they store Seals ..........................................................................................91
Figure 4.3: Handwritten note: Drawer 4, list of contents of 3 layers .........................................................92
Figure 4.4: Packing with “handles” for lifting layers of Seals ....................................................................93
Figure 4.5: Layers without “handles” ........................................................................................................94
Figure 4.6: Typical contents of a single box ..............................................................................................95
Figure 4.7: Peace & Plenty .........................................................................................................................98
Figure 4.8: French Mottoes: No. 752 .........................................................................................................99
Figure 4.9: Bill of Sale p. 17: Horses standing .........................................................................................100
Figure 4.10: Bill of Sale p. 18: Dog breeds .............................................................................................101
Figure 4.11: Bill of Sale pp. 6-7: A section of redacted text ......................................................................102
Figure 4.12: Example of Catalogue Seal vs Bill of Sale Seal ....................................................................103
Figure 4.13: Thorvaldsen’s reliefs & reverse .........................................................................................104
Figure 4.14: Night & Morning after Thorvaldsen’s ................................................................................104
Figure 4.15: Context of the Thorvaldsen entries ....................................................................................105
Figure 4.16: Thorvaldsen’s marble reliefs ...............................................................................................106
Figure 4.17: A typical article receipt form ...............................................................................................108
Figure 4.18: Typical description of articles received ................................................................................109
Figure 4.19: An example of the Ethnographic acquisitions in 1912 .........................................................110
Figure 4.20: Registrations, Annual Report 1951 ...................................................................................111
Figure 4.21: Glass card catalogue .........................................................................................................112

Abbreviations
  o ARF – Article receipt form
  o CMS – Collection Management System
  o FRS – Fellow of the Royal Society
  o GLAM – Galleries, libraries, archives and museums
  o ICOM – International Council of Museums
  o OM – Otago Museum
  o RIFD – Radio frequency identification device

Reader’s Note
  The titles and descriptions of Henry Laing’s publications and Seals are accurately reproduced. Readers are to note there is little consistency within Laing’s system of labelling and descriptive terms. For example, sections might be titled Irish Devices and Mottoes, Welch Mottoes and Devices, or even Devices with Motto in the Spanish Language. All titles have been faithfully reproduced including grammar and spelling errors.