Telling Australia's story to the world:
The Department of Information 1939-1950

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Declaration

I hereby declare that the work presented in this thesis is, to the best of my knowledge and belief, original, except as acknowledged in the text, and that the material has not been submitted, either in whole or in part, for a degree at this or any other university.

Eddy Vickery

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Abstract

This study focuses on the organisation and operation of the Australian Government's Department of Information that operated from 1939 to 1950. Equal weighting is given to the wartime and peacetime halves of the Department's existence, allowing a balanced assessment of the Department's role and development from its creation through to its abolition. The central issue that the Department had to address was: what was an appropriate and acceptable role for a government information organisation in Australia's democratic political system? The issue was not primarily one of formal restrictions on the government's power but rather of the accepted conception of the role of government. No societal consensus had been established before the Department was thrust into dealing with this issue on a practical basis. While the application of the Department's censorship function attracted considerable comment, the procedures were clear and accepted. Practices laid down in World War I were revived and followed, while arguments were over degree rather than kind. It was mainly in the context of its expressive functions that the Department had to confront the fundamental issue of its role. This study shows that the development of the Department was driven less by sweeping ministerial pronouncements than through a series of pragmatic incremental responses to circumstances as they arose. This Departmental approach was reinforced by its organisational weakness. The Department's options in its relations with media organisations and other government agencies were, broadly, competition, compulsion and cooperation. Competition was never widely pursued and the limits of compulsion in regard to its expressive functions were rapidly reached and withdrawn from. Particularly through to 1943 the Department struggled when it sought to assert its position against the claims of other government agencies and commercial organisations. Notwithstanding some high profile conflicts, this study shows that the Department primarily adopted a cooperative stance, seeking to supplement rather than supplant the work of other organisations. Following the 1943

Federal elections the Department was strengthened by stable and focused leadership as well as the development of its own distribution channels and outlets whose audience was primarily overseas. While some elements, such as the film unit, remained reasonably politically neutral, the Department as a whole was increasingly employed to promote the message of the Government of the day. This led to a close identification of the Department with the Labor Party, encouraging the Department's abolition following the Coalition parties' victory in the 1949 Federal elections. Nevertheless in developing its role the Department had remained within the mainstream of administrative practice in Australia. While some of its staff assumed a greater public profile than had been the practice for pre-war public servants, this was not unusual or exceptional at that time. Partly through the efforts of the Department, the accepted conception of the role of government had expanded sufficiently by 1950 that despite the abolition of the Department most of its functions continued within the Australian public sector.

CONTENTS

ABBREVIATIONS

AAP	Australian Associated Press
ABC	Australian Broadcasting Commission
ADB	Australian Dictionary of Biography
AIF	Australian Imperial Force
ANA	Australian National Airways
ANFB	Australian National Film Board
ANTA	Australian National Travel Association
AO	Officer of the Order of Australia
AWA	Amalgamated Wireless (Australasia)
AWM	Australian War Museum/Memorial
BA	Bachelor of Arts
CPD	Commonwealth Parliamentary Debates
GPO	General Post Office
MA	Master of Arts
MGM	Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer
NAA	National Archives of Australia
NSW	New South Wales
SA	South Australia
TAA	Trans-Australia Airways
US	United States [of America]
WA	Western Australia

TABLES AND FIGURES

History outline of Australia, with links to history of Australia related information. Settlement of prospectors during the gold rushes in Australia. Gold was discoverd in 1851and led to the Victorian gold rush during this era Victoria dominated the world's gold output. Self-Government and Economic Expansion, 1850–1900: The Australian colonies of New South Wales, South Australia, Tasmania (renamed officially from Van Diemen's Land in its constitution), and Victoria achieved self-government during 1855 and 1856. During the 1950s, the United States was the world's strongest military power. Its economy was booming, and the fruits of this prosperity–new cars, suburban houses and other consumer goods–were available to more people than ever before. However, the 1950s also saw great conflict. The nascent civil rights movement and the crusade against communism at home and abroad exposed underlying divisions in American society. After World War II ended, many Americans were eager to have children because they were confident that the future held nothing but peace and prosperity. In many ways, they were right. Between 1945 and 1960, the gross national product more than doubled, growing from $200 billion to more than $500 billion, kicking off "the Golden Age of American Capitalism."