

Obituary

Bruce T Burne OAM (1926–2011)



Bruce Burne visiting the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau, Canberra, June 2008.

Bruce T Burne, pioneering archivist in the Pacific Islands, Africa and Australia, died on 19 May 2011.

Bruce was brought up in Kew, Melbourne, and was the second son of Sir Lewis Charles Burne and Florence Mary Stafford. He was educated in Catholic schools and took an early interest in literature and history, helping out during vacations at the Central Catholic Library in Collins Street under its scholarly custodian Fr WP Hackett SJ. There he engaged in discussions with the library's patrons, including the prolific commentator and historian Denys Jackson, which encouraged Bruce's historical and political curiosity.

After matriculating from Xavier College at the end of 1943, Bruce attended the University of Melbourne where he graduated BA (Hons), in history and political science, in 1949. At university Bruce was involved in the Newman Society, the history club, the drama club and, later, the Democratic Labor Party Society. During his history studies under Manning Clark, archives were spoken of with some awe. It was known that archival material existed in the basements of government departments and state libraries, and there was a feeling that something should be done to preserve primary sources, however Australia had no great scholarly tradition in this field. Bruce knew some of the people working in the basement of the State Library of Victoria, such as Rosemary McGowan and Pat Ingham. Use of the term 'archivist' was not generally recognised in the late 1940s and 1950s.

In 1949 Bruce began employment collating data and statistics of employment in the Department of Labour and National Service. After about six months he left the job to study for a Diploma of Education and, subsequently, for the Church.

After he ceased training for the Church, Bruce undertook the library course at the Commonwealth National Library in Parliament House in Canberra. He joined the Archives Division of the National Library, took further training in the Romney huts, attended the seminars of Theodore R Schellenberg, and in 1954 seized the opportunity to return to Melbourne to work in the new quarters of the Archives Division of the National Library in Middle Brighton. At the time, the archives repository at Middle Brighton was in a former dry-cleaning factory. Working and storage conditions were very poor. In the early days there were difficulties with a lack of sustained experience and there was no climate of comprehension of the nature and needs of archives. Reflecting on that period, Bruce wrote that, 'Aspiring to best practice within the realities of Australian situations meant much learning on the job and feeling one's way'.

During 1961 to 1962, Bruce toured Europe visiting archives ranging from the Vatican Archives to a new repository inside a mountain in Stockholm, Sweden.

In 1965, Bruce was appointed Director of the National Archives of Zambia. Formerly Northern Rhodesia, Zambia was then an

independent nation, newly formed following the dissolution of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963. Bruce commented that the National Archives of Rhodesia, which had been established in 1935, was one of the most progressive in the Commonwealth. At the time it was far superior in terms of buildings, procedures and conservation to any archival establishment in Australia. It made precise arrangements for apportioning and transfer of colonial archives to the successor states Zimbabwe, Zambia and Malawi, including microfilming of record series of common value to all the successor states. The National Archives of Zambia was housed in a building custom built as the Lusaka depot of the National Archives of the Federation of Rhodesia.

When Bruce returned to Canberra in 1970, Australian Archives was still housed in Romney huts from which the National Library had reluctantly departed. It was a brief sojourn. In 1971 Bruce took the position of Director of the Western Pacific Archives in Suva. The Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission, as archivist Ian Diamond wrote, was 'something of a prodigy'. Set up in 1954, 'not primarily for its practical value as an aid to administration', but because of a recognition on the part of both Fijian and Western Pacific administrations 'of an obligation to conserve their early records'.¹ When Fiji became independent in 1970 the Fijian records were transferred to the new government of Fiji and the Central Archives was disbanded. The remaining records then formed the newly established Western Pacific Archives (WPA) which served the Western Pacific High Commission (based in Honiara since 1952).

At this time the Western Pacific Archives comprised the files of the High Commission Secretariat, together with records of the New Hebrides British Service (NHBS), the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (BSIP) and the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (GEIC). Records of the South Pacific Office were also transferred into the WPA, in particular records of the British Consul, Tonga, and Pitcairn.² The records were housed in the former quarters of the South Pacific Office in the grounds of Government House in Suva. It was a modest timber building, difficult to insulate and grossly over-crowded.

Bruce's major project at the WPA was identifying and boxing records held in bundles and listing all the records. As the colonies

under the administration of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC) moved towards independence it was essential to exercise control over WPA holdings as a matter of urgency. The WPHC's main correspondence series was microfilmed, from inception in 1875 through to 1927, in order to provide copies to the successor nations. Bruce initiated the construction of a substantial purpose-built archives repository in Honiara to hold the WPHC Secretariat and BSIP archives. Arrangements were made for the establishment of archives repositories in Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu. Kunei Etekeira, Tarawa Nataua, Willie Toa, Joseph Wale and other Pacific archivists received training in Suva and overseas.

On achievement of independence, in accordance with established international procedures, the WPA sent the records of the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony to Tarawa and Funafuti. Records of the British Solomon Islands Protectorate which survived World War II were sent to Honiara.

However, while Bruce was on leave in 1978, his arrangements for the proper disposition of the remainder of the WPA holdings were preempted. Officers of the British Colonial Service despatched the archives of the WPHC Secretariat to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office in London, together with records of the New Hebrides British Service and records relating to Pitcairn, Tonga and Samoa. The transfer deeply affected Bruce, who observed that it was 'little short of a tragedy', and angered others.

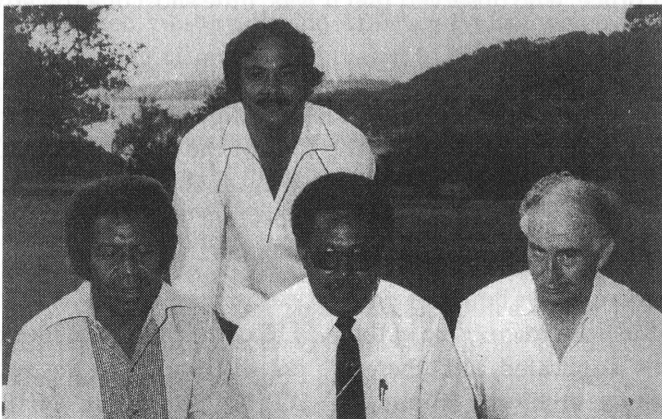
Jim Boutilier, wrote in the *Pacific Islands Monthly*, 'I can well remember standing in the hall way of the WPA in August, 1978, watching in a state of growing dismay while the files of the Western Pacific High Commission (WPHC), relating primarily to the Solomons, Kiribati, Tuvalu, Vanuatu, Tonga and the Samoas, for the period 1874-1941, were packed into crates destined for England.'³

Furthermore, as Dr Boutilier pointed out in his *Pacific Islands Monthly* article, the WPA microfilms of the WPHC correspondence files to 1927 were not duplicated, and therefore not distributed to the successor government archives. It put the WPHC Secretariat, NHBS and Tonga and Pitcairn Consular archives out of reach of researchers in the region until 2003 when the British Foreign and Commonwealth

Office eventually donated the archives to the University of Auckland Library.

Following the closure of the Western Pacific Archives in 1978, Bruce returned to Melbourne to become Deputy Keeper of Public Records. Public Record Office Victoria (PROV) was then housed partly in a former drugs warehouse in bleak suburban Laverton in the city's west, which provided records storage and some reference facilities, and partly in Treasury Gate at Little Collins Street. The administration later moved to Nauru House.

Bruce retired from PROV for health reasons in 1981, but it was far from the end of his archival interests. He had always been a joiner. In Fiji, Bruce was an active member of the Fiji Library Association and the Fiji Society. Bruce was a member of the Archives Section of the Australian Library Association and a founding member of the Australian Society of Archivists. He was a member of the Society of American Archivists for many years and remained a member of the (UK) Society of Archivists. Bruce attended various conferences of the International Council on Archives and was involved in the setting up of an ICA branch for East and Central Africa in 1969 (ESARBICA). Writing to Charles Kecskemeti, Executive Secretary of the ICA in January 1978, Bruce took the first steps to establish the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives (PARBICA).⁴



Left to right: Edward Iamae, Solomon Islands; Herbert Del Rosario, Saipan (standing); Setareki Tuinaceva, Fiji; and Bruce Burne, Australia, at the PARBICA Conference, Sydney, January–February 1985. Photograph from *Pacific Archives Journal*, No. 2, 1986.

Bruce was a member of the PARBICA Bureau until 1986. He participated in conferences on Pacific Islands' archives and history, through to the Tongan History Association conference in Canberra in 1996, the Pacific History Association conference in Honiara in 1998, and the PARBICA conference held in Suva in 1999. He was a keen supporter of the work of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau and attended its 40th anniversary celebration in Canberra in 2008. Bruce carried out a fact finding survey of Pacific archives for PARBICA in 1984⁵ and a survey of government archives administration in Vanuatu with Peter Orlovich in 2000.⁶ In 1987 Bruce was elected an Honorary Member of the Australian Society of Archivists and of PARBICA.

Bruce Burne's career as a dedicated professional archivist tracks the development of archives administration in Australia, Africa and the Pacific Islands. His practice and advocacy upheld the rights of independent nations to the records of their colonial administrations. His legacy is marked by: his contribution to early efforts to preserve Australian official records; the establishment of government archives in Zambia, the Solomon Islands, Kiribati, Tuvalu and Vanuatu; the arrangement, description and partial microfilming of the archives of the Western Pacific High Commission; and by the thriving operations of the Pacific Regional Branch of the International Council on Archives.

Ewan Maidment
PMB Executive Officer

Acknowledgements

A version of this article was originally published as an article in PARBICA's Panorama newsletter 2011/3. Thanks to Ewan Maidment and Karin Brennan for making it available to *Archives and manuscripts*.

Endnotes

¹ AI Diamond, 'The establishment of the Central Archives of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission', *Archives and manuscripts*, vol. 2, no. 8, May 1965, p. 10.

² Bruce T Burne, 'A guide to lists of records held in the Western Pacific Archives in Suva in 1974', *Pacific Archives Journal*, no. 3, 1987, pp. 43–58.

³ Jim Boutlier, 'Little short of a tragedy...', *Pacific Islands Monthly*, January 1984, pp. 43-44.

⁴ Burne to Kecskemeti, 4 January 1978, and Kecskemeti to Burne, 12 January 1978, WPA file 1064, Tuvalu - International Council on Archives, Tuvalu National Library and Archives.

⁵ 'Report on Fact Finding Advisory Mission South Pacific, funded by the Canadian International Development Agency, 18 November - 14 December 1984', *Pacific Archives Journal*, no. 6, June 1988, pp. 5-21.

⁶ Bruce Burne and Peter Orlovich, 'Report on the Records and Archives Management Project of the Public Sector Reform Program and the Operations of the National Archives of Vanuatu', together with a chronology, 'Development of Vanuatu National Archives and Records Services', n.d. [1980], Ts., 5 pp.