

AN ADMINISTRATIVE RESEARCH SERVICE

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The purpose of this article is to suggest that archivists have an obligation to provide a research service to serve the needs of the administrator, that is, the needs of those responsible for the conduct of the affairs of the organisation which the archivist serves. The fact that these needs are often not felt consciously, or are only but vaguely realized, is, I submit, no reason why an archivist should not take some action to see that they are met.

Many archivists will argue that they are already providing such a service. This may be true of a few, especially of those serving comparatively small organisations, but I doubt if any more can be said of state archives institutions than that they are providing an administrative reference service. I admit that it is sometimes difficult to draw the line between reference and research, but I shall attempt definitions which, even if they achieve little else, will at least make clear the meaning I would attach to these two terms for the purposes of this article.

Reference, I would define as the consultation of particular sources of information by the use of existing finding-aids, and of such finding-aids as were drawn up especially to aid in the use of records for academic searchers.

Research, I would define as the consultation of records where finding-aids themselves do not reveal the information directly, or where additional information needs to be derived from documents by the comparison of one document with another, the making of value judgements, or the drawing up of tables to show correlations etc. Thus one would refer to a Blue Book to discover the number of pounds of wool exported from a given port in a given year. But one would carry out research to show the percentage increase in the export during one year over its predecessor, etc.

Of course, I admit that this definition is subject to all sorts of objections, and this must be the case, where the terms being defined differ only in degree, and not in essence. What is research for one searcher, or in the case of one series of records, would only be reference for another, or if another series of records were being used.

The point I have made with regard to an administrative research service is, however, still valid. We are prepared to carry out reference work for the administrators from whose hands we received the records, whether it was at the intermediate records stage, or at the archives stage, but we are not prepared to do any work that could be termed research. When we publish finding-aids, they are designed to serve the historian, or other academic user, but are not in any sense directed at the making available of information which could be of use to the administrator.



There are several good reasons for this. In the first place, our finding-aids are put into operation with respect to our older records. The older record groups, though not necessarily more complete, at least are less liable to be added to by the discovery of new series, or parts of series, than the more recent ones are. It is natural to start from the beginning, and as no state archivist in Australia is much beyond the beginning stage, it is obvious that a start on describing record groups of recent origin cannot yet be expected.

We also suffer under an impression, which I feel is a delusion, that the registry official has arranged the records in such a way that they will serve the administrator's purposes, and that all information wanted from them in current office use will be readily available by means of the finding-aids compiled in the office.

The experience of other states in this matter may be different from what I have encountered, but I feel that archives and intermediate records could have been of tremendously greater use to departments who had transferred them to my custody had I made an effort to understand their filing systems and explained them to departmental officers. One department in Tasmania, for instance, used an annual single number system, but had either departed from it, or so radically altered it that later appointees to the registry staff could not interpret earlier correspondence filing.

I have heard, too, of a department which sanctioned the destruction of hundreds (it may have been thousands) of surveyors' field books and level books because it was felt that the trouble of making a new survey would be less than that of locating the correct note book.

The archivist would have a duty in a case like this, I feel, to impress upon the department the simplicity of finding the correct surveyors' notebook, and to remind him of the expenditure of public money involved in sending a surveyor into the field to repeat the work.

We often remind ourselves of the fact that we owe our first responsibility to the administrator, and that scholastic use of the records we retain is only a secondary interest with us. Perhaps we do this when we wish to find excuses for not involving ourselves in long researches on behalf of academic enquirers. However, the truth of the matter is that we often do little enough in order to serve the demands of the administrator, so, if our service for the historian is to be less than the former, it will be practically negligible.

The records compiled in most registries only serve in a most imperfect way to preserve information for the benefit of the current business of the office; when information is required after the lapse of a few years, it can seldom be found in its most convenient form, without redundant matter, and with a minimum of delay. Thus you have stories, such as that repeated in a recent issue of The Observer\*, of the need which confronted a N.S.W. Government Department to repeat tests of the

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\* The Observer, 25 June, 1960, p.6. "The Archives boom" by  
R.W. Bell.



soil structure for a proposed bridge because the records of a test made a few years earlier had been lost. This mistake, we are told, cost £70,000. In actual fact, the tale may be apocryphal, but parallels could be found, and these could show that, in contrast to what was probably the case in the example cited above, great saving could have been effected through the exercise of initiative by the archivist. On many occasions I have felt some disquiet on hearing that departments were sending men out to survey the field for a new line of road, or to examine timber resources in a rarely-frequented area, or to carry out a geological survey. I would not suggest that records in archival custody would necessarily be found which would render the proposed survey unnecessary, but I would suggest that in many cases records exist which would provide a useful background to the current project, and whose existence, if discovered, might be most helpful to those embarking on the new work.

With legal records, I am tempted to believe that a great deal could be discovered if the resources of the archives were more conveniently accessible to the practising lawyer. We often fall down in our job of making our records known because we fail in ourselves to understand them. Records of legal processes are often as perplexing as the processes themselves. The inadequacy of our knowledge of these processes makes us hesitate to present lists, inventories and other guides to the lawyer, for fear that we have not correctly described them. Lawyers, in their turn, often seem willing to neglect the resources of the archives, often to the detriment of their understanding of valid precedents. Perhaps they have precedents enough already.

Many state archivists have had to deal with accumulations of judges' notebooks. In Queensland, about 1100 of these have been received on transfer in about nine months. I understand that at least one other state archives has had to deal with more than ten times that number. In one case only has any reference been made to them. In that one case, however, where the information sought was to be found in a judge's notebook for matters heard in Chambers, I was told that the notebook would be the only existing source of the text of a judge's decision in a certain case, and that it was essential to locate the exact words of the judgement, as matters arising out of it were still the subject of litigation. There must surely be cases constantly recurring where the need to have recourse to these books arises. The fact that this type of reference does not take place may be taken as a reflection on the efficiency of the lawyer or of the archivist; it certainly would not contribute to a consistency in the processes of the law. The fact that there were some hundreds of registry records included amongst the transfer, and these, like the 1099-odd other judge's notebooks, have not been referred to, would suggest that, contrary to popular belief, lawyers have very little occasion to refer to what has taken place in the past.

This article is meant to provoke discussion, or at least thought, about the responsibility of the archivist in making the contents of his repository known to the administrator. I do not claim to be thoroughly convinced as to what lines an improved service of this kind might follow.



I realize that a great deal can be done through better records management, to make sure that future archives accumulations provide the administrator with the sort of information he needs in the most convenient form. However, I am still concerned about the records already in custody, and about our responsibility towards them. Above all, we should match our claims of giving the needs of the administrator first priority in determining archives policy, by showing that in all stages of our programme for the arrangement and description of records the interests of that same group are not neglected.

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NEWS NOTES FROM STATE ARCHIVES INSTITUTIONS.

New South Wales. Mr D.J. Bluford, B.A., is now in charge of the New South Wales Archives Department, Public Library of N.S.W. Two new archivists have been added to the staff in 1960 - Miss M. Bull, B.A. and Mr R. Lupton, B.A. The new wing at the Public Library, in Macquarie Street, Sydney, to house the Archives Department, is rapidly nearing completion.

Queensland. Miss F. Dolan, B.A., of the Accessions Department of the Public Library of Queensland, has been appointed Archives Assistant. The Queensland State Archives, in conjunction with the Public Service Commissioner's Department, has completed a survey of semi-current and non-current records in Government departments in Brisbane, with a view to the establishment of an intermediate records repository. Land is being made available for this purpose at the Brisbane suburb of Rocklea.

South Australia. Mr Brian Baldwin, M.A., formerly of the Commonwealth National Library, has been appointed to the staff of the Archives Department of the Public Library of South Australia. Mr J. McLellan, the Archivist, has been on long service leave, and Mr G.L. Fischer, B.A., has been acting in his absence as Archivist.

Tasmania. Mr P.R. Eldershaw, B.A., has been appointed Archives Officer under the terms of the Tasmanian Public Records Act, 1943. Mr G.T. Stilwell, B.A., has been appointed Archives Assistant, the position formerly occupied by Mr Eldershaw.

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