

A NOTE ON THE TREATMENT OF MANUSCRIPTS IN THE ARCHIVES
BRANCH OF THE STATE LIBRARY, PERTH, WESTERN AUSTRALIA

M. LUKIS

It is with some diffidence that this note is supplied for ARCHIVES and MANUSCRIPTS, partly because the collection of MSS. is only small, and partly because the writer is fully conscious of her comparative inexperience in this highly specialised field. The remarks which follow, however, may hold some interest for those in the other States where work with MSS is at much the same stage of development as in Western Australia.

The Archives Branch of the State Library was opened in 1945, primarily to serve as a repository for the records of the State Government, but in addition all other records of an historical nature relating to Western Australia were to be collected. The material held therefore falls into two main groups:-

- (i) The State Archives - i.e. records of government departments, other government instrumentalities, and local governing bodies;
- (ii) records of private individuals, organisations and societies, including many single documents.

Originally the term "records" used in (ii) covered paintings, sketches, prints, etc., and relics, but recently these have been transferred to the Art Gallery and Museum. Records which remain consist of original documents; manuscript, typescript, or photographic copies of original documents; photographs and maps; printed books, pamphlets, leaflets, etc. The comments which follow apply to this material in the second group, excluding the books, pamphlets and other printed matter.

Nature of MSS Collection

Work in gathering private records in Western Australia began comparatively late, so that much remains still to be done, and constant additions are being made to the collection. At the present time, apart from single documents, photographs and maps in filing cabinets, the MSS collection consists of about 90 feet of volumes, boxes and packages of records and some 2000 feet of microfilm copies. It comprises largely personal papers, family papers, farm and station records, and a small quantity of records of societies, institutions, companies and other business organisations - these latter mainly too incomplete to be described as private archives.

Accessioning, arrangement and description

As specialisation by process is not feasible with a very small staff, it has been the practice for one staff member to perform all the functions with regard to any MS or collection of MS received. It is felt, as a

result of experience with this method, which is, of course, the usual procedure with archives, that it can most profitably be applied to collections of MSS.

A satisfactory accession record for a MSS collection - frequently received as a heterogeneous mass of papers in little or no discernible order - cannot be made until they have been thoroughly examined, and such examination is not really effective unless made in the light of a knowledge of the background of the person or organisation concerned. By the time a complete inspection has been made, the knowledge of the records concerned acquired by the officer who has carried it out is such that he or she can most effectively complete the work on that particular collection.

Almost all MSS received to date have been acquired by gift, not by purchase, and a copy of the accession record is always sent to the donor. As received, each MS or MSS collection is given a number (an A series of numbers, 1A, 2A, 3A etc. being used for MSS) and a brief entry - sufficient only to identify the material - is made in an accession register. The accession record, completed after examination of the documents, is separately filed, and a reference to the number of the accession record is included in the register.

No matter how lacking in order a collection of papers appears to be when received, on first examination it is carefully skimmed through without further disorganisation to get a general grasp of the collection and to try to find traces of the original arrangement. If discernible, this is retained, otherwise the best arrangement for the particular collection is adopted - generally a chronological arrangement with some grouping into series if the correspondence lends itself to such treatment. For the accession record, a brief list of the material received is then made, as far as possible in series with inclusive dates (probably including at this stage one group of unidentified, undated documents), the number of volumes or documents being stated in each case. If the collection is very extensive, measurements in linear feet and inches are given and single documents are not counted. The physical condition of original documents is described and a note made of the source from which they were received. With family papers, names and addresses of those likely to have additional material, or related records in the case of associations or companies, are included. Finally, information is given about any restrictions on access or reproduction. Whether original documents, or manuscript, typescript or photographic copies, all records receive the same treatment. With copies, however, the type of copy is noted in the accession record, and the location of the original documents.

Photographs and maps are separately accessioned and filed, a B series and a C series of numbers being used for them. Maps and photographs received in a collection of MSS are withdrawn, and filed in their own series, but in such cases they are replaced in the collection

by a sheet of paper giving a reference to the new number and location of the map or photograph concerned, and in their own accession register, reference is made to the collection from which they came. Similar action is taken with regard to books and pamphlets included in a MS collection.

A preliminary survey of the collection having been completed, and the accession record filed, it is then given a more detailed examination, an attempt being made to place unidentified and undated documents. As this work progresses, groups of documents are boxed or packed ready to go on the shelves, a list of the contents of each being recorded; at the same time, the accession record is expanded into a descriptive list which will serve as the main guide to the contents of the collection for an indefinite period until detailed indexing, if justified, is possible.

The descriptive list includes data from the accession record, e.g. accession number, source, access restrictions, physical condition, quantity, etc., a biographical note on the person, or a brief history of the family or organisation concerned, and a list of contents of the various volumes, boxes or packets. Finally, and most important, a description of the records themselves is compiled, if possible in series, with an indication of the subject matter, form and arrangement. In most cases a list of the main topics dealt with, taken in conjunction with the background information already provided, will suffice, but sometimes a list of persons from whom correspondence is received is of sufficient interest to be included, or a particular document may be of such importance as to require specific mention.

Descriptive lists are filed and numbered in sequence, and they are used as the basis for the main entry and any added entries in the catalogue. Catalogue entries are kept as simple as possible, reference being made on each to the descriptive list from which details can be obtained.

Two separate card indexes are kept in which entries are made for all MS or MSS collections of importance, the entries being again very brief and referring to the number of the corresponding descriptive list. One of these is a chronological index, in decades, indicating what MSS of importance there are relating to Western Australia at any particular period; the second is primarily geographical, with the State divided into eight regions, and MSS relating to a particular region are listed chronologically in each section.

Single documents, photographs and maps are kept in filing cabinets, each in its own series in order of accession number. Cabinets in two sizes are used for documents, and very large photographs are kept in racks. Large maps are cut into two or more sections for filing, only the one size of cabinet being used. Short lengths of microfilm are filed with single documents; reels of film, in labelled boxes, are kept in special cupboards arranged in order of accession

Page Eight

number on the shelves. In the catalogue more detailed entries are made for single documents, photographs and maps than for the MS collections, which are covered by the descriptive lists.

TECHNICAL NOTES.

Transparo. Transparo is a fine silk chiffon used for the repair of records. It costs two dollars (U.S.) a yard approximately.

It has been found recently that the Transparo supplied by a recent requisition shrinks severely after application to the paper being repaired, causing the surface to "bubble".

Tests have shown that the Transparo which is approximately 39" wide shrinks to 37" when wet. Further tests are being carried out at present into effective methods of preshrinking the Transparo before use. It would appear that after shrinking it will be necessary to iron the material.

A large number of crumbling papers had to be repaired. Because of the illegibility of the ink Transparo had to be used. To reduce the cost experiments were made and it was found that the backs of the pages where no writing appeared could be covered with japanese tissue (a much cheaper medium) without any apparent loss of effectiveness.

NOTES AND NEWS

Miss M. Rokosawa, a Fijian member of the staff of the Archivist to the High Commissioner of the Western Pacific has just completed a three-month stay in Australia. Miss Rokosawa spent most of her time learning the art of repair in the manuscript repair section of the Mitchell Library but was also able to visit the Archives Branch of Sydney University and the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library in Canberra.

Miss P. Cocks of the New Zealand National Archives spent a few days in Canberra and Sydney on her way home from a visit to the U.S.A. and England. During her stay in Canberra, she addressed a meeting of the Archives Section on her impressions of overseas institutions.
