

## THE PROBLEM OF LOCAL RECORDS

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There can be no doubt that many of the archival problems being faced in Britain today have considerable significance for Australia. The attention which Miss M.G. Jacobs drew recently to the British Report on Departmental Records was timely, not only because of the intrinsic value of the Committee's findings, but because it brought to notice another aspect of a great problem, the solution of which is the most pressing need in Australia. How Disposal Schedules are to be framed successfully is a very considerable question; the problem of local record preservation is another.

The history of the organised preservation of records in Britain is instructive, if not very creditable. Over many centuries, local organs of government and little disturbed institutions have accumulated placidly large stores of historically valuable material, and invariably no consideration beyond that of administrative necessity has influenced the interest taken in their welfare. Frequently, there was not even an official custodian. Not until the stimulus provided by the constitutional and sectarian struggles of the seventeenth century was there any worthwhile effort made to grapple with and investigate the bulk of the local and private archives. In the second half of that century, the prodigious labours associated with the researches into the historical position of the gentry and the Protestant church, along with the foundation of county history, produced one of the most fruitful periods of mediaeval research Britain has seen. Rymer's "Foedera" and Dugdale's "Monasticon" typify the width of the approach. So the story continued intermittently even through a period most unfavourable for the physical preservation of records. Committees of Lords and Commons were instituted in the early years of the eighteenth century; in 1763 experts were appointed to methodize the central records, and in 1771 appeared the Rolls of Parliament - the first genuinely official publication. 1783 saw the appearance of what remains the standard edition of Domesday, and the turning point was reached in 1800 with the appointment of a full-scale Royal Commission. From then on, the result was all but inevitable, especially since Britain was being increasingly exposed to similar, if older and more advanced, movements on the Continent.

But if the story was relatively continuous, it became particularly one-sided. From the very nature of the case, the seventeenth century search for evidence of one form or another had extended to all forms of record, central, local and private. Unfortunately, the movement which had started so promisingly, dwindled during the eighteenth century to a preoccupation with the welfare of only the Public records. Apart from the registries (for registering land deeds) established in Middlesex and the three Ridings of Yorkshire, no provision had been made for the preservation of local records up to the 1837 act, and the result has been calamitous.

Thus probably it will never be known whether the early county



court kept records regularly and whether the few surviving records of this body are abnormal; thus the only records which remain of the activities of the early Justices of the Peace are those which were handed over to the Assize Judges and put into the central records; thus the archives of the Council of Wales, reputedly in a bad state even in the time of Elizabeth I, had vanished by the Civil War. Strengthened by the feeling that the Crown had no directive power over these records, the process of wastage continued unchecked, giving local records no continuous history and making individual interest the decisive element in selection for preservation. This difference in attitude made it inevitable that when something was done about the general problem of record keeping, the local records were treated at a different level from the central.

Care of local records for other than legal purposes was a conception of very slow growth. The question had come within the purview of the 1800 Royal Commission, which did in fact send out enquiries to local authorities, but on receiving little response, and having its hands full with the problems of the Public records, the matter was left alone. What really roused modern interest was the work of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, set up in 1869. The state of affairs which came to light, and the strictures published in the Commission's annual reports had the effect of gradually awakening the public conscience, and making it apparent that the existing legislation (aimed at the preservation of Parish Registers and Quarter Sessions records) was inadequate and too restricted in scope. Several spasmodic attempts to provide for the real needs of the situation followed, but did little beyond demonstrating that to make the injunctions purely permissive and embody them in an act mainly concerned with other things, could have very little effect. Right at the end of the century a very sensible Bill was drafted, forcing County Councils to make provision for caring for local and private records. The President of the Local Government Branch was put in charge, with power to supervise and inspect local records, and in the case of public local records to order deposit, but unfortunately the measure failed to pass.

The first twenty years of the present century saw the enunciation of two distinct principles, embodied in the reports published in 1909 and 1919 by the bodies set up to consider remedies to the problems raised by the state of the local records, both public and private. From the nature of the case, the findings of the 1902 report were tentative, especially when confronted with the problem of the relationship to be created between the local organisations and the Public Record Office. While recommending that all local public records should be sent to a suitable local centre (county town or borough); that owners of semi-public records (e.g. Hospitals, Societies, Colleges) and private records should be invited to deposit their documents in the officially constituted centre, the Committee went on to consider the creation of some form of supervisory inspectorate appointed by the Public Record Office. These officials, it considered, should be empowered to inspect the record offices, advising the local archivists and sending back reports to the Deputy Keeper which, if approved by him, were to be sent on to the local



office for implementation. Certain blemishes in the 1902 recommendations became obvious on closer reflection, and a Royal Commission was appointed in 1910 to reconsider both the findings and the original problem. The report of this Commission, delayed by the war, appeared in 1919 and showed that although in agreement with their predecessors on some grounds, certain specific measures were to be taken to overcome the deficiencies, notably a new emphasis on the need for centralization. Condemning the uselessness of legislation that was merely permissive, it stated that all local records were to be under the superintendence of the Master of the Rolls, the local provisions for these records being under the supervision of practically the same inspectorate as suggested in 1902, but with one significant difference - the inspectors were to be empowered to remove records which they considered to be inadequately housed. Unlike the 1902 Committee, therefore, the Commissioners of 1919 insisted rigorously on the need for centralization, and had their proposal been put into effect, the result would surely have been the stifling of local initiative and a stratification of archival organization such as has occurred in France.

Progress in the case of local records, then, had been very uneven before 1939. Little that was tangible had been suggested from the centre, while in the shires and boroughs developments were left entirely to the enthusiasm of a few individuals. Two counties, Bedford and Middlesex, had established Record Offices, and local bodies like the Chetham and Surrey Societies were doing what they could. The Historical Manuscripts Commission had been under way for seventy years and was joined in 1932 by the British Records Association. Such work mitigated the problem to a degree, but whatever the extent of its success, the result could hardly fail to be haphazard and uncoordinated. But the war brought new pressures. One result was the increased stimulus to the county authorities to consider the wartime dangers of disposal and destruction, and the inception of many county repositories (including Lancashire) date from this period. Another was the Committee set up by the Master of the Rolls in 1943. The purpose of this body seems to be to consider the problems connected with records in Britain from a national standpoint, but its constituency seems to weigh unduly in favour of the Public Record Office and other influences from the centre. So far the only tangible result of its deliberations has been the setting up of the National Register of Archives, a scheme which was launched during adverse times, and which even yet seems to be struggling to get under way.

After the war, the practical problem became steadily more acute, being sharpened by a tremendous upsurge in the study of local history. The need was met by the widespread establishing of local Record Offices, and the setting up of training courses for local archivists at the Universities of Liverpool and London. But the opportunity to provide a relatively simple solution to the basic problem of co-ordinating the archival arrangements of the various localities with each other and then with the Public Record Office was lost when the outstanding post-war development in the field of local archives was allowed to take place on an unsystematic and purely ad hoc basis. The very success of the movement has brought only a widening of the gap.



From the lessons of the last hundred and fifty years, certain principles seem to stand out as undeniable. It is essential that the differences between the approaches for dealing with central, local and private records should be recognised and training given accordingly; but, it would be equally dangerous to make any distinction in status between the staffs concerned. There can be no success with legislation which treats the problem incidentally. Special legislation is the only possible solution, and it must not be merely permissive. It should not rely too greatly on the public spirit of the owners, yet must not be too sensitive to vested interests, while sufficiently considerate of local interests and patriotisms. It is very necessary that machinery should be created to enforce and carry out the legislation, and the machinery should be such that, without duplicating staff, it co-ordinates archival work at all levels and in all spheres, does not result in stratification, nor stifle local initiative by an over centralized control.

Undoubtedly these are counsels of perfection, but the warning for Australia is all too clear. The new attitude which is prepared to consider the study of local history as a suitable field for the attention of professional historians has appeared already in Australia, as well as in Britain. As yet there appears to be no sign that any Australian University is prepared to foster the study of local history to the extent that is practised, for instance, in the University College of Leicester. But the paper by F.K. Crowley at the recent ANZAAS Conference in Melbourne indicates that in Western Australia, at least, the possibilities are not being ignored. Similarly, the work of Dr. Serle at Melbourne, who has for some years been labouring to complete a register of local records in Victoria, deserves the widest recognition and support. The lists of theses in progress in Australian Universities shows a considerable percentage of work being done which involves in part or in whole the writing of local history, and in this connection, one able article has appeared already on the techniques of writing and record searching to be employed in such work. Mr. Blainey remarks on the tendency amongst Australian local historians to write as easily and as quickly as possible, a characteristic which in some cases he attributes to the fact that many do not know where to search for the answers to their questions. As he says "The Council or Town Board should own minute and note books, listing occupations of people, uses of land and the age of the houses. Churches, mechanics institutes, schools, shops, court houses may yield records. Old families may own an old farm journal, a diary, photos or newspaper clippings". All this is very true; in England, the volume of records similar to these has proved in some cases to be staggering. But the very fact of this development in Australia only throws into greater prominence the necessity of making provision for such materials.

Clearly enough, the most satisfactory starting point is special legislation, though any such legislation must be confined at first to meeting the specific problem of local records, since at this stage it would be impossible to frame provisions covering adequately the whole field of archives in Australia. The basic question is that of the organisation to be created, and for official records, the solution need not be difficult to find. Ideally, while specifying



compulsory deposition, the legislation should cut through vested interests, and preserve local pride and initiative. But in an Australia whose cities are large and whose towns are usually small, could the regional office cater economically for an area less than that of the State? The only possible remedy is that State capitals should become the centre of what is equivalent to provincial archives, if only for the reason that in those places alone will there exist sufficient resources capable of giving the records adequate treatment. Here, all the techniques of modern record keeping would be at the service of the State and local administrators; but also there should be at least one member of the staff whose special responsibility would be for the care of local records and who also has facilities for travelling round the outlying districts, to exercise a supervisory control over the arrangements made for the storage of semi-current records. This latter provision is all the more important since in the case of local official records there is likely to be one important divergence from normal archival procedure. Owing to the considerable distances involved, it would be impossible to operate the usual file-lending services for any but the central authorities; this would mean that the local administrators would be obliged to retain their records for a greater length of time than is usual before placing them in the State Repository, and this might easily be the point at which the greatest confusion and loss occurred.

The position of private local records, however, remains untouched. The rather ominous suggestions attributed to the 1943 Committee in Britain only demonstrate how wide are the implications connected with the problem, and how difficult it will always be to find a compromise which is workable and yet acceptable to the majority of private owners. The fact will always remain that in the case of private records legislation is foolish, since it can never be enforced. Little can be done to induce owners to deposit beyond using persuasion, and it should be stated as clearly as possible that with the possible exception of sale abroad, no official interference is intended with private records. To meet this problem, a suitable version of the English county records system seems to have the greatest value, with a central Repository created to cater for official records, and yet willing to shelter records of other institutions and private owners as an act of grace.

It is one thing to create a system of state Repositories; it is another to ensure that they contain the best quality records. Once the Repository is established as far as official records of the recent past are concerned, the process could become relatively automatic. At one point only might it become necessary to call in outside help, and this would be in assisting to discover the whereabouts of earlier official records. Some may be at the house of a former official, some sent for destruction or salvage, but never destroyed - many possibilities present themselves, but all are outside the scope of a government department. The work of seeking out these records must be left to local enthusiasm and voluntary effort.

Similarly with private records. Again this particular class presents the greatest number of problems to which there can be no easy or even single solution, and this is an aspect to which the



State Universities and local Historical Societies could direct their most useful work, since it is a field in which the ability to forecast the types of record most likely to be encountered and to assess the value of each are almost pre-requisites. But it should be clearly understood that there can be no question of forming subsidiary collections through these bodies; practice has shown this to bring in some cases disaster, in most cases a completely useless disposal of records. The temptation must be resisted firmly since the use of a central Repository is certainly in the best interests of the records themselves and probably in the long run of most serious researchers. It is true that some of this work of discovery has been done already, but as it proceeds nothing will become more evident than the need for some co-ordination and standardisation of practices. The wide variety of record types will be paralleled only by the variety of methods used in recording information about them. Nor, under the present circumstances can there be any hope of securing uniformity in setting out the contents of each. Uniform recording media are desirable, if only to ensure that the same questions are asked about each discovery. In this respect, it would be advantageous to consider at some future stage the applicability to Australian conditions of the methods used by the British National Register of Archives. But whether or not the same or similar recording instruments are used, there remains one inescapable necessity - the setting up of a central co-ordinating body. Again, the method used by the National Register of Archives of setting up a central office which makes up into the form of a National Register the recording sheets sent in by its voluntary helpers in the counties, offers a simple and inexpensive solution. This is a very adaptable procedure, and could be suited easily to Australian conditions, provided that a co-ordinating body could be found. Two obvious alternatives exist - to construct a new one or to adapt an existing body. Of the latter category, both State Archives and Universities must be by-passed since to be really effective, the organisation needs to be supra-state. Naturally it would be possible to set up something along the lines of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, but there seems to be no real reason why an existing organisation such as the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia should not be made the body responsible for arranging an Australia-wide programme, as well as registering the results.

Training needs would depend to a very great degree upon the staffing arrangements decided upon in each Repository. During the recent Library Conference in Brisbane, the Archives Section set up a Committee to consider the general problems connected with training, but in the case under discussion, the provision of suitable archivists should not be too difficult a matter. Certain State Archives already exist and a period of in-training undertaken at the most advanced of these would give a fair grounding in the methods to be followed in dealing with modern departmental archives. But from the very nature of the institution to which they belong, the archivists would be expected to take an interest in the activities of local historical societies, and the developments in local history in general. Moreover, if the staff of the Repository includes one or more members responsible for all forms of local records, public and private, then the need to provide some suitable training before specialization is obvious. Here, the Universities could render another valuable service by providing these archivists with instruction in the techniques



of researching for and writing local history, and by making themselves responsible for that part of the archivists' training involving the treatment of private records.

Whether the requirements of Commonwealth, State and Private Owner will ever be met by one organisation, and what will be the inter-relationships within such an organisation are questions for the future. Whatever the form adopted, however, the most important consideration is that the provisions which have been made for the Commonwealth and State central Archives and which are now being framed for those of business houses should not be allowed to outstrip those made for the rest. If ever the problem is to be considered from the point of view of Australia as a whole, some immediate action must be taken on behalf of the remaining segment; otherwise the position may well deteriorate beyond redemption.

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## MANUSCRIPTS IN THE MITCHELL LIBRARY, SYDNEY

### A DESCRIPTION OF THEIR ORGANISATION

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### INTRODUCTION:

David Scott Mitchell, founder of the Mitchell Library, began collecting an Australian and Pacific library less than a century after the first white settlement. He was able to preserve many items, especially manuscripts, which might otherwise have been lost. Under his will he endowed the Library and stipulated that it should be vested in the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales on condition that it be provided with suitable space in the Library building and with trained staff. The result of these conditions is that the Mitchell Library can continue to grow. Since the Mitchell Library was opened in 1910, it has been greatly enriched by gifts from public spirited citizens, from donors abroad and from societies and Government agencies of Australia and other countries. The income from the endowment enables the Trustees to make selected purchases.

In October 1955 the collection of manuscripts contained 6,400 catalogued volumes or files, 340 sets of volumes and boxes of loose documents as yet not fully catalogued, and many thousands of single