

## GUIDE TO PRE-FEDERATION ARCHIVES;

A paper read at the 11th Conference of the  
Library Association of Australia, Melbourne, August 1961.

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The intention of this symposium as I understand it, is to examine the various means whereby the archival resources of Australia may be exploited. My part in it is to speak about that rather moribund creature, the Guide to Pre-Federation Archives. Because of the shortness of time I have perforce prepared this paper with no knowledge of how much work is being done towards the project in various States, nor even of how much many of you know of the scheme. Consequently much of the material in this paper will be from the point of view of what is happening in New South Wales. Should any State be doing any work towards the Guide I think we would all be most interested to hear about it in the discussion time.

I assume that most people present know something of the Guide and its origins, but I will give the broad outlines of the scheme. The idea for a guide to all pre-Federation official records in recognized archival institutions throughout Australia originated from a Seminar on Archives Management held in Canberra in 1954 under the chairmanship of Dr. T.R. Schellenberg. The scheme was for each State and the Commonwealth to prepare a preliminary inventory for each record group in custody containing descriptions on the series level, and an historical introduction to the record group and to the functions reflected in it. It was not intended to include series in departmental hands unless necessary to clarify an archive group in archival custody. The description of continuing series would be terminated arbitrarily at 1900. As each inventory was prepared by States and Commonwealth it was intended that they would be forwarded to a central editor. The editorial work would, of course, involve a great deal of additional research in order to produce a general introduction which would include a history of the administrative relationships between the various States, and with Great Britain, and a study of the relationships between the records described in the Guide and those published for example in "Historical Records of Australia", and those from the Public Record Office which have been copied on microfilm. Co-operation would be necessary between the contributors and the editorial body for the research work necessary, and the possibility of enlisting the help of research workers and staff of various universities was suggested.

Following on this Seminar, a Conference of representatives of the Commonwealth National Library, and State Library authorities was held in 1955, and agreement was reached as to the form of the preliminary inventories which would make up the Guide. Copies of "Instructions for the Preparation of Inventories" were circulated to ensure some uniformity.

These "Instructions" went into minute details concerning what should be included in the introductions and appendixes, details of layout and terminology, and of arrangement.

That then was the basic scheme. Results have been somewhat disappointing, but understandably so.

As I mentioned before I am only able to judge what is being done by what has actually been published. Two inventories have been produced by Tasmania, one by Western Australia, and three to my knowledge by the Commonwealth Archives two of which were, however, inventories of post-1900 records, and hence not contributions to the Guide to Pre-Federation Archives. All the above six inventories were of complete record groups, and in addition the Archives Department of the Public Library of N.S.W. has produced two inventories of sub-groups of the Colonial Secretary's record group.\*

I understand that the original expectation was for all inventories to be submitted to the central editorial authority within about five years. This was a completely unrealistic expectation, since many institutions were at that stage not even within sight of beginning such a project. The production of a complete and final inventory of a record group, while laudable in itself, is to be deplored if it is produced at the expense of other record groups which remain virtually unprocessed. Usually it is necessary for the entire holdings to be brought into use on a very preliminary level of description before any refinements are embarked upon. I know this was the position at the Public Library of New South Wales in 1955, and other States were probably at a similar stage of development. In New South Wales there was roughly 7,000 feet of archives in custody when the Archives Department was established in 1953, and practically no description or other processing had been done. My predecessor, Allan Horton, embarked immediately on a project of very quick and preliminary description of the entire collection, this being the only way in which the records could be brought into use as quickly as possible.

The end of this first stage was reached at the beginning of 1959, and it was only then that work could begin on revising these preliminary descriptions and organizing them into preliminary inventory form with the necessary historical introduction and other associated material. It was at this time that work commenced on the two preliminary inventories of sub-groups of records mentioned above. These were published in December, 1959, and January, 1960. They were still experimental in nature, but with all their faults they were given an enthusiastic reception sufficient to encourage us that this was the best form of finding aid to produce. Since then we have embarked on an extensive publication programme and at the present time we are

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\* As a result of this statement, I have since found that an additional inventory has been produced by Western Australia, and one by South Australia.

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working on inventories of eleven record groups and three further sub-groups of the Colonial Secretary's records. At the first meeting of the newly constituted Archives Authority of N.S.W. on 29th June last, several resolutions were passed concerning the broad outlines of the future work and methods of the Archives Office. One of these resolutions was "That work continue towards the publication of the preliminary inventory form of finding aid."

I feel sure that we all agree that the original project was an admirable one. The "Instructions" which were issued as a result of the 1955 Conference are in almost as much detail as anyone could possibly need. Some minor additions and amendments may be necessary, but by and large it is a good working basis. For instance size is not specified. I note that the two Tasmanian Inventories are published in quarto, while all others published so far are foolscap. However this is a minor point.

It might be said that the original scheme was a little premature. As I mentioned above we in New South Wales were not at that stage in a position to embark on such a project, and I suspect that some other States were in similar circumstances. Even today Queensland may not be in a position to commence preparing inventories since an Archivist has only recently been appointed there. However, most States are now probably in a better position to be able to give the project serious consideration. I will commit myself so far as to say that the preliminary inventory is the best form of finding aid that can be produced for Australian conditions at this stage of our archival development. As you may have gathered I see the compilation of finding aids for an archival institution in three stages, perhaps because this is what has been happening in New South Wales. Stage 1 is the preliminary description, series by series, to bring the entire holdings of an archives into immediate use. Stage 2 is a refinement of this, developing the preliminary descriptions into the more detailed preliminary inventories with the necessary introductory material added. Stage 3 in the far distant future is the ultimate refinement of indexing and other such luxuries.

If I am correct in assuming that editing on the completed inventories from all States was to have commenced five years after the initiation of the scheme then I can only say that the Conference must have been a meeting of supreme idealists. New South Wales has its staff problems, and some other States must have even worse problems. We find we can only devote about a quarter of our time to work towards inventories. 1970 seems to be a more realistic dead-line for the commencement of the editing of the entire Guide; the decision as to who is to be the editorial authority should obviously be deferred until then. The archives scene in Australia has undergone a radical change in the last five years and will undoubtedly undergo further changes in the next ten.

The advantages of the preliminary inventories should be quite obvious, even if the Guide to Pre-Federation Archives is never published. Published inventories deposited in institutions throughout Australia will be useful as:-

1. A general stocktaking of holdings for archival purposes.
2. A means of stimulating interest in archival activities generally.
3. A basic reference tool for research workers.

The last point is the most important. Inventories would eliminate much correspondence along the lines of "what have you got in my subject field?". They would also eliminate a certain amount of travelling to survey the resources available for a particular research project. For instance, some two years ago I received an enquiry as to what records were in our custody that might be used for a certain thesis. The researcher was simply conducting a pilot project to find out if it were possible to find the necessary information for the thesis he had chosen. I understand that most other States received a similar enquiry from the same person. Following protracted correspondence he then found that he had to visit each State to examine the records more closely. After over a year he was able to decide that his thesis was possible and he could start work. Much of this correspondence and travel would have been eliminated had he had access to a set of inventories of all pre-Federation records in official archival custody.

In conclusion I would urge most strongly that all States begin as soon as possible to work towards the preparation of preliminary inventories in a standard form according to the principles set out in the "Instructions for the Preparation of Inventories". Speaking from experience, we have found that the work necessary for the preparation of inventories is necessary work in any case whether the inventories are published or not. Most States seem to follow the principles behind the preliminary inventory in the preparation of their own domestic finding aids. It simply requires a slight extra effort to edit the material into the correct form, into a logical order, prepare stencils, and publish.

We all stand to gain considerably from this little extra effort. The Guide to Pre-Federation Archives may never be published, but if preliminary inventories are published by all archival authorities and circulated to a wide range of libraries, universities, and other archives throughout Australia, then a similar result will be achieved. The advantages of published inventories from all States being held in such institutions are as manifold as they are obvious.

If I might summarize the points I have tried to make:-

1. All State archivists should try to allot a percentage of the working time of their staff towards the

preparation of preliminary inventories, no matter how small a percentage this may be.

2. These inventories should be designed as far as possible along the lines set down in the "Instructions for the Preparation of Inventories".
3. The inventories should be issued irrespective of whether they will eventually form the basis of a Guide to Pre-Federation Archives.
4. Consideration of the Guide, should be shelved until 1970 or such other time, be it earlier or later, when sufficient inventories are published to justify extensive work commencing on such an ambitious project.

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THE COLLECTION OF AUSTRALIAN HISTORICAL RECORDS;

A paper read at the 11th Conference of the Library Association of Australia, Melbourne, August 1961.

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The title of this talk is wide enough to cover a variety of treatments of a broad subject. It will be as well, therefore, that I begin by setting a limit and giving some indication of my intentions.

In the first place, the only kinds of Australian historical records with which I will deal are those that may be termed unique: manuscripts and original works.

In the second place I propose to make some reference to the Conference on Source Material for Australian Studies held in Canberra on 12th July. I believe that no discussion of the collecting of Australian records can be pursued usefully at this stage without reference to this conference. However, I should make it clear that although I was Secretary to the Conference I am in no sense a spokesman for the Conference or for the Library Association which was a participating authority. Anything that I may say that goes beyond the circulated minutes of the Conference must be regarded as a personal observation. Finally I propose to give some account of the collecting activity of the National Library in some fields at least.

The Conference on Source Material for Australian Studies was