

## SECURITY AND SERVICE;

Some problems in providing students  
with materials for research.

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It is very common in writers in struggling journals to write articles hopefully intended to stimulate snowballs of discussion and comment from colleagues; this one is no exception. I genuinely would like to know how other archivists deal with what must be one of their commonest and most immediate problems: the question of the security of unique records.

I do not mean the well-known problem of access, in the sense that that question exercises the mind of our Canberra colleagues; but simply protection from loss. Most archivists, I think, sooner or later develop a complex about the safety of the records in their charge. In some it amounts almost to a phobia: they would rather see the records sealed up behind bars than have to expose them to the light, let alone to the tender mercies of students. But most of us are torn between the wish (and the obligation) to make our records available for genuine research, and the instinct of preservation. We find ourselves making odious comparisons between different kinds of research - has the genealogist as much right to use a fragile land grant register as the Ph. D. student? Surely it is better to keep our favourite series reserved for the great historian who, some day (but not to-day), will found a significant monograph on it? For so many documents there is a limit to the number of times they will stand being unfolded and folded, thumbed, turned over, flattened, leant on, rubbed and exposed to ultra-violet light.

Photographic copies, on the face of it, get us out of this dilemma. But in practice they are far too expensive and slow in the making to solve the problem. What then is the happy mean? How, please, can we win historians, like Mr R. B. Joyce, and still keep the records for the enlightenment of those other historians who will reverse their findings?

Since public records have been organised for regular research in Tasmania, the policy has been extremely liberal. Several factors were at work to this end: the youth and enthusiasm of the early staff; the need to encourage the use of the records in order to build up a demand for better conditions; the smallness in the numbers of our early students; and, of course, the lack of any alternative, in the then circumstances of accommodation and staff.

There was, in Hobart to begin with, no search-room; a student was given a table and an insubstantial chair in the huge underground vault beneath the Supreme Court, given a start and told where the rest of the records were - in the stacks all around him. We knew everyone, probably had been at the University with them, and the common herd did not trouble us much. A select few, who could count on a cup of tea and perhaps a biscuit (cream buns on Wednesdays), knew the Archives as quite a pleasant place, uninfluenced by outside conditions of weather and shielded from the light of common day; in a small way we had an international reputation for tea and sympathy, and much worthwhile work was done in this cosy, if musty, atmosphere.

There were obvious advantages to the student in this freedom from formality; he got his material with the minimum delay; unlimited access to the stacks put him into the context of the records he was using; he had the opportunity of sampling records the staff may not have thought of; and maybe he derived incentive from the physical challenge of such vast runs of material. Yet this is perhaps making a virtue out of necessity; no reasonable alternative was possible to our giving the student access to registers and indexes (themselves archives), or to the records en masse, where finding aids did not exist. Few institutions can find the staff to fetch and carry for several students who are searching big series the hard way.

There are even more obvious hazards in this free-for-all system. Even if we are fairly satisfied that there will be no actual theft for gain or curiosity, or to avoid the trouble of copying, there is always the risk of misplacement, which is often nearly as bad. Perhaps most to guard against, though, is the generation of the feeling among the less responsible people that they own the place and are at liberty to treat it with no more respect than the reading-room of the average public library. Too much licence inevitably brings abuse.

What can the alternatives be? In Tasmania our removal to the new State Library building, the most modern in Australia, has brought the problem to a head. In the old premises which, when the mists of nostalgia clear away, were dirty, hard to find and not conducive to leisured browsing, we were relatively untroubled by our masters, the general public. Now those records which are open to student use are shelved with unwonted orderliness in this up-to-the-minute building where every facility for the comfort of the public is laid on, and where the concept of "impact" has free rein. One result is that the Archives are now increasingly visited by many people who, in the old days, would never have heard of us, people quite innocent of any idea of the methods and purposes of such an authority. And this is quite apart from the "natural increase" in our clientèle, accelerated by such projects as the Australian Dictionary of Biography.

Long before the move I had been pondering ways and means, while trying not to build too high a barrier of officiousness between the student and the records, of protecting our resources. Not because anything had actually gone missing, but because it was becoming clear

that the good old days were gone. The winds of change were blowing in too many new faces and the only check imposed under the old system, that of requiring everyone to sign a book specifying the records he had used, was obviously shot full of holes as a real safeguard.

Our staff was, and is, quite inadequate to run a system which denies everyone access to the stacks, even with our present improved search-room facilities. So we have adopted an uneasy compromise which imposes on the staff the unpleasant duty of discriminating between those whom it thinks it can trust to put things back properly and not otherwise to misuse the records, and those who have yet to graduate to this position. Everyone, whether he is of the élite or not, must sign a card for each physical unit of records he wants, and this card is placed on the shelf in the place of the item until it is returned; when this is done, the fact is noted on the card and it is filed chronologically and by the same classification used for the records it refers to.

The system applies equally to the Tasmanian Collection, a valuable body of printed Tasmaniana, which is now housed in the Archives premises. It is my opinion that people have looser morals when it comes to books than with archives, and I am sure that rare books have a readier resale value. But I hesitate to imply that books are more valuable than archives by the application of a more complicated procedure governing their use.

The problem is, of course, insoluble in practical terms. The best we can do is to try to reduce the risks to a minimum, and to give our fellow humans some credit for common honesty. Even with unlimited staff resources, and the narrowest and most constant supervision of search-rooms, the determined filcher can get away with it; the risk of damage and accidental misplacement can never be entirely overcome. And then, paradoxically, there is always the likelihood that a rigidly restrictive system will tend to defeat its purposes, because of its very rigidity.

Very few archival establishments can honestly claim never to have lost anything; it is an occupational hazard. But I for one would be interested to learn how other archivists keep their safety margins.