

BOOK REVIEW

Essays in memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson. Edited for the Society of Archivists by A. E. J. Hollaender. Published by the Society of Archivists.

Although his precepts may not always have been found practicable, or his message even fully understood, the late Sir Hilary Jenkinson acquired a certain aura of authority among archivists in Australia. If this authority has often been challenged, it has, nevertheless, also sparked off a good deal of useful discussion and writing on such topics as custody, the definition of archives, the duties of an archivist, and the concept of the archival group. It is for these theorisings, perhaps, that Jenkinson will be remembered most by the Australian archival profession, and it is surely a tribute to him that, to an Australian, the most interesting essay in this volume is that by Mr. Ian Maclean which relates Jenkinsonian theory to Australian practice.

In Mr. Maclean's article one can see the difficulties of living up to Jenkinson—difficulties which one always suspected were there, even when reading the *Manual* as required examination preparation. One can therefore applaud the more the attempts of the Commonwealth Archives Office to carry Jenkinson's colours into battle — even if they are sometimes necessarily forgotten in the heat and press of the day. For in the unequal fight with partial transfers, mixed records, and intermediate records, Jenkinson can only lend some certain moral encouragement. Even his terminology is found wanting and the Commonwealth Archives Office has added novelties of its own, including the word "set". The meaning of this is made clear enough (p.135), but the absolute need for the term is less clear. Mr. Maclean's suggested use of the terms "provenance" and "provenience" are, I think, less felicitous. Why cannot the word "provenance" in its meaning of the history of records, imply both where a document was found and where it originated? My dictionary gives the same meaning for both words, in any case.

There is an engaging candour in Mr. Maclean's account of past and present accessioning procedures in the Commonwealth Archives Office — one even has the feeling of being asked for at least silent approval for the new three-stage approach, even though the third stage is apparently far enough off in fact to permit serious re-thinking before any final decision is made. Even the decision that groups are to be co-extensive (virtually) with ministries, is sufficiently blurred in concept (e.g., some groups will not be ministries after all) to allow for a good deal of manoeuvrability at all times and situations. It is hard to imagine that Sir Hilary would be so amorphous — after all, the definition of the group was one of his grand concepts. He at least knew — or thought he knew — what it ought to be, even though he might have had some difficulty in isolating an earthly representation of this platonic form.

Mr. Maclean's article makes clear the many difficulties in accessioning records, and he states these problems for all archivists. One wishes, however, that he had been able to deal at greater length with the practical problem of interfiling (in their correct original order) separate transfers of one series as a regular and desirable procedure. It is difficult to find an analogy for removing parts of a whole series of records from time to time, but one might ask whether those in the Archives are just a spatial extension of those still held and being created in the department? Should each transfer be kept separate, or continually filed together in the Archives? As more subject-type file series are created, the problem of their transfer becomes of

increasing importance. And if they are interfiled, how can the necessary space be determined? And should it be just space, or space in different containers? Or should there rather be a grand interfiling of several transfers at intervals? Some speculation on these points might have been valuable to those of us who see the problem looming up all too soon. Fixed location of separate transfers is one answer, but it may not be even the best short term answer.

The possibility of certain Commonwealth records of local origin and significance being passed on eventually to local archival or other appropriate institutions (p.148) is a point of considerable interest and some novelty. Although Mr. Maclean does not go into details the principle is a most thoughtful one.

In some way Mr. Maclean's article has, in the Jenkinson tradition, more theoretical values than practical help for the reader. But he need not fear having ventured into print for his remarks are most informative and stimulating.

Still close at home is the contribution of Mr. David Macmillan on business archives, marred somewhat by his long-standing prejudices about libraries. Whatever the faults of libraries in relation to government records, it is pointless to imply that libraries are in any way responsible for the slow development of interest in business archives in Australia. One reason for this is surely the lack of serious academic interest in Australian history before about 1950, not to mention the lack of government and private funds to finance work on business archives. We must just face the fact that in the competition for resources, all kinds of archives work in Australia can expect to be "also rans" until we become much more wealthy and civilised. In any case, the picture is not at all as bad as Mr. Macmillan represents, and he might have paid some tribute to the considerable number of important business record groups which libraries had preserved long before the Business Archives Council was established.

There would seem, also, some reason to question Mr. Macmillan's assumption that because of the lack of business records to work on, Australian historical writing has suffered "considerable distortion, even without the natural bias that a left wing tendency among some Australian historians has given to their viewpoint". It is not unreasonable to ask for some examples of this, and to be shown how business records would have corrected such a fault. And does not the assumption that research workers at universities are *bona fide*, imply that other research workers in other institutions may be rather dubious characters; in other words, that non-academic people are not to be trusted with business archives? Nor do I share Mr. Macmillan's confidence in historians inventorying the papers they are interested in. If the profession of archivist means anything, it certainly does not mean a skill acquired merely by being an historian who, in any case, is usually far too preoccupied to investigate finer points of arrangement.

Jenkinson seems to have been quite absent from Mr. Macmillan's thoughts as he wrote his essay. This is a pity, since a discussion of custody and other points of theory as they relate to the transfer of business archives to an archival institution, would have been a valuable complement to Maclean's paper.

For obvious reasons I have devoted greater attention to the Australian contributions in the *Memorial* volume, but by this I do not mean to undervalue the other essays, all of which are scholarly and interesting. Perhaps the most delightful is Roger Ellis' paper on the building of the Public Record Office. The great struggle to achieve the building is not without many lessons for to-day, even though we are never so ambitious as to contemplate our new buildings as integral and aesthetic parts of whole streets.

The essay on sigillography and palaeography is, in some way, an ideal introduction to these subjects for Australian archivists who have paid far too little attention to this branch of archives work under the mistaken impression that it has no relevance to modern — i.e., 19th century — records. The essay on Jenkinson's war-time experiences reveals that the archival profession can be as adventurous as anyone would desire, and so might be quoted to attract recruits who may be inclined to look upon the work as cloistered. Similarly the vision of Jenkinson in Jamaica conjures up some delightful — if rather improbable — rewards of the profession.

The essay on the British Transport Commission archives has some curious interest if only for the free and easy interpretation of the term "group" which, it appears, the Commission has apparently applied to collections of annual reports — a deviation which might have Sir Hilary gyrating in his own limbo. The method of assigning specific numbers for "classes" of records so that, for example, directors' minutes in all groups are always, say, no.22, is another novelty. But we can at least take some hopeful comfort from the essay on the development of local archive service in Britain where the writer prophesies that "Increasingly the quasi-anti-quarian flavour of archives work will give way to records management as office after office has to contend with the steady accession of modern papers".

For antipodean readers, the essays reveal a few interesting glimpses of Sir Hilary. He could be both firm and frank, and he displayed much kindness and helpfulness both to those who worked with him, and to the various organisations with which he was connected in promoting archives work. He had his foibles and H. E. Bell catches one neatly when he writes that it was as if Jenkinson "thought in the capital letters that he so much loved to use in all his publications". It is clear that Jenkinson was an intellectual — not merely in swapping Latin verse with his friend Dr. Fowler, but a "ruthless, dedicated intellectual". He was certainly a dedicated archivist.

Overall, the essays strike the reader with the newness of the archives profession and its indeterminacy of method and its many big problems. At the same time they make it plain how much the profession owes to Sir Hilary Jenkinson for his practical work and theoretical writing all directed to solving these problems. His labours were not without compassion, for no-one appreciated better than he that "the archivist (contrary to views held by the Treasury) is a strenuous creature, constantly in touch with the practical problems of life". The volume is a fine tribute to a distinguished archivist.

— G. L. Fischer, *Archivist*,

Public Library of South Australia.