

THE ESTABLISHMENT OF THE CENTRAL ARCHIVES OF FIJI AND THE WESTERN PACIFIC HIGH COMMISSION

By A. I. DIAMOND

The Central Archives was established at Suva in 1953 as a common repository for records of the governments of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission.⁽¹⁾ Since that time the scope of its services has been extended to the South Pacific Office⁽²⁾ and to certain British consular offices⁽³⁾ in the Pacific. Since its establishment it has developed rapidly and is coming to be regarded as one of the more important centres for sociological research in the Pacific. The records held by the Central Archives now occupy approximately 10,700 feet of shelving. These records, received on transfer from the various governments and agencies served by the Archives, date from about the middle of the 19th century and document a large part of the history of British administration and influence in the region up to recent times.

In the larger metropolitan countries, movements for the establishment of libraries, museums, archives and the like can often draw decisive support for their aims from a variety of well-informed and influential sources. In smaller countries, and perhaps especially in colonial territories, such movements must often make their way with little or no outside assistance and sometimes in the face of apathy and even opposition. None of the British territories in the Pacific could be described as opulent by any stretch of the language, nor could it be claimed that in any of them there existed large or powerful sections of the community clamorous for measures to preserve the record of their past. That an archives was successfully established in one of them, therefore, seemed something of a wonder at the time, and still does, even looking back at the events which made it possible.

The movement for the establishment of an Archives in Fiji first arose in 1933. By that time the Colonial Government had been in existence for nearly sixty years⁽⁴⁾ and in many departments the pressure of records⁽⁵⁾ on available space was becoming severe. Sporadic attempts had been made in various offices to stem the accumulation of paper and to reduce the volume of existing records. In 1911 and 1916, for example, systematic reviews of the general inwards correspondence (Minute Papers) of the Colonial Secretary's Office were undertaken to eliminate material of ephemeral value. These reviews seem to have been carefully planned and conscientiously carried out. But elsewhere, action to reduce the bulk of departmental records too often took the form of "clear-outs"—a term which many readers will recognise as a euphemism often applied to destructions, in which the only guiding principle is the apparent value of documents for the con-

(1) The High Commission is centred in Honiara and has jurisdiction over the British Solomon Islands Protectorate (which it administers directly), the Gilbert and Ellice Islands Colony (locally administered by a resident Commissioner) and the British Service of the Anglo-French Condominium of the New Hebrides.

(2) The South Pacific Office performs the functions of a secretariat for the Governor of Fiji in his other capacities as Governor of the Pitcairn Islands Colony, U.K. Chief Commissioner and Consul-General for Tonga, Consul-General for the Western Pacific and Senior Commissioner for the U.K. on the South Pacific Commission. The office is administered by a Commissioner, South Pacific, who is also the British Consul for French Polynesia.

(3) The Central Archives was approved by the Master of the Rolls in 1958 as a permanent repository for archives of the Consul-General for the Western Pacific, of the British Consul in Tonga, and of the now defunct consulates of Fiji, Samoa and the New Hebrides.

(4) Fiji was proclaimed a possession and dependency of the Crown on 10 October, 1874.

(5) In this article the terms "records" and "archives" may be taken as having the same meaning

of current business.⁽⁶⁾ Such efforts as were made to reduce or limit the accumulation of paper, however, were generally inadequate or not sustained and the pressure on suitable accommodation steadily increased.

Every archivist is familiar with the *via dolorosa* followed by departmental records as they fall from current use. It leads from the office to the registry, from there to the registry limbo, and from the limbo to the purgatory of any shed, vault, attic or shack on which the department can obtain a lien.⁽⁷⁾ This ancient progress, which can be described somewhere in the annals of every government, was repeated in Fiji.

Accounts of the state of non-current departmental records prior to 1930 are rare, as might be expected. But they are hardly necessary; the conditions in many of the depositories of Suva and the provinces in the first half of this century are only too vividly illustrated by the state of many of the records now in the Archives.

Among the first to take an interest in the conservation of Fiji's records was Professor George Cockburn Henderson.⁽⁸⁾ Henderson visited the Colony four times between 1927 and 1934 to gather material for his books, and part of his local research in original sources was carried out among the early records of the Colonial Secretary's Office. The non-current records of the C.S.O. were housed at that time in a small concrete room adjoining the old Government Building.⁽⁹⁾ The condition of the "Archives", as it was called, disturbed Henderson profoundly. What he discovered was "a gloomy and depressing dungeon", a "badly ventilated and wretchedly appointed room", crammed to the ceiling with more or less disordered records, in which dust and vermin abounded. When he had finished his work he sent a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary deploring the state of the early C.S.O. archives and begging that something should be done to mitigate it, even if this only extended to the cleaning and sorting of them. Referring to the pre-session records⁽¹⁰⁾ he suggested that, as they were no longer of political interest, they might be offered to the Mitchell Library.

This suggestion was not acted upon, partly because an officer with experience in the management of official records had just been seconded to Fiji from the Colonial Office to overhaul the filing system of the C.S.O., and it was felt that he might be able to undertake the work advocated by Henderson as part of his duties. This was John Murray Jardine.⁽¹¹⁾ Jardine did, in fact, take an interest in the early C.S.O. records and throughout the whole of his long term of service, first as Records Clerk and later as Office Superintendent of the C.S.O., he continued to exert a gentle but steady pressure for the improvement of archive facilities.

(6) The writer has heard many confessions of desperate and terrible deeds done in government vaults and outhouses in Suva and the provinces — and not only in government depositories.

(7) A body of non-government records now housed in the library of the Central Archives previously served out a humiliating term of imprisonment in a disused latrine.

(8) Emeritus Professor of History at the University of Adelaide and author of *Fiji and the Fijians*. Angus and Robertson, Sydney. 1931; *The Discoveries of the Fiji Islands*. John Murray, London. 1933; and *The Evolution of Government in Fiji*. Unpublished MS. Mitchell Library Sydney. Henderson was among those instrumental in establishing the South Australian Archives in 1920. For details of Henderson's work in Fiji see *George Cockburn Henderson, a Memoir* by Marjory R. Casson. Libraries Board of South Australia, Adelaide, South Australia. 1964.

(9) On the site now occupied by the Anglican cathedral.

(10) These date from 1871 to 1875, and are now in the Central Archives.

(11) Assumed duty, 21 Mar., 1930. *Fiji Civil List*.

Although the immediate results of Henderson's report were slight his visits mark a turning point. His interest in the history of Fiji, and in "the stuff of which reliable histories are made", was infectious, and helped to create an attitude of mind in government circles, from the Governor down, which was favourable to later measures for the conservation of official archives. Among other things, his last visit resulted in the raising of a file in the C.S.O. on which all subsequent papers relating to archives matters were posted. As a result, an orderly body of background material grew up which not only served to confer a kind of respectability on the subject of archives,⁽¹²⁾ but which provided a useful source of reference for later reformers.

Among Henderson's associates in Fiji was a young official whose own interest in history and anthropology made him a ready convert to Henderson's views. This was George Kingsley Roth. Roth arrived in the Colony as a cadet at the beginning of 1928, and by 1933, when Henderson made his last visit, he had already reached the relatively senior rank of District Commissioner. In December, 1933, Roth addressed a memorandum to the Colonial Secretary adumbrating Henderson's earlier plea for improved conditions for the early C.S.O. records and suggesting that a survey of them be made to ascertain their extent and nature.

This proposal of Roth's was taken up, and during the next three years, Jardine made a careful survey of the early C.S.O. and pre-cession records as part of a larger project for the re-classification of the C.S.O. correspondence.

Henderson's views gained the interest of the then Governor, Sir Murchison Fletcher, and to feed this interest, Henderson obtained for him a quantity of literature dealing with the establishment of the South Australian Archives, in which Henderson himself had played a prominent part. This material was later passed to Roth and Jardine and appears to have been responsible for Roth's advocacy, soon after, of a Colony Archives.

In September, 1934, Henderson and Roth simultaneously forwarded memoranda to the Colonial Secretary, both again urging immediate action to improve the condition and housing of the early C.S.O. records. Roth's memorandum went further, to recommend the establishment of a "State Archives".

This was a new departure. Up to that time discussion had been confined to the C.S.O. records. Now, under Henderson's influence, Roth was beginning to think in terms of a central repository for the whole of Government. But in this he was far ahead of the times. At that stage there was not the slightest hope of Government rising to such a proposition and indeed this particular recommendation was not even commented on. Nearly twenty years were to pass before anything like this was suggested again. Even then, though the times were much more propitious, it could still raise some eyebrows.

In the meantime Jardine did what he could with sadly limited facilities. To him more than to any other person, except perhaps Henderson, is owed the survival of the records of the pre-cession government (the Kingdom of Fiji). Jardine made these records an object of special care, and devoted much time, both within and outside his normal hours of duty, to the classification and listing of them, and to their repair and preservation. The relatively sound condition in which these records eventually reached the Central Archives was due in no small measure to the unthanked efforts of Jardine.

(12) In government, one of the most important attributes a novel measure can have is reputable antecedents.

The securing of suitable storage space was always Jardine's greatest problem and this was not solved until the last year of his service. In 1935, when plans for the new Government Building were under consideration, he arranged for a large room to be set aside for use as a C.S.O. "Archives". This room was specially equipped with electric heaters to control relative humidity (an idea he had obtained from Ceylon) and arrangements were made to furnish it with rustless steel shelving. But these plans came to nothing. At the last minute, Jardine's "Archives" room had to be converted to another use and the C.S.O. records were assigned to two smaller, and very unsuitable, rooms elsewhere in the building. Before Jardine could get these adapted, the war broke out and the whole question of archives was dropped.

Towards the end of the war, government began to consider plans for local rehabilitation and post war development. One of the subjects reviewed was that of library services, and to provide a basis for policy on future expansion or improvement of these services it was decided that a Colony-wide survey should be made of existing facilities. At that time, C. R. H. Taylor, Librarian of the Alexander Turnbull Library, was serving in Fiji in the New Zealand army. Taylor agreed to undertake the proposed survey and afterwards to submit "a plan for establishment and maintenance of libraries in the Colony". This work was carried out between September and December, 1944, and the resulting report was published as a Legislative Council Paper in July, 1946.⁽¹³⁾ In this report, after dealing with libraries, Taylor turned to the question of archives, remarking, *inter alia* that in spite of much interest and solicitude for the preservation of archives during the previous fifteen years, in fact "nothing [had] been done either to improve the physical preservation of resources or to discharge in some measure the duties that devolve upon an administration that produces archives" (i.e. to preserve its archives in good order and to make them available for public reference). He recommended that a member of the Secretariat⁽¹⁴⁾ staff should be allocated to archives duties, and that, once the archives had been properly organised,⁽¹⁵⁾ he should be enabled to spend at least 50 per cent. of his time working in them. He further recommended that at some stage an editorial committee should be invoked to advise on the publication of catalogues, calendars, guides and similar reference media.

Nothing was done to implement these recommendations and Taylor's admonitions would seem to have fallen on deaf ears. But although no immediate action resulted, the report did at least reopen the subject of archives, and in terms which could only strengthen the hands of those concerned with reform. At any rate it is interesting that the next time the archives question arose, a noticeably different atmosphere prevailed.⁽¹⁶⁾

In October, 1951, on his way back to Fiji from England, where he had been on leave, Roth visited Sydney. There he met and had discussions with H. E. Maude, at that time Executive Officer for Social Development of the South Pacific Commission.⁽¹⁷⁾ As a result of these discussions, Maude extended an

(13) C.P. 12/1946.

(14) Previously called the Colonial Secretary's Office.

(15) Taylor seems to have been thinking primarily of the Secretariat Archives.

(16) Although there were more reasons than one for this as will be shown.

(17) H. E. Maude entered the Colonial service in 1929 and served in various administrative capacities under the Western Pacific High Commission until December, 1948, when he was seconded to the South Pacific Commission as Deputy Secretary-General. Between 1949 and 1957 he served as Executive Officer for Social Development. He then joined the staff of the Department of Pacific History in the Research School of Pacific Studies, A.N.U., and is at present a Professorial Fellow in that Department.

offer to the Fiji Government, through Roth, to obtain the services of a trained archivist to carry out a systematic survey of the Colony's official archives, and to advise on measures for their conservation. The Government accepted this offer and arrangements were made for a visit by C. A. Burmester, Chief Reference Officer of the Commonwealth National Library. This visit was arranged for September of the following year.

Before Burmester arrived, however, a memorandum dealing with the records of the Western Pacific High Commission was submitted to the Chief Secretary by a visiting scholar, Miss Dorothy Crozier. This memorandum was to have an important bearing on later developments; but before dealing with it, it will be necessary to outline the circumstances which led up to its submission.

Prior to 1951, the office of High Commissioner for the Western Pacific had been vested in the Governor of Fiji. On the 20th August, 1951, however, a separate High Commissioner was appointed, and arrangements were put in hand for the removal of the High Commission Secretariat from Suva to Honiara in the British Solomon Islands Protectorate. This removal was carried out in three stages, or "waves" as they were called, between December, 1951, and May, 1952. All of the records of the High Commission were transferred to Honiara with the exception of those accumulated prior to 1st January, 1920, and certain records of a later date relating to the Pitcairn Islands Colony, Tonga and Consulate-General for the Western Pacific.⁽¹⁸⁾ The records created prior to 1920 were left in the strong-room of the old High Commission building in Suva, while the other records mentioned were transferred to a newly established Pitcairn and Tonga Office.⁽¹⁹⁾

The decision to leave behind the pre-1920 records was taken partly as a result of an arrangement already entered into by the High Commission for a survey of its early records by Miss Crozier.⁽²⁰⁾ The value of the early High Commission records for academic research was recognised by the administration and it was agreed that removal of them to Honiara in the early stages of settlement would not be in their best interests. The call on them in connection with current business was slight and, all things considered, it seemed better to leave them in Suva, at least until Miss Crozier's survey had been completed. It was anticipated, moreover, that some solution to the question of the future housing of these records might emerge from Burmester's forthcoming survey of Fiji's records. In the event, as will be seen, this belief was justified.

In the course of her survey, Miss Crozier was invited to advise on the practicability or otherwise of separating Pitcairn, Tonga and Consulate-General papers from the main body of High Commission records. It was realised that if it became necessary to transfer the old records to Honiara, such a separation might become necessary.

Miss Crozier began her work in May, 1952, and in the following July she handed up a memorandum, dealing with "the proposed separation, future housing and present survey of the Western Pacific High Commission archives". In this she pointed out that it had been the normal practice of the High Com-

(18) The Governor of Fiji retained certain offices in relation to Pitcairn and Tonga referred to in (2) above.

(19) Abolished and superseded by the South Pacific Office in 1958.

(20) This project was carried out under the auspices of the Department of Pacific History in the Australian National University and was financed, in part, by a grant in aid of £500 from the Western Pacific High Commission.

mission to keep its Pitcairn and Tonga records as part of the general records of the office. Separation of them, therefore, would entail going through, and marking, all of the registers and indexes. Not only this, but as the registers and indexes themselves did not always furnish sufficient evidence to show to which territories documents related, it would be necessary to go through all of the correspondence as well. Further, in cases where files related to Tonga and Pitcairn, as well as to other territories, removal of papers would entail either the making of copies to replace them, or an elaborate system of cross referencing, or both. Similar problems arose in the case of letter books and bound volumes of inwards despatches. After a careful study of the problem her conclusion was, that the separation of Pitcairn and Tonga documents from the main corpus of High Commission records, though theoretically possible, could not, if carried out in accordance with correct principles, be accomplished without heavy expenditure of time and money.⁽²¹⁾ The separation of Consulate-General records, she found, would be no less difficult, and for similar reasons.

The proposed separation, in short, was impracticable, and some alternative would have to be found. Miss Crozier's solution was to leave the records in Suva, intact, as the nucleus of a Central Archives.

To solve these various problems the most desirable course would seem to be the establishment of a Central Archives in Suva in collaboration with the Government of Fiji along the lines of the Central African Archives. This solution should receive a favourable reception from the Government of Fiji in view of the present unsatisfactory state of the housing of their archives which are rapidly deteriorating under present conditions and the general pressure on storage space experienced by all Government offices.

Such Central Archives could be under the joint control of the two administrations.

The cost of maintenance could be shared between the two administrations on an agreed ratio.⁽²²⁾

Other possible courses were outlined in the memorandum, but each of these was shown to have distinct disadvantages and it was clear that Miss Crozier herself strongly favoured the idea for a Central Archives.

On the whole, official reaction to this proposal was favourable. By now, most of the senior officers in Government were willing to concede that something effective should be done about the conservation of official records, and joint action with the High Commission offered certain advantages; not the least of which was shared costs. The idea for a Central Archives offered for the first time a solution to the archives question which was financially feasible.⁽²³⁾

Burmester began his survey in October and submitted his report from Canberra in February the following year. The report revealed, as was expected, that the condition of the Fiji Government's archives was generally deplorable and urged that measures should be taken at once for their protection. The most desirable of such measures, it was pointed out, would be the establishment of a properly equipped and staffed archives office. After referring to Miss Crozier's memorandum of the previous July, Burmester wrote:

(21) She estimated that the work might be sufficient to keep a qualified records officer fully occupied for as long as two years.

(22) "Memorandum on the Proposed Separation, Future Housing and Present Survey of the Western Pacific High Commission Archives" dated 14 Jul., 1952. Ref. Fiji Secretariat file No. 117/63-II. pp. 26-34, in Central Archives, Suva.

(23) "Financial feasibility", of course, is a relative term. The amount appropriated annually for the Central Archives now would have been quite unthinkable for such a purpose in 1953.

Having in mind the urgent need for the provision of proper archival custody and service in the case of both Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission, and the common archives problems of the two administrations, the conception of a Central Archives appears to be a natural and undoubtedly the most practical solution. The economy of having one archives authority with one staff, housed in one building, applying one set of procedures and aiming at the one standard of archives care and service, instead of two, is as obvious as it is important. The Central Archives would have these specific advantages:

- (a) It would reduce the inconvenience of the present admixture of records between the two sets of archives.
- (b) The separation of the records of the Consulate-General, Tonga and Pitcairn from those of Western Pacific High Commission would be avoided.
- (c) Common standards of procedure consistent with the requirements of archival integrity could be achieved.⁽²⁴⁾

Summing up at the close of the report he said:

The survey of the records of Fiji has made it clear that:

- (a) The state of the Fiji records makes it necessary for them to be removed immediately to more satisfactory accommodation.
- (b) A most economical and efficient archives system could be achieved by the establishment of a Central Archives embracing the records of Fiji, [the] Western Pacific High Commission, and the Consulate-General of the Western Pacific.
- (c) Temporary accommodation in Suva could be provided for such an archives established in those offices vacated by the Western Pacific High Commission.
- (d) It is essential that the Central Archives should be placed under the direction and control of a trained archivist who, preferably, would have had some experience in the Public Record Office of the British record system, and of the colonial series in particular.

"The advantages which the Government of Fiji and the Western Pacific High Commission are likely to derive from the increased economy and efficiency in their record administration achieved by the Central Archives would themselves justify its establishment. At the same time, also, the requirements of research, both governmental and non-governmental, would be met much more adequately than they have been in the past."⁽²⁵⁾

By the time Burmester's report came to hand the idea for a Central Archives had already been accepted in principle by both administrations, as well as by the Colonial Office. It could not be claimed, therefore, that his report was the original moving force; although if it had opposed the idea or recommended alternatives, it could very well have brought the movement to a standstill. As it was, its strong recommendations for the setting up of a Central Archives served to reassure waverers and greatly to strengthen the hands of local advocates of the proposal. The chief value of the Burmester report was that it drew together the threads of the argument for a Central Archives and provided both administrations with a common basis for policy.

It would be tedious to trace in detail the negotiations which followed the arrival of the Burmester report, but a brief outline of them is worth recording.

(24) *Report on the Archives of Fiji* by C. A. Burmester Feb., 1953. pp. 18-19 unpublished. MS. in the library of the Central Archives, Suva.

(25) *ibid* pp. 32-33.

With a Central Archives agreed upon, it remained to work out a basic plan for its establishment acceptable to both governments and to the Colonial Office. With this object, a group of senior officials of Fiji and High Commission,⁽²⁶⁾ with Miss Crozier in attendance, met on the 17th February, 1953, in the Suva Office of the High Commission. At this meeting, agreement was reached on all essentials. The Archives was to come into existence, provisionally, on 1st April, 1953⁽²⁷⁾ and to have as its premises the old High Commission headquarters building in Government House grounds, Suva.⁽²⁸⁾ The expenses of the institution were to be met equally by Fiji and the High Commission. It was resolved to leave all Archives policy and matters of detail for decision after the appointment of an archivist; but estimates were made of the initial costs arising from staff salaries, furniture, equipment and incidentals.

The committee's proposals, after the usual "pruning" on the side of expenses, were eventually submitted to the Governor and the High Commissioner in June, 1953. That funds would be voted to meet Fiji's share was fairly certain, although the final decision in this lay with the Legislative Council.⁽²⁹⁾ In the case of the High Commission, however, there was no such assurance. The British Solomon Islands Protectorate was then, and still is, a Grant-Aided Territory; that is to say, a proportion of its funds are provided by the United Kingdom Government. Consequently, the Treasury in London, as well as the Colonial Office, would be concerned in the decision on a joint Archives, and the Treasury's views, so far, were unknown.

Fiji's share of the expenses received the recommendation of the Select Committee on Finance in November, and in the following Budget Session were voted into the Colony Estimates.

The anticipated difficulties over the High Commission's share, fortunately, did not arise. As it happened, the Treasury offered no objection, and on 30th December, 1953, the Secretary of State for the Colonies gave notice of his final approval.

With its finances approved and published in the Estimates, the Central Archives took its place within the framework of Government as the first institution of its kind in Oceania. As remarked earlier, its establishment seemed, and still seems, something of a prodigy—particularly, perhaps, to those who know the region well. In the past at any rate, the Pacific has not been notable as a spawning ground for cultural or academic institutions, even for those, like Archives, with a utilitarian side to them. Yet the fact remains that the Central Archives was set up, and set up moreover, not primarily for its practical value as an aid to efficient administration, though this of course was a consideration, but because of a recognition on the part of both Governments of an obligation to conserve their early records. This recognition was somewhat belated, it is true, but then so it has been with most administrations, including some for whom there has been less excuse.⁽³⁰⁾

(26) H. A. C. Dobbs, Assistant Secretary, W.P.H.C.; G. K. Roth, Deputy Secretary for Fijian Affairs, Fiji; J. W. Sykes, Assistant Colonial Secretary (A), Fiji; J. M. Jardine, Office Superintendent, Secretariat, Fiji.

(27) Subject to funds being made available, and to final approval from the Secretary of State.

(28) This building still forms part of the Central Archives although plans are now under consideration for its demolition in 1966, and the erection of a permanent Archives building on its site.

(29) In the first instance, with the Select Committee on Finance.

(30) Except where otherwise indicated the factual material for this article was drawn from Fiji Secretariat file No. 62/122/1 *Archives, Fiji* parts 1-3.