

ARCHIVES IN AUSTRALIA 1955-1965 RETROSPECT AND PROSPECT

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The first issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* appeared in November 1955, as a successor to the *Bulletin for Australian Archivists* of which two numbers were produced privately by the archivists who attended the seminars conducted in Canberra during 1954 by Dr T. R. Schellenberg of the National Archives, U.S.A. As exactly ten years have elapsed since *Archives and Manuscripts* appeared and it is just over eleven years since the memorable seminars which first brought Australian Archivists together for professional discussions, it seemed an opportune time to take stock of what has been accomplished in the field of Archives in Australia in the intervening years and give some thought to the future.

First let us note the more obvious signs of growth and development. In 1955 the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia had 117 members, this number being inclusive of institutional as well as personal members; there are now 170 personal members. There were at that time 14 professional officers employed in Commonwealth and State Archives; there are now 33. The first University archival appointment was made at the University of Sydney in 1954; four more universities now have archives officers. A number of business and other organisations, including the Bank of New South Wales and the Reserve Bank, have appointed their own archivists.

A development of great importance was the foundation in Sydney in 1955 of the Business Archives Council of Australia. This body, of which a Victorian branch was formed in 1957, is most active. A journal has been issued twice a year since 1956, first under the title of *Bulletin of the Business Archives Council* and latterly as *Business Archives and History* and a number of other publications to arouse interest in business history and the preservation of business records have appeared. A Summer School on Archives was conducted at Sydney University in 1957 and a course in Records Management in 1959—the proceedings of both being subsequently published. The Victorian Branch of the Business Archives Council organised conferences on a national scale on Australian business history in Melbourne in 1958 and 1960 and a two day conference was held at Ballarat in 1962. All of these activities have served to further the objects of the Business Archives Council, foremost among which are the promotion of the study of business history and the preservation of business archives.

Looking more closely at Commonwealth and State Archives, apart from increased staff working in the field there have been other important developments. The Archives Division of the National Library of Australia became, late in 1960, the Commonwealth Archives Office, a separate agency of the government within the Prime Minister's Department. Notable achievements include the completion in 1963 of carefully designed new branch repositories at Adelaide and Brisbane.

The Archives Authority of New South Wales was established in June 1961 under legislation brought down the previous year. Though independent of the Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales the Archives Office is housed for convenience in the Public Library building and since December 1961 has occupied three newly completed floors in the south-east wing of that building which were specially designed for the purpose, fully air-conditioned and containing compactus electrically operated mobile shelving.

Improved accommodation for State Archives is generally becoming available in Australia. The Tasmanian State Archives now occupy a special wing within the new State Library of Tasmania; there is a building at present in progress for the Public Library of South Australia which will include the Archives and plans have been drawn for a building specially designed for State Archives in Queensland. In Western Australia, when the State Library building was renovated in 1956, improved facilities for the State Archives were provided within the newly created Battye Library and in 1960 the State Intermediate Records Repository was opened in a building most suitable for the purpose.

Apart from the Archives Act 1960 in New South Wales there have been no developments in legislation for archives. The relevant section of the Libraries Act of Queensland was proclaimed in July 1958 but this differed little in principle from the well established Acts of South Australia and Tasmania. Neither the Commonwealth nor the States of Victoria and Western Australia have yet attempted to bring down legislation. The need for legislation which would prevent trafficking in public records has been much discussed in recent years and the ineffectiveness of present archives legislation was demonstrated by the failure of a case in Tasmania in 1963 when the Archivist attempted to retrieve certain public records in private hands. The matter of appropriate legislation, whether Commonwealth or uniform State and Commonwealth, to prevent trafficking both within and beyond the State, is still under consideration by the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia.

When Australian archivists had their historic first meeting at the Canberra seminar of 1954 there were a number of problems with which they were deeply concerned; of these there are three which have remained ever since in the fore-front of discussions and for which no complete solution has yet been found—

1. Publication of Guides and Other Finding Aids to Australian Archives
2. Training of Australian Archivists
3. Formation of a Professional Association of Australian Archivists.

1

After the 1954 Seminar archivists returned to their home States full of enthusiasm for the proposal which had been adopted for the production within two years of a Guide to pre-Federation Archives in Australia. As is well known, the project broke down almost at once; only two States produced their first draft inventory within the allotted time and they lacked the incentive to proceed. A number of factors contributed to the failure of the project: it had not been possible to make fully satisfactory arrangements for central editing; the archival authorities concerned—both Commonwealth and State—were sadly understaffed and could barely cope with routine demands made upon them. The time necessarily spent in first establishing the required control of the record groups concerned and then preparing the fairly detailed inventories which had been planned would have been considerable. Archivists, in some instances at that period without any professional assistants, were faced with their undertaking to proceed with work on the guide at the expense of fundamental developmental work in their departments. Could they justify the spending of time on a guide to records already in their archives at a stage when equally important material was still scattered through cellars and store-rooms of government offices in

the metropolitan area and country districts? In some, possibly all, States the necessary liaison between government departments and the archives and the procedure for regular transfers of material for preservation had not been fully established. It was still essential for archivists to spend much of their time in government agencies examining old records and by discussions with the officers concerned making them familiar with the required procedures. Faced with the choice between possible loss of valuable records and failure to carry out promised work on the guide, the archivists allowed the project for the guide to drop. This does not mean that in the intervening ten years no finding aids have been prepared and published. Substantial inventories for three of their larger record groups have been produced by the Tasmanian State Archives between 1957 and 1965 and five inventories, on the basis of the original plan for the guide to pre-Federation Archives, have been issued by the Archives Authority of N.S.W. and its predecessor the Archives Department of the Public Library of N.S.W., between 1959 and the present. An interesting new development is a "List of Series Titles in the Archives Office of New South Wales" recently prepared in the Archives Office and designed to serve in some measure as a guide to material in the New South Wales Archives. As is pointed out in the preface to the "List of Series Titles" some preliminary inventories for N.S.W. record groups have been published and others are in preparation, but each involves considerable time and work and for this reason publication of a complete guide to the State Archives on this scale will not take place in the near future. It was therefore felt that the "List of Series Titles" could well be of value in the meantime to research workers outside the Sydney region who are unable to refer to the finding aids available at the Archives Office in manuscript form only. It is emphasised that this list is preliminary and it is being circulated at present only to archives and research libraries and university departments of history throughout Australia.

From even a cursory examination of the List it is clear that it should prove very useful indeed to research workers, and other archival authorities could well consider whether they might, also as an interim measure, produce something on similar lines. Although the position in the various government archives offices with regard to staff is still far from ideal and backlogs of older records may still remain in some government departments awaiting attention from the archivist before transfer, it is no longer true, as it was in 1954-55, that archivists are quite unable to cope with the task of preparing finding aids for publication. The ideal situation, in which adequate time can be devoted to all aspects of an archival institution, probably seldom exists, even in an old established repository, and the archivist has to accept the fact that the choice must be made between the various demands upon his time, and emphasis placed now upon one aspect of his work, now upon another. Australian archivists who have to date found little time to devote to the publication of finding aids should take stock of their situation and ask themselves how long they can continue to neglect this task. Having decided to proceed with it, they are still faced with the problem of the plan to be adopted. It will probably be agreed that compilation of the type of inventory accepted for the Guide to pre-Federation Archives should be continued for 19th century records but its suitability for more recent material is doubtful. There is in addition the point made by the N.S.W. Archives Office that completion of a Guide on this scale covering the entire holdings is very much a long term project. While it is desirable that such control of all record groups should eventually be established and work towards that end should continue, thought could

well be given to the production of a guide at a less detailed level. The solution of the problem might well vary from State to State but it should not be delayed.

Some reference should be made at this point to the *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts relating to Australia* being published by the National Library of Australia. It is intended that the Guide should include entries for both private papers and government archives but it too is a long term project with priority to be given to private papers where both are held in one repository. Entries for this Guide for record groups might well be prepared in conjunction with whatever form of Guide to State Archives were adopted.

The subject of publication of finding aids to Australian archives should not be left without mention of two recently established journals—*South Australiana* published by the Libraries Board of South Australia since 1962 and *Queenland Heritage* published for the Library Board of Queensland, of which the first issue appeared in 1964. Both journals are devoted to the publication and study of the literary and historical manuscripts (including government archives) of their respective States and are important as a means of arousing interest in the holdings of the repositories concerned. Valuable though such publications are, however, they do not lessen the need for guides and the production of satisfactory guides remains in the forefront of tasks facing Australian government archivists.

2

Professional training of archivists has long been a problem, even in countries where, unlike Australia, there are old established archival institutions. It is still largely the practice in the Public Record Office and the National Archives of the U.S.A. to appoint staff with good academic qualifications and provide in-training courses within their own institution. The post-graduate diploma courses in Archives at London and Liverpool Universities and the short courses in archival administration conducted by several universities in the U.S.A. are comparatively recent developments.

A number of Australians who have been working in the field of archives for some years have now had the opportunity to gain further knowledge and experience overseas, by study of overseas institutions, attendance at special courses and actually working on the staff of well established repositories. This has enabled them not only to make a more effective contribution within their own organisation but they are better fitted to give assistance in the training of their colleagues. With the comparatively small number of officers actually training for work in archives in Australia each year and the way in which they are scattered throughout the country, organised courses of training are rarely practicable and most officers are dependent on practical in-training given within their own institution together with courses of study directed by their more experienced colleagues. A serious disadvantage is that they are so often limited to experience in and knowledge of procedures of one institution only. The exchange of junior officers between institutions, which would to some extent over-come this difficulty, has been recommended by the Archives Section. There would be problems in arranging such exchanges but they are not insuperable and it is hoped that archivists in senior posts will do all they can to encourage exchanges.

A further problem in the training of Australian archivists, but one which is gradually being over-come and towards the solution of which *Archives and Manuscripts* has made such an important contribution, is

the lack of professional literature relating to specifically Australian aspects of archival administration and records management. The need for a training manual for Australian archivists was discussed at the Section's Annual Meeting during the recent Canberra Conference of the Library Association of Australia; when the next fully representative meeting takes place in two years' time it is to be hoped that some concrete proposals can be made. In the meantime, all can help by contributing to *Archives and Manuscripts* and other professional journals on aspects of their work which are of general interest.

Certification of archivists after training has been and to some extent continues to be a problem, particularly for officers employed in the public service or in institutions which adopt public service conditions. This frequently means that they must have passed the Registration Examination of the Library Association of Australia or its equivalent for permanent appointment and advancement. Until 1962 this involved study for a certificate where only one of the nine papers in which a candidate was required to pass dealt specifically with archives. However in 1962 a separate Registration Certificate for Archivists was approved by the Library Association of Australia; under the new regulations candidates no longer have to take compulsory papers in library administration, cataloguing and classification, these being replaced by three compulsory papers on different aspects of archival work. In addition, under the revised syllabus of the Library Association the four introductory papers which are also compulsory place more emphasis on archives and non-book materials than did the former Preliminary Examination, which they replace. The position now is that holders of the Registration Certificate in Archives, although still covering a fair proportion of the course required for librarianship, are able to specialise in their own field and at the same time meet public service conditions. The actual syllabus for the three papers in Archives was drawn up and subsequently revised by a sub-committee of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia whose recommendations were accepted in their entirety by the Board of Examiners. Members of the Archives Section are appointed as examiners in these papers and Mr R. C. Sharman, State Archivist of Queensland, has been a member of the Board of Examiners since 1960.

A certain number of archivists are still opposed to certification through the Library Association of Australia. However at this stage of development, where government archives remain closely associated with the library service provided by the government and the number of senior positions in archives administration is limited, it is to the advantage of the individual to have qualifications which will enable him to seek promotion in the field of librarianship as well as in archives. Indirectly this is of advantage in archival work also, because officers of good quality are more likely to be attracted if they know that, failing opportunities for advancement within the archival institution, they are still qualified to pass on to positions in the wider field of librarianship.

It is hardly necessary to add that the final measure of the status of the archival profession in any country does not depend on the number of degrees and certificates produced by its members, but on the contribution which they make to the development of work in their own field both on the practical side and in its literature.

3

A professional association of archivists in Australia has been the subject of a number of meetings of archivists in the last ten years: sub-

committees have met to discuss it and made reports; a draft constitution for such an association has even been prepared. Progress has not been made beyond the point of discussions however, because the numbers concerned are still so small. The alternative seems to be the formation of an association with a wider membership to include as well as the archivists people with similar or associated interests. The reply might well be that such an organisation already exists in the Library Association of Australia, of which many archivists are members and form a special section through which their interests are promoted. Difficulty arises with the archivists whose work does not bring them in touch with libraries and who are frequently not eligible for professional membership of the Library Association of Australia, not having qualifications recognised by that body. It seems unlikely that this obstacle will be overcome and the position will probably remain such that only a proportion of archivists will join the Library Association. One unfortunate result is that fully representative meetings of archivists can seldom be arranged.

It is interesting to note that even in Great Britain a professional association of archivists—the Society of Archivists—was not formed as an effective body until 1954. Much older however, is the British Records Association, catering for a very wide range of interests, which has served for a number of years as a means whereby the archivists, with historians and all those interested in or working with records, may get together and promote their common interests. It may well be that an association in Australia on the lines of the British Records Association could serve to bring together the archivists within a wider membership including all those concerned with records. Such an association would not necessarily affect the Library Association of Australia, in which archivists attached to libraries would wish to continue their membership, and some thought might well be given to its promotion. Six years have passed since the Report on Archives and Libraries, compiled by a special committee, was published in this journal. It is not easy for a group of archivists to meet for discussions on such topics, but when a few members of the profession next have an opportunity to get together, proposals for an Australian Records Association could well be considered. Through such an organisation archivists would more readily be able to make their specialised knowledge available in a wider field. There is a growing interest in local history in Australia. Small local history collections in the hands of historical societies, town or shire councils, etc., etc., are being formed throughout the country. Interested and well meaning custodians rarely know where to seek advice; archivists are frequently too concerned with their own particular problems to be aware of such developments. Through a records association weekend workshops and other meetings could be arranged at central points in country districts where those with professional training could assist the enthusiastic amateurs, and helpful literature, on the lines of British Records Association Memoranda, could be distributed. Archivists may feel they can ill afford the time for such activities; on the other hand, if they are really concerned about the preservation of source materials for the study of Australian history, in the widest sense, it is doubtful whether they can afford not to do so.

The matter of an association of archivists is of major importance. In Australia, where opportunities for professional contacts are so few, the place of such an organisation is even more vital than in the older countries. This article will have served its purpose if it helps to focus attention on

some of the problems which require immediate action by archivists, not least among which is the formation of an effective association of Australian archivists.

6/10/1965

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BIBLIOGRAPHY OF ARTICLES ON ARCHIVES ADMINISTRATION

At the Annual Meeting of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia, held in Canberra on 25th August 1965 it was agreed that a bibliography of articles in periodical literature should be drawn up. This should be set out in accordance with the various subjects in the Registration Examination syllabus:—

Paper 14: Archives, historical and theoretical

Paper 15: Archives with particular reference to Australia

Paper 16: Archives and records management.

Mr P. R. Eldershaw (C/- State Library of Tasmania, 91 Murray Street, Hobart) was appointed editor for periodical literature relevant to Paper 14; Mr J. L. Cleland (C/- Manuscripts Branch, National Library of Australia, Canberra) for those relevant to Paper 15; and Miss S. Mourot, (C/- Public Library of N.S.W., Sydney) for those relevant to Paper 16. It was agreed that various people should search the files over the past ten years of the following periodicals:—

American Archivist, Archives, Archives & Manuscripts, Archivum, Australian Journal of Politics and History, Business Archives & History, Historical Studies, Australian & N.Z., Journal of the Society of Archivists, and Public Administration.

To these has been added the *Australian Library Journal*, and we have asked Miss Margaret Medcalf to search it. If any reader would care to search the files, over the past ten years, of any other periodical, in order to list articles which could beneficially be studied by candidates for Papers 14, 15 or 16, the Editor would be pleased to hear of the offer.