

PROBLEMS OF THE AUSTRALIAN JOINT COPYING PROJECT

BY H. J. GIBBNEY, B.A.

Australian Dictionary of Biography staff, Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University

Just before World War II, the National Library and the Mitchell Library brought to finality many years of discussion about the best method of completing the work which had been initiated in the "Historical Records of Australia". Permission was secured from the Master of the Rolls to make microfilm copies of those archives housed in the Public Record Office which had a bearing on the history of Australia. The project was put aside during the war but by 1948 the first films were arriving in Australia and during the 18 years since 1948 over 3,000 reels have been received. These include all relevant records of the Colonial Office to 1901 with a few series continued to 1913 and selected documents or parts of series from the Home Office, War Office, Admiralty, Treasury, Board of Trade, Audit Office and Privy Council.

The scope of the project has now been extended to take in records outside the Public Record Office and of course there may now be further work to be done in the P.R.O. as a result of recent changes in British access policy. Initially some of the smaller State Libraries were hesitant about buying all the film produced but these problems have now been overcome and research workers in every State have now at their disposal an almost complete collection of the relevant British archives.

The people involved in this really monumental undertaking could perhaps be pardoned for sitting back at this point and congratulating themselves on a job well done. Unfortunately however, although the copying can now be considered virtually finished, this is by no means the end of the job. Anybody who has ever used microfilm knows only too well how intractable it can be unless practical measures are taken to facilitate access to it. When the microfilm collection concerned runs to 3,000 reels the provision of adequate finding aids becomes imperative but in this case only the most tentative efforts have been made to provide sign posts for this vast mass of material.

The collection falls naturally into three main divisions. — the Colonial Office Archives; the archives of other departments; and material copied outside the Public Record Office. Of the three thousand or more reels already exposed, the Colonial Office group occupies more than 1900. Access to the two latter divisions presents few serious problems. Most of the documents concerned are drawn from the archives of various government departments and, since Australian affairs were only of marginal interest to these departments, there were few if any series devoted entirely to Australian affairs. Searchers associated with the copying project examined the archives of these departments and selected specific documents or occasionally small particular instance series for copying. Their reports which have been preserved and now reproduced serve quite satisfactorily as descriptive lists for the whole collection.

The Colonial Office group however is a much more difficult problem. Here the copying consisted almost entirely of whole series many of them consisting of hundreds of feet of records together with the original finding aids.

The content of the reels represents in fact a large part of an extremely extensive and complex record group which was in active use for more than a hundred years. Any experienced archivist knows that this is not a problem to be tackled by amateurs without guidance and when the complexities of the original group are further added to by additional difficulties created by microfilm copying, the result is quite sufficient to make even experienced research workers throw up their hands, and cry "Kamerad!" I have no doubt in fact that this is what many people have already done.

Difficulties in using the records can, in the main, be attributed to the following three factors.—

- (i) The concept of a "class" as used in the Public Record Office is in some cases quite arbitrarily applied. Sometimes the class is, in fact, a series; sometimes it is a whole group of series, the individual series within the group being only tenuously related. A small series, though it may be of considerable importance, can often therefore be very difficult to find. Once the method of combining series within classes is understood, however, it is usually *possible* to find what is wanted; it is, nevertheless, not always *easy* to do so.
- (ii) Although the technical demands of microfilm copying have led to further illogical splitting up of classes and even volumes, nobody has up to date produced a completely satisfactory key to the contents of specific reels of microfilm.
- (iii) The class lists published by the Public Record Office will in most cases direct the searcher to the correct volume but, since each volume may contain up to six hundred folios, more detailed finding aids are quite frequently required. The original finding aids for the group are more effective than the general run of official finding aids for that period but unfortunately they are all on microfilm. Any extensive search may therefore require either a laborious and time-consuming process of continually changing reels or the use of two microfilm readers.

In order that the reader may be able to understand the problem and the solution proposed for it more clearly, it may be desirable at this point to summarise briefly the nature of the Colonial Office archive group. The core of the group is a classic nineteenth century correspondence system consisting of letters received, internal minutes and draft outward letters bound up into a single series in chronological order according to the date of despatch of the letters received. Each letter received is usually accompanied by the appropriate minutes and drafts and from 1822 each of these dockets is identified by the registration number of the leading letter. Right throughout the series one occasionally encounters elementary files purporting to contain all the papers on a particular topic and towards the end of the century these become more frequent. The documents are bound into volumes representing usually either a year or a part of a year of letters despatched from a specified source. In each of these years there are subdivisions for Governors' despatches, letters from other departments and letters from individuals. These subdivisions may either be bound as separate volumes or as subdivisions within the one volume. Most but not all of these volumes include a table of contents.

Fair copies of all letters despatched are written up in separate entry books each of which seems to be well indexed.

From 1822 onwards all letters received are registered. Each of these registers is divided into the same three subdivisions as the bound correspondence. Until 1849 however, the registers represent not specific colonies but groups of colonies though in this period of the copying project has only taken in the pages which refer to the Australian colonies. After 1849, each register refers only to one colony and the registers therefore are a substantially accurate reflection of the bound volumes.

Besides the registers, the following supplementary finding aids exist. —

- (i) Precis books covering both inward and outward correspondence between 1801 and 1811.
- (ii) A series of indexes commenced by the office librarian in the 1850s which cover Governors' despatches from 1812 to about 1870 for all colonies and other general correspondence during the 1850s only.

There are two things which need to be done as soon as possible in order to facilitate access to the group. Somehow or other an accurate key must be provided to the contents of the various reels and some or all of the original finding aids must be put into a more manageable form. Only the first of these problems has hitherto been given any consideration and all the efforts which have been made have been devoted to marking off reels on copies of the Public Record Office Class lists. This is helpful as far as it goes but unless the first and last documents of the reel are indicated, it can be extremely frustrating since reels very often finish in the middle of a volume. If however the original registers or indexes were to be copied by xerography from the microfilm reels, it would then be possible to mark off on the copies a completely accurate summary of the contents of the reels which would at the same time serve as a precise account of the documents which they contain.

In planning such an operation the first question to be considered would be which of the original finding aids to use. The indexes (C.O. 714) are perhaps somewhat clearer and fuller since they were compiled for the most part after the event but they are unfortunately not comprehensive. For most of the period covered, they deal only with governors' despatches and there are long periods in the indexes for some colonies which have suffered so much from damp that they are almost illegible. The registers (C.O. 326, 331, 332, 360, 370, 378, 424, 557, 578) are not perhaps as easy to use as the indexes but

- (i) They cover all correspondence from 1822;
- (ii) They seem to be completely legible throughout; and
- (iii) They can be used not only as a primary finding aid but as a guide to the fate of papers which have been caught up in the administrative machine and deposited in unlikely places. They also provide some degrees of cross referencing between related papers.

The most important advantage possessed by the registers however is that they appear to be a faithful mirror of the bound volumes of correspondence and can therefore serve with some annotation not only their original purpose as a key to the bound volumes but the additional purpose of a key to the microfilm reels.

This proposal is based on a pilot project which was recently carried out jointly by the National Library of Australia and the Australian National University. The National Library arranged the xerographic copying of the first reel of registers relating to Victoria and the National University staff have

since been engaged in comparing the registers with the bound volumes of correspondence and marking the scope of the reels on the copies. Those concerned consider the resulting document to be completely satisfactory as a finding aid but the following drawbacks must be considered. —

- (i) Since the complete register sheets occupy a whole folio, the copy emerges as a brief size sheet which is rather unwieldy. Whether this can be overcome remains to be seen.
- (ii) The cost of copying, marking up and binding all the necessary registers from 1822 to 1900 has been estimated at something like \$4600 per set. This would mean about 150 volumes at a cost of about \$30 per volume. Undoubtedly this is a pretty heavy outlay and there may be some doubt about whether it is warranted. The question might perhaps be resolved by asking all those who use the films regularly to give some estimate of the amount of time that they waste now owing to the lack of suitable finding aids.

It should perhaps be emphasised in conclusion that this proposal is as yet only a tentative suggestion, which deserves further consideration. It would certainly provide a satisfactory key to the main correspondence series which are the core of the group but would have little or no effect on other series. Many of these however will not require any special key. Because of a necessarily sketchy examination of the main correspondence series too, there can be no guarantee at present that the registers will prove to be equally satisfactory as a finding aid throughout the century. Finally there will have to be some consideration of the appropriate treatment for the period wherein no registers exist.

A final solution of the problems in treating what is now one of our major national cultural assets will only be achieved through further co-operative efforts between the various institutions involved. The first requirement is a thorough investigation of the whole group by experienced archivists capable of assessing the importance of changes in the nature of the records and deciding the best method of coping with them. This has not been done up to date because the people were not available. It should not be delayed much longer.