

# MELBOURNE UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

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In his valuable paper *Reflections on Australian Archives*, presented to the 13th Biennial Conference of the Library Association of Australia (Canberra 23rd—27th August 1965), H. J. Gibbney observed that "archives in Australia are not at present in a particularly happy state" and concluded that, "Under present conditions, I see no possibility of any change in this position".

The point has much to support it: inadequate staff and salaries; unsatisfactory buildings and equipment; lack of independence from other government establishments such as libraries. Yet in one respect at least there is a brighter image. One of the most exciting developments in work in Australian archives in the last decade has been the establishment of repositories by Universities, and the rapid growth of collections concentrating in the field of business records.

The movement commenced in the mid-1950s at the Australian National University and Sydney. Then followed New England and, in July 1960, Melbourne. With the exception of New England, the smallest collector, the Archives were made independent of the University libraries, and in all cases the Archivists were given support for vigorous collecting drives.

There has been truculent opposition, even envy, at the Universities engaging in collecting archives. It is still thought by library authorities, who were traditionally the collectors of records, that the Universities have no right to enter the field. Yet, until Professor N. G. Butlin had the vision to see the rich dividends to be won from research on business records and promoted the establishment of the Archives of the Australian National University, virtually nothing had been done to preserve business records in Australia.

Furthermore, the Universities find that there are great advantages in forming the collections themselves. The close contact between the academics and archivists enables each to more readily know of the others' wants and interests. There is too a more ready awareness that tracing, obtaining and treating the records is a job for well-qualified people, who themselves have historical training, who have solid backing from their institutions, and who should proceed without restricting interference from some bureaucratic "Titular Head". The Universities have also realised that it is unsatisfactory to sit back and wait for material to come to the repository. They are unique as a body in the extent to which they go outside to search and ask for records. For example, the position now is that the Australian National University's Archives are second in volume only to the Mitchell Library as a collection of private (i.e. non-government) source material; the University of Melbourne's collection of private records is much larger, after only six years of operation, than the holdings of the State Library of Victoria, after one hundred and ten years of operation.

This is not a result of the Universities having more money or staff. It springs from a fresh approach to work in archives, and of having qualified people to do the work. And it demonstrates the advantages of removing archival establishments from library control.

Rather than object to the activities of the Universities, the libraries should recognise that there should be fully independent government-supported private records repositories; that these can leave the field of business records to the Universities, and meanwhile concentrate on such vast and neglected areas as the records of politicians, churches, schools and local government.

In advocating independence for archivists employed by governments Mr Gibbney observed, in the paper mentioned above, "It is fairly obvious, I think, that many of our troubles stem from the fact that we are a numerically small profession, which has been placed under the wing of a larger one in the belief that we are thereby being given wider opportunities". I think it is rather that the profession was for the most part placed within libraries because chief librarians wanted this additional piece of power; and I think that this is their position today.

Competition and clash of interest is of course not limited to librarians and archivists. There is competition between the archivists themselves. A major reason for the establishment of the Archives of the University of Melbourne was the success of the Australian National University in obtaining Victorian business records for their collection. *The County of Bourke Building and Investment Company Ltd.*; *The Melbourne Trust Company*; *Patterson, Laing and Bruce Ltd.* (softgoods wholesalers); *Michaelis Hallenstein and Co. Pty. Ltd.* (tanners, merchants) — these were examples of important Melbourne-based enterprises whose records went to serve legitimate research needs at the Australian National University, while nothing effective was being done by Victorian interests.

The University of Melbourne, faced with plans to develop research, saw that it was necessary to establish a repository to ensure that sources would be available for its scholars. Both to avoid clashing with established Victorian repositories and, more significantly, in response to the realisation by academics that records of the activities of businesses and businessmen were neglected, yet were highly rich and influential sources of historical information, the University decided to specialise in business records. This decision was backed by the knowledge that records were being lost to the State, not only because they were going to Canberra, but due more to destruction of records by businesses.

The Business Archives Council of Australia (Victorian Branch) had been formed in August 1957. This is primarily a propaganda body supported by many leading companies, universities, libraries, and interested individuals. It aims to make businessmen realise that their records should be preserved, well managed and housed, and to persuade them to make their records available to scholars. The Council had done a postal survey in 1958. But of fifty businesses who were asked to furnish a statement of their records in accordance with a carefully devised sample return, only twelve responded, and of those only two were of any use. The Council then decided to visit businesses and do the surveys themselves. Records of thirty-four businesses were surveyed by the writer in the twelve months to June 1960.

These surveys showed that due to ignorance, shortage of space, changes of management or address, amalgamations or rebuilding, valuable records were illuminating the furnace rather than the past; were being fed to the pulp-mill rather than the repository; were being left to the rain and rats of the rubbish tip. It was clear that a repository for business records was urgently needed in Victoria. The University of Melbourne responded to an appeal from its

Departments of History and Economic History and the Business Archives Council, and established its Archives.

The first records to come to the University were sixty running feet of Head Office letter books and Loans on Mortgage ledgers of the Australian Mutual Provident Society (Victorian Branch). Dating from the mid 1860s, this highly valuable material had been found in the Society's sub-basement during a *Business Archives Council* survey. It was sewn up in sugar and chaff bags, ready to go to the pulp-mill the following morning. The Society immediately responded to an appeal to save the records. In the space of that afternoon the records were sorted into groups for preservation and destruction, and those to be preserved were transported to the University. The University's Baillieu Library co-operated by providing storage-space until the University established its Archives. By this time records of *Permewan Wright Ltd.* (merchants), salvaged under similar circumstances, had also been acquired.

Now the collection includes records from some one hundred and eighty sources, ranging in date from 1837 to 1961, and in bulk from a few documents to runs of up to two hundred feet. Rural and legal records are included under the head of Business Records. There are records of woolbrokers, farmers and graziers, estate agents, architects and builders, solicitors, publishers, manufacturers, wholesale and retail traders, shipping and mining companies, and trade associations. From their diaries, minutes, reports, correspondence, share and finance records, accounts, specifications, plans and photographs, the historian can win new and rich evidence.

The collection now totals over four thousand running feet, and is growing rapidly. Most records have been donated, and the cost in purchase price totals only three hundred and twelve dollars. Records are obtained in collecting drives from Portland to Omeo, Beechworth to Sale. Interest is restricted to Victoria, but the University takes records of a Victorian-based business even though its operations might substantially be located out of the State. *Huddard Parker Ltd.*, the now liquidated ship and colliery owners, are an example of this class. Furthermore, the University will not fracture a collection so that sections will go to the non-Victorian area they refer to. For example, records obtained from *The Australian Estates Co.* have files concerning the original sub-division of Condoblin, New South Wales. Similarly the great collection of *James Graham*, Melbourne merchant, includes reports and correspondence for station properties ranging from Queensland to South Australia. But these must remain with the main body of the records.

Not only do the records at times refer to areas outside Victoria, but they often, of course, refer to matters outside the history of the business itself. This is not restricted to the obvious case of information concerning other companies or firms being included due to the normal course of business operations. The records of *Swallow and Ariell Ltd.*, biscuit makers, include personal papers of F. T. Derham, the Managing Director. There are letters of the 1880s from Alfred Deakin concerning his Queensland sugar speculations, and politics.

Businessmen were initially reluctant to deposit their records with the University, for by tradition these were secret. In some notable cases negotiations have covered as long as two years. But it is now rare to have a refusal. The University's policy of allowing only responsible research scholars to use the material, and the experience that this policy is not being adulterated or abused, is bringing increasing co-operation.

The policy of restricting use to responsible research scholars is a restriction of access. However, businesses need assurance that people who are irresponsible to the point of being malicious will not be allowed to use the records. Furthermore, there is still so much to be done in building the collection, with a limited staff, that time cannot be given to the needs of the casual enquirer or dilettante. It is a basic policy to work for liberal terms of access for the research scholar, but in the case of some businesses it has been agreed that they will have the right to review a manuscript written from their records prior to its submission for examination or publication.

Whenever possible the records are sorted and a preliminary list made at the offices of the business. The University then nominates the records it wishes to have transferred. The records which are released are collected by University truck and taken to a firm of pest exterminators for fumigation by methyl-bromide. On arrival at the University they are cleaned and more detailed lists are prepared. Copies of the lists are sent to the business donating the records.

More detailed treatment is given to records such as personal papers or legal records, since these more usually include unrelated documents. Principles of function are used to establish the structure of arrangement of groups, and classes within these, and classification is according to the single number system. Most material held is represented by a detailed inventory, but, although in many cases indexes have been prepared at the time of the inventory, there is much indexing to be done, and an additional member of staff is required to take this load from the three archivists.

All but oversized material is boxed in a pressed-board container designed at the repository. The container is received from the manufacturer in a collapsed form, and when prepared for use it is a dust-proof box of easily managed size. Storage is in locked rooms and on medium-duty, industrial steel shelving, adjustable every inch.

The repository is far from ideal, being two double storied brick houses and an outlying repository of a new double-storied brick building, originally built for use by the Department of Town and Regional Planning. These buildings have been fully treated against silver-fish. A thermostatic fire-alarm system has been installed, and the fire-brigade has instructions to fight with gas.

Plans are now in hand which could lead to major developments at Melbourne, including a new and full-equipped repository. This has been precipitated by the impending receipt of several major collections. Furthermore, the University realises that achievements so far represent only the surface gold from a rich and deep claim.