

# PRACTICAL TRAINING FOR ARCHIVISTS

by

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In a paper on "Training for Archivists" presented by R. F. Doust and G. D. Richardson at the 12th Biennial Conference of the Library Association held at Hobart in 1963 it was said with reference to the training of archivists that:

There is no substitute for handling the records themselves and that any system for training archivists should be based on that premise.<sup>1</sup>

In 1966, a post graduate course in practical work or archives practice was provided, for the first time at an Australian University. That is, as one of the subjects available to students undertaking the Diploma of Librarianship in the School of Librarianship at the University of New South Wales. Prior to 1966 a course of one hour per week in Archives theory, records management and government publications had been available. But, from the beginning of 1966, this basic course was expanded into three courses: Archives History and Theory; Records Management; and Archives Practice.

It is the course in Archives Practice about which I would like to talk today, although I must say at this point that the effectiveness of the practical training is to a great extent derived from a close relationship with the other two courses of Archives History and Records Management.

The course in Archives Practice is held in the Public Library of New South Wales building and with the co-operation of the Archives Office of New South Wales in so far as the students work on archives from this repository. This is necessarily an artificial situation in so far as they are divorced from the work situation or environment of the repository. They do, however, have access to the repository's holdings and the collections of reference books, other published works and catalogues of manuscripts, so necessary for archival work, which are held in the Mitchell Library and General Reference Department of the Public Library. Their contact with the repository, then, is much the same as that which research students enjoy.

What then does the practical work attempt to achieve and what form does the training take? The course aims at developing skills of evaluation and description, an understanding of and familiarity with different types of records and record keeping systems, of preservation techniques and providing practice in the preparation of finding aids and reference and research work. This is undertaken by the completion under supervision of practical exercises covering a wide range of activities. They involve the use of Indexes and Registers of Letters Received to find registered numbers of and register entry details of particular letters, the tracing of file movement, the examination of files to develop familiarity with their arrangement and the importance of original order, the examination of out-letter books with searches for copies of replies to letters, the examination of 19th and 20th century correspondence registration systems including index-registers, the allocation of number blocks to particular subjects of correspondence, press copies of letters sent, card registers and file movement and reference indexes and the examination of modern files

with inward and outward correspondence on a particular subject or transaction brought together as file units and their control. This practical work on record keeping systems is in conjunction with formal lectures and discussion on archive theory and practice in France, Germany, Holland, Britain and the United States to develop an awareness of variations in archival practice from country to country and the differences in application of general theory. At the same time, a modern registry, usually that of the Public Service Board, is inspected.

Practice is provided in the description of records and the preparation of lists, indexes and other finding aids and in their use; in addition, research into the origins and functions of the provenance of records is carried out. Evaluation of records for disposal or transfer to an archives repository presents the greatest problem as far as practical training is concerned. Some of the skills of evaluation are developed, in so far as practice is gained in the examination of series for their informational content, their relationship with other series and for insight into the functions and activities of their provenance. The basic skills underlying evaluation can only be developed further in the repository situation where experience can be gained in the kinds of things archives may be valuable for, as the purpose for which a record is created frequently has little to do with the purpose for which it is consulted in the future.

To relate the practical work and formal lectures on archives theory and records management to the repository situation an inspection is made of the Archives Office of New South Wales and the Government Records Repository. Different physical forms and types of archives are examined: maps, glass negatives, photographs, parchment, form series, modern files, financial records, and so on. The transfer and processing of records is traced from the initial receipt of notification from a department indicating an intention to dispose of records through evaluation, disposal recommendation, accessioning upon receipt, physical processing including methods of preservation and repair, the preparation of finding aids and finally to shelving. All aspects of reader service and reference work are explained as well as semi-current records procedures.

But the major piece of practical work undertaken during the course is the preparation of a preliminary inventory of all the records of a particular record group. At this stage formal lectures have been attended on the preparation of preliminary inventories, formal description, the introduction and appendices to the inventory as well as on finding aids generally in Australia and other countries. The preparation of the inventories is useful not so much as an end in itself but in so far as its preparation develops certain skills. There is no formal examination in Archives Practice. However, each inventory is examined and marked for evidence of the development of abilities and skills so difficult to assess in a formal examination. That is, recognition of series, relationships between series within the record group and with series in other record groups held by the repository, description, organizing and arrangement of records to facilitate their use and control without violating their organic unity or integrity and insight into the functions and activities of the creating department. As the course is so new at present as to be considered in some degree experimental it is difficult to test its success. However if we can gauge success by the quality of inventories produced then some success in providing practical training has been attained in so far as all inventories produced in the first year of the course were satisfactory and some outstanding.

Of course not all the students become archivists, many of them become librarians. At this point it is interesting to note that during the year 1964-5 the Committee on Education and Training of the Society of American Archivists concerned itself mainly with archival training in library schools, for the following reasons:

library courses will reach a large and growing class of manuscript custodians that is not now exposed to archival training; library courses because of the importance attached to methodological training in library schools, will promote the development of archival methodology; and library courses (in archives) will supplement, not supplant the training courses now being developed by State and Federal archival institutions.<sup>2</sup>

These remarks are in some respects applicable to our situation — the end result of the archives courses is not an archivist. Only a beginning has been made and those students who have shown an aptitude for the work come to the repository with a background of formal training in history and theory and records management and at least a familiarity with archives and the archivist's skills. To make a proficient archivist out of the successful student is now a matter of in-service training and time. An in-service training programme for new staff with this background of formal and practical training may well be different to one designed for staff without any previous formal or practical training. Where this type of training is not available outside the repository then the responsibility will weigh more heavily on the repository.

The National Archives and Records Service of the United States has developed a thorough-going in-service training programme of formal training based on the assumption that on-the-job training is not enough where training from educational institutions outside the repository is not available. Their proposition is that:

It has been our experience that formal training is less expensive than on-the-job training. One hour of formal training is equivalent to three hours of training on the job. It is less fragmentary. It is usually more thoughtful and more fundamental. It brings to light the pros and cons of our philosophies, attitudes and beliefs. Terms are defined better and procedures are analysed more thoroughly.<sup>3</sup>

The course aims to give . . . all archivists a correct understanding of the overall organisation and functions of the National Archives and Records Service and its place in the General Services Administration, a sound knowledge of basic archival principles, some mastery of necessary archival skills and a general familiarity with all the more important record holdings of the National Archives . . . it is the essential minimum of information that all should have who are to render intelligent reference service and perform the other common duties of archivists. It needs to be given methodically and cannot economically be left to casual absorption.<sup>4</sup>

I am sure we would all agree with these sentiments. Such an ambitious formal training programme may indeed be impossible where the repository staff is small and even the National Archives admit that to get instructors for the formal training is a difficult although solvable problem. There may be at least one short cut, however, to the orientation of new staff in the operations of the repository. This is by the preparation of an up to date and detailed handbook or manual of

the repository's methods and procedures. This of course presupposes an analysis of the jobs done in the repository and the operations performed in those jobs and an awareness of the skills required for their performance. The compilation of such a handbook would not in many repositories entail a great deal of work and could be in a loose-leaf form to enable it to be kept up to date. Staff information circulars and general orders at present internally circulated in most repositories and concerning such matters as access to records, the issue of readers' tickets, methods of taking photographic orders would form the core of such a handbook. It could also contain statements on general policy of appraisal, preservation, reference and reproduction services as well as statements of duties, methods of registering and filing correspondence received in the repository, the maintenance of disposal registers, accession records, registers of readers, the methods of physical transfer or disposal of records, of packing, shelving, labelling, providing location numbers, handling of inquiries received by mail or by telephone, and could contain copies of various forms relevant to different procedures. A handbook of this type would be a permanent source of reference for new staff and would supplement any programme of in-service training undertaken in the repository and in fact could become the textbook for such a programme.

I don't know that I have said anything new about practical training for archivists but I hope that I have been successful in explaining what the Archives Practice course in the School of Librarianship is attempting to do in preparing people to be archivists and in filling part of the void which R. C. Sharman referred to at the Library Conference in 1963 when he said:

I would propose that we should do something about this lack of exchange of ideas, and that we should start by keeping one another informed as to what we are doing about preparing people to be archivists. I think it would be very helpful to know what training is provided for the archival student in other states and under other employing authorities.<sup>5</sup>

#### REFERENCES

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