

NOTES ON 15TH BIENNIAL CONFERENCE, L.A.A.

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by

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Delegates to the biennial conference received the warmest of welcomes, literally, when they assembled in Adelaide on 25 August. Sunny days and blue skies, quite unseasonable for that time of year, were to last until rain set in on the final day.

The South Australian Conference Committee had prepared an excellent program covering professional, organizational, social and sight-seeing interests, more than enough to keep everybody fully occupied throughout his stay.

In reviewing the Conference proceedings from the standpoint of members of the Archives Section, it will be convenient first to consider broadly the items of general reference to members of all sections of the Association and then to comment in greater detail on sessions of particular interest and relevance to archivists.

PLENARY SESSIONS

These sessions are, of course, convened for the benefit of all members of the Association. Matters discussed refer to the common interests of all Sections and are not intended to cover the special interests of any Section in particular. In these circumstances it is perhaps unfortunate that the work of archivists is so distinctly different from that of the members of other Sections, all of which have a wide range of common interests. For the archivist whose object in attending Conference was to absorb as much as possible about archives administration and whose interest in librarianship may have been only peripheral, the Conference plenary sessions were somewhat disappointing. Since the speakers invariably (and, quite understandably) made direct references to librarianship and rarely,

if ever, to archives administration, the archivist could only discover truths of possible relevance to his profession by analysing the speakers' remarks and translating the essence of their messages into an archives context.

Conference sessions were convened within the University of Adelaide, or the State Library. All plenary sessions were held in the magnificent Gothic setting of the Bonython Hall at the University, where almost one thousand delegates, seven hundred from other States or overseas, assembled to listen to the principal speakers.

Dr P. G. Law, C.B.E., Vice President, Victoria Institute of Colleges, delivered a stirring special oration, lasting well over the hour, titled "Libraries - 1984". In a rather frightening forecast, he emphasized the approaching inevitability of technological changes in media for disseminating information. Dr Law warned librarians, as a breed of introverted seekers after quiet havens of employment, that they could not escape the certain impact of these developments, especially of the computer. To meet the changes, professional training programs and existing hierarchies of employment in libraries would need urgent review. Dr Law's attack and his proposed remedies sent occasional murmurs of dissent rippling across the great hall. By interpretation, archivists might heed Dr Law's prediction of a coming deluge of computer records and prepare in advance to administer them.

These notes of warning were bolstered by the President of the Association, Mr F.A. Sharr, in his Presidential address. In developing the theme of the Conference - "Challenge and Response" - Mr Sharr made a thought-provoking appraisal of librarianship as it stands and discussed the need for keeping the profession up-dated in a world of changing information media. He echoed Dr Law's exhortation that librarians (and equally, archivists) should be alert and keep abreast of changes so that the profession may not stumble along in the wake of progress.

A panel of three eminent educators in librarianship, from England, the United States and Australia, addressed a plenary session on the theme "Education for Librarianship." There was little in these three excellent talks of direct interest to archivists. However, the question of graduate status for "Librarians" raised in the address by Professor W. Radford, University of New South Wales, and discussed later at greater length during the Association's Annual General Meeting, is a matter of parallel importance for archivists.

GENERAL INTEREST SESSIONS

Some items on the Conference program were of general application and, prima facie, appeared likely to involve matters of direct or potential value for archivists.

There was a good lesson for senior archivists in Mr G.D. Richardson's address "The Role of Management in Librarianship." Mr. Richardson suggested that management should take stock of overall effectiveness in services to readers and ensure that the library staff goes about its business with the degree of vigor normally expected of workers in industry. He emphasized the importance of in-service training and a balanced measure of supervision.

In discussing the very pertinent subject, "Library Association of Australia - structure, nature, role", Miss J.P. Whyte and Mr M. A. Shearer made no specific mention of archives activities.

SESSIONS FOR ARCHIVES SECTION

The programme included several excellent papers having special reference for members of the Archives Section.

On the first day of Conference, delegates were treated to a most interesting and enjoyable session, "The Documentary Basis for Pacific Studies", a subject in which both the Chairman, Sir Grenfell Price and the speaker, Mr H. E. Maude, Australian National University, are renowned authorities. Mr Maude said that while the Mitchell Library and Australian National University have the world's best collections of published works relating to Oceania, the position with regard to unpublished material is less satisfactory. He proceeded to outline present activities in this field, first by paying tribute to the valuable work of Miss Phyllis Mander-Jones in cataloguing Australasian source material in the British Isles and then by explaining the role of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau. The Bureau commenced activity in July 1968 under Mr Robert Langdon and is sponsored by four member libraries - the Library of New South Wales, National Library Canberra, Australian National University Library and the University of Hawaii Library. Mr Langdon is working in the South Pacific field, discovering source documents, acquiring them or copying them

and producing microfilms for distribution by sale. It is a co-operative effort by the four member libraries, the aim being to unearth all extant material documenting Pacific studies. Because of the gradual loss of early source documents and their inevitable deterioration in conditions of tropical climates, the need for carrying out the project is most urgent. In the discussion that followed, Mr H. L. White drew attention to a moral within the project, that it is essential that libraries co-operate in acquiring this unique material in order to promote efficiency and economy in such an enterprise. Mr Maude emphasized that the originals of collected manuscripts would be handed over by the Bureau to the custody of libraries or archives repositories. They would not be allowed to remain indefinitely in the hands of university scholars.

In a paper titled "Causation in Historical Study". Mr R.C. Sharman, Archivist for Queensland, made a scholarly examination of the relationships between the written word, as documented in Archives, and the truth which philosophers and historians seek to find there. Mr Sharman showed that archives do not always give a true or complete picture. Documents, even if authentic, may contain inaccuracies. Archivists have an important responsibility to the historian, to preserve the integrity of oral communication, the need for records to be held in continuous custody by authorized keepers, and the questions of dependence, or autonomy, of history in relation to other social studies such as economics and politics.

An informative and entertaining address on "The Public Record Office" given by Mr J. H. Love, Acting Archivist for South Australia, attracted much favourable comment. Mr Love spoke informally of his experience at P.R.O. during a stay there of three months in 1968. He described P.R.O.'s establishment, facilities and practices and paid high tribute to the Deputy Keeper and his assistants for their continuing help to overseas archivists visiting London. Mr Love considers it would be well worthwhile sending an Australian archives repairer to P.R.O. for further training in their conservation section. He also suggested that Australian repositories might with advantage adopt the practice of exchanging microfilms of source materials. The session concluded by broadening into a useful pot-pourri discussion on general aspects of archives administration.

ARCHIVES SEMINAR

A seminar on the theme "Conservation of Special Materials" gave archivists the opportunity of hearing from technical experts in four separate fields of special physical types of archival records.

Messrs J. A. Wells and R. Commans, of South Australian Archives, spoke about the conservation and handling of motion pictures, microfilms and photographs. Delegates were able to benefit from the speakers' broad experience and knowledge of highly technical matters, including nitrate base movie film, microfilm spotting and photograph restoration. After the address, visitors were taken on a tour of the well-equipped photographic laboratories of the new State Library building. Mr. Wells kindly distributed an annotated bibliography of works relating to the preservation of film materials.

Miss S.M. Mourot, Library of New South Wales, gave an address titled "Description and Arrangement of Paintings, Drawings and Prints" and liberally illustrated it with slides and transparencies. She explained in detail the essential particulars required in a descriptive inventory of graphic records. In describing the various forms of graphic material, Miss Mourot circulated exhibits of wood cuts, etched plates and blocks, as well as examples of the end products. Some discussion followed, which explored questions on selective criteria for graphic records, including doubtful cases such as "bad" works of art and painted photographs. Miss Mourot suggested that if the subject of the work was historically relevant, then the work itself would have value.

A session on "Sound Recordings - Disc and Tape" was conducted by Miss Patricia Kelly, A.B.C. Sound Archives, and Mr D. Barnett, Flinders University. Miss Kelly described the policies and practices of the A.B.C. in the difficult task of selecting worthwhile material for permanent retention from an aggregate of "35 years" of programs of Australian origin transmitted each year over A.B.C. networks. The great volume of material raises seemingly insoluble problems in overcoming the time factor involved in any process of selection. Miss Kelly suggested the need for archivists to agree upon some guidelines for selecting suitable sound recordings to represent oral history. Mr Barnett gave a wealth of practical detail on storage and preservation of tapes and discs. His advice ranged widely, from how often one should change disc needles, to the preferred types of tape spools. Mr Barnett proposed to compile a bibliography on the subject for inclusion in the Conference Proceedings.

A subject of some difficulty and mystery for archivists, "Access to Records on Punched Cards and Tapes in Archives", was handled explicitly by Messrs. R. H. Rothwell and D.W. Simmons, University of Adelaide. Mr Rothwell described the processes of computer programming and indicated the difficulties involved in any attempt to preserve information stored in this form. He considered it best to keep the source materials from which the computer programming was derived, if they are available. Even then, the record may not be final, because additional information may have been key-punched into the computer program. Future changes in the essential nature of computer hardware will create problems of access to information contained in old software, for it will not be practicable to convert material to new forms from time to time. Mr Simmons compared some of Jenkinson's principles of archives administration with the peculiar nature of computer records and showed that the traditional principles would have to be modified in their application to this category. There are, he considers, enormous problems to be faced. In discussion, Mr R. Doust said that computer records are so different from conventional records for which archives principles had been formulated, that the rules will simply have to be rephrased to meet the situation. On conclusion, delegates were conducted over the University's computer installation.

Each of the four seminar sessions dealt with technical matters, some of them highly complex and outside the day-to-day range of experience of most archivists. The value of such sessions for the non-specialist archivist lay in focussing attention on matters for which expert advice is available. The series of papers, when published in the Conference Proceedings will prove to be a useful source of reference in each of the subjects discussed.

It was a successful and enjoyable Conference. One can only confirm the words of the President, speaking at the closing social function, that throughout the whole course of the Conference he had not heard a single point of criticism. The South Australian Committee are to be congratulated and thanked for their very effective organising which achieved such pleasing results.