

## BOOK REVIEW

**Concise Guide to the State Archives of New South Wales**  
Syd., Archives Authority of N.S.W., 1970 . Pp (IX) 464. \$10.00.  
(Reviewed by H.J. Gibbney)

The publication of Australia's first full scale archives guide is an event of considerable importance to both archivists and historians – all the more so because it is 'the Ma state' which has been brave enough to break the ice. This compact foolscap volume in a clear attractive photo-lithographic format, presents to the professional public the archives of New South Wales from 1788 to 1965, housed in the New South Wales archives office. Any research worker who isn't able to recoup the \$10 outlay within the first twelve months in time saved and expanded knowledge simply isn't worth his salt. To those who feel like penny pinching, I should perhaps point out that the guide includes series not described in the old 'List of Series titles'.

The book opens with a brief introduction explaining certain technical points. Then follows the archives groups arranged in alphabetical order, and the whole concludes with 14 pages of index. Each group is prefaced by a very short historical note including remarks about access and photocopying conditions. This is followed by individual series, grouped where necessary by types, e.g. letters received, letters sent, financial records etc. Large groups such as that of the Colonial Secretary are preceded by an outline of arrangement to facilitate finding. Many but not all of the series are described in some detail, but all entries include at least a guide number for citation, a precise title, the date range, the physical bulk, and a shelf number for physical identification.

The introduction points out that the archives authority is conscious of the deficiencies of the index and hopes to do something more comprehensive later on. In my opinion this displays a worthy, but unnecessary, sensitivity. No index to archives can ever really be adequate and I am personally quite satisfied with what is offered. If the compilers can improve in the future on what they have done already, I can only say 'more power to their arm', but I see no need for heartburnings if they can't.

In dealing with a work like this which breaks new ground it would be churlish to be critical. On the other hand, this publication does offer a unique opportunity to lay down guidelines for future work and I sincerely hope that any comments I make will be accepted by the compilers, not as criticisms but as suggestions for the improvement of future editions.

The first point which strikes one is, that the decision whether to describe a series or not, seems to have been taken arbitrarily, sometimes apparently without

reference to potential need. On page 91, for instance, seven series of convict indents are entered without any description. The word 'indent' is not self explanatory and it is of quite considerable importance for any potential user to know what he may expect to find therein. In fact I would lay it down as an axiom of description that every document in which information is presented in tabular form requires at least a list of column heads. At the other end of the scale is item 14 on page 29, a series which is unlikely to receive much research use, in which the two lines of description add little or nothing to the title 'authorities to collect monies'.

This leads naturally into a second point. Without any universally recognised formulae for archival description, there is always a tendency to be literary and waste words. In many of the descriptive entries examined, the first line of the description is virtually a recapitulation of the title. It is very easy of course for a busy archivist to get into a descriptive rut when dealing with large masses of material and the only real answer is a clear-eyed editor with an economical mind who can ensure that the story is told in as few words as possible.

It is of course impossible to decide on the general level of accuracy for entries in a work of this size, but I have noted two entries in which the information provided is at least ambiguous. On reading item 237 on page 237, described as 'Persons on ships from U.K. etc.' I was led to hope that I had at last found a way to a particularly elusive migrant – but on calling for it, was disappointed to find it a purely statistical return, a point which should have been made clear in the title. Immediately opposite on p. 236, item 46, 'Index to Migrants from New South Wales', leaves a lot of questions unanswered.

By the use of a fine tooth comb, it would no doubt be possible to unearth other defects in the work but, I am quite sure that the people concerned are able to do this without my assistance. The defects which have been pointed out are largely due to the absence of any codification of descriptive techniques – a professional handicap which, as Schellenberg pointed out so forcefully in 'The Management of Archives', is not confined to this country. Until the leaders of the archival profession in Australia can arrange for more frequent consultation than has existed in the past, that handicap is likely to remain with us.

It remains for me to congratulate Mr. Doust and his staff for a job well done. To the others I can only say, 'Go thou and do likewise'.

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