

## THE TRIALS OF TRAINING

by

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All responsible members of the archival profession in Australia recognise that the profession will never grow up until it can achieve a recognised standard of professional competence but nobody has yet been able to devise a satisfactory method of measuring that standard. In an understandable but in my opinion mistaken effort to move towards this objective, an arrangement was made in 1950 by which the Library Association of Australia included a paper on archives in its professional examinations. In 1962 the Association made a further concession by creating a second qualification entitled Registration Certificate (Archives). Apart from the manifest absurdity of granting what appears to be a professional certificate for archivists for a testing in nine papers, only three of which have any bearing on archives, the system has other weaknesses. After five years lecturing candidates for one of these three papers, I'm painfully aware that the system needs revision and this paper is intended to offer constructive criticism.

The archival part of the candidates' training consists of three papers which, regardless of their formal titles, can be most accurately defined as 301 History and theory, 302 Elementary practice and 303 Advanced practice. My own experience suggests that candidates for these papers fall into two well-defined classes. On the one hand there are the pitifully few people with a deep interest in Archives and a real desire to enter the profession. On the other hand there is the infinitely larger group of people who see their future entirely as librarians. Some have a dilettante interest in archives; some need papers to complete their library qualifications; some feel they may meet archives in the course of their library work and believe that the qualification may come in handy: all see archives as secondary to their main purpose. The first of these groups needs the full course as it exists at the moment, and much more. The second group would be well served by a slighter course designed along quite different lines. The existing course in fact satisfies nobody.

The curiously mixed clientele enrolling for this course raises another problem. I believe it to be axiomatic that nobody can understand the work of the archivist thoroughly without considerable practical experience. Much of the theory of archives is in fact a description and explanation of the curious almost organic way in which files and series grow and change, phenomena which are enormously difficult to explain. Unless the candidate is able to handle files and series, theoretical exposition can be virtually meaningless but novices can't be turned loose in archives *en masse*. How then do you give them practical training? The few textbooks available don't do much to solve this problem. All of them are written by professionals for professionals and both Jenkinson and Muller, Feith and Fruin are strong meat even for some professionals.

The difficulty of providing practical training is I suspect a universal problem which can't easily be solved anywhere but I have no doubt that our own courses could be improved in other ways. The needs of librarians with a general interest in archives could be satisfied by a course along the lines of the original one paper course given by the Library Association until 1958. The very useful *Elementary introduction to archives* written by F. H. Rogers for the New Zealand Library Association during the 1950s would serve very well as a textbook for such a course.

Until quite recently, the syllabus for the History and Theory paper 301 was thoroughly satisfactory but in 1969 it was ruined by the introduction of administrative history. The change was undoubtedly made in an effort to bring the course closer to an ideal standard of professional education but the result has been thoroughly unsatisfactory. The new syllabus for paper 301 requires an extensive knowledge of history and theory plus the administrative history of the Governor and Colonial Secretary in all Australian colonies, the functions of state and federal governments in Australia and the functions of local government.

The most obvious result of this change is that it diminishes the time available for history and theory. It isn't easy adequately to cover the history of archives throughout the world and the development of the main theories in the thirty odd lectures previously available. When perhaps ten of these periods have to be given to administrative history, the position is even more difficult. The change might be acceptable were it possible to do the new subject well but there is simply not sufficient material written to enable candidates to secure even a rudimentary grasp of the subject. The Colonial Secretary's offices are represented by about ten pages of painfully inadequate inventory introductions. There is more material available on the governors in works like A.C.V. Melbourne's *Early constitutional development of Australia* but so much of this is in fact constitutional history that the lines between constitutional and administrative history become blurred. By diligent use of *Historical records of Australia* and the few secondary works available, I was able to produce seven painfully inadequate lectures but I'm quite certain that any candidate working alone would be in serious trouble.

I have a good deal of sympathy with those who seek to include administrative history in the course but I believe that the syllabus as at present designed is unnecessarily extensive. The objective should be to emphasise the need for administrative history, to show the sort of information required, how it is compiled and how it relates to records. To do this it isn't necessary to show evidence of knowledge over a wide area. The object of the exercise would be served much more satisfactorily if all candidates were required to cover only the history of the Governor and Colonial Secretary of New South Wales to 1850. Such a course could be based on Melbourne's book and a number of other secondary works supplemented by detailed investigation of *Historical records of Australia*, Public Record Office microfilms and the *Guide to the New South Wales State Archives*, all of which are freely available throughout Australia. Candidates working to such a syllabus could be required to show a standard of knowledge and competence which could not fairly be demanded at present.

Although tinkering with details may do something to ameliorate the lot of those who try to teach archives, an acceptable standard of professional education will not be achieved until certain fundamental facts of the profession are recognised. Archivists are a very small profession and it is unlikely that they will ever support an independent system of professional training in this country. The archivist is, however a rather peculiar animal with four different aspects. There are, in his make up, substantial elements of the research worker, the administrator and the librarian, while somewhere, often hidden away in the background, is a small proportion which is pure archivist. The real solution to our problem may perhaps lie in recognising this diversity by granting professional certification for:

- (1) Attendance at special courses run within a university on research – courses which would be attended not only by archivists but also by librarians and university research workers.
- (2) Attendance at selected courses on germane aspects of bibliography run within a library school.
- (3) Attendance at courses on records and paper work, run by administrative authorities such as the Public Service Board.
- (4) Apprenticeship and seminar training within an institution run by a senior staff member.

A system of this type could be arranged and managed by a board of training and examinations composed of all senior professional archivists who could be empowered to grant certificates, either on production of evidence of completion of the above requirements or on the basis of examinations held when sufficient candidates had registered.