

## LETTER TO THE EDITOR

Dear Sir,

I refer to the exchange (*A & M*, May 1971) between Mr G.L. Fischer and Miss Margaret Littlejohn concerning archives establishments at universities.

Both agree that academic departments can hold material of archival value; they differ merely as to the extent of this material. Whereas Miss Littlejohn believes deposit of material (excluding personal papers of individuals) should be made compulsory by statute, Mr Fischer believes in persuasion by the archivist.

I agree with Miss Littlejohn. I see no merit in Mr Fischer's implicit polarisation of the nature of records of academic and administrative departments. Both contain important source material.

Mr Fischer sees dangers of "invasion of privacy" and infringement of "academic freedom" in bringing records of academic departments under regulation by statute. To my mind this is subsidiary to the main purpose of a university — that of fostering enquiry, and the application of reason, intelligence and imagination to the use of relevant material. This purpose should provide principles of procedure for the university teacher, administrator, or archivist. Truly held, it removes much of the substance of Mr Fischer's worries. An alternative — the denial of availability of source material — is a much greater danger to "academic freedom". It follows that though academic staff should not be compelled by statute to transfer their personal papers to a university's central archives, members who recognise the purpose of a university would place such papers with the archives. This has occurred in notable cases at Melbourne.

Mr Fischer doubts that an archivist would be in a better position as head of an independent archives department to persuade records of academic departments his way. "What does seem certain", he adds, is that records of central administration would become "one more unit to be won over". Further, he proposes a dreadful climax: "It might also be reflected that an independent archival department would hardly escape some board of management".

Experience at Melbourne does not substantiate Mr Fischer's fears. When this university formally established Archives in July 1960, the then Vice-Chancellor, Sir George Paton (who had recently headed the committee of enquiry resulting in divorce of the National Archives from the National Library) accepted establishment of Archives as a section within his department. The object was to place the establishment on neutral ground; to give room for freedom of operation. This independence proved a very precious possession. In the case of administrative records it facilitated removal of obstructions raised by people from the academic (not administrative) area.

Growth and development have led to Melbourne's Archives Statute, and the establishment of an Archives Department with responsibility to a Board of Management. Rightly so. The Archives Department is responsible for records of an institution equal in population to a big town, and one which engages in more diverse activities than are found in most places this side of Bourke. Fortunately

the university is now serviced by an efficient central registry which takes the great part of the load of central administration records, leaving records of departments, organisations and individuals associated with the University as the immediate responsibility of Archives. In addition Archives holds some 15,000 linear feet of business records, obtained for research from leading Australian companies and businessmen.

To profess that this material can or should be subject to the control of one person is, to my mind, like saying that an academic department should be run solely by some senior professor, that we should have absolute rule by the Registrar; or that a company only belongs to a chairman. Certainly it would be silly to deny there can be dangers in control by a board of management – as there can be with a faculty executive committee or a board of directors. These dangers are not yet apparent at the University of Melbourne. It is recognised, however, that sitting in a mouse-hole gives opportunities for inroads into the big cheese of research.

A final point: Mr Fischer implies that a board of management could acquire an undesirable member in the form of the University Librarian. Miss Littlejohn replies that membership of the Librarian is “highly probable”; that “The Board would benefit greatly from his advice”. Having immediately disagreed with Miss Littlejohn I imagine a new debate. What about the proposition that the Archivist be a member of the Library Committee or Board? Bags the negative!

Frank Strahan