

PREHISTORY OF AN ARCHIVES

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When the Commonwealth governmental structure was evolving early in 1901, nobody gave any consideration to the need for a national archives office. This was hardly surprising as none of the constituent colonies possessed such an institution and few people even knew the meaning of the word, Archives. Late in 1901, F.M. Bladen who had been editor of the Historical Records of New South Wales, offered to prepare for the Prime Minister, a report on archives overseas during a visit to Europe for an international congress on historical sciences. Bladen left for Europe in April 1902, and on 14 October submitted a long report accompanied by voluminous appendices and attachments describing overseas institutions. The time was distinctly unripe. Faced with a cabinet of prima donnas and the problem of setting up a new bureaucracy, the Prime Minister had neither the time nor the inclination to consider what most of his political colleagues would undoubtedly have considered an expensive luxury. The report was absentmindedly tabled in the House twelve months later and was printed as a mere 29 pages without its appendices.¹

During the next ten years, the idea of archives was revived from time to time by negotiation with New South Wales over the publication of historical records but instead of being inspired to put its own archival house in order, the Commonwealth now shot off along a completely blind alley. Edward Augustus Petherick, an Australian bibliophile with an international reputation, had failed as a bookseller in London but had nevertheless accumulated a massive private collection of Australiana. As a fervent federationist he had, since the early 1890's tried to induce the founding fathers to acquire his collection as the basis of a National Library. Federation was at last achieved but there was no satisfaction for Petherick and the Library committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, no doubt dreaming of a new Library of Congress, pre-empted the role of national library. At last, in desperation, Petherick decided to give the library to the nation on the understanding that he went with it. The offer was accepted and he took up duty with the library in Melbourne in 1909. Since there was already a library staff, the importation of this aging stranger was a matter of some delicacy. After years of frustration he was touchy and suspicious. What he saw as the casual attitude of the Library to precious books appalled him and, almost from the time of his arrival, he was at loggerheads with Arthur Wadsworth, the Librarian. In a clumsy effort to retrieve the situation, the act by which the library was formally acquired gave him the title of Archivist with direct access to the Speaker.²

Petherick had collected manuscripts as was the custom among 19th Century bibliophiles but saw them as individual curiosa associated with books. When asked

1. Commonwealth Parliamentary Papers Vol. 2 p.993. The complete report in typescript is held in the archives of the House of Representatives.
2. No. 4 of 1911. Petherick Collection Act. Much of Petherick's unfortunate career in the Parliamentary Library is recorded in the papers of Charles McDonald, the Speaker, NLA MSS. 40.

to report in 1910 on a proposal for an archives department, he wrote

‘Upon the proposed archival department, I beg to say that my book collection is the natural foundation for such a department. Having collected the printed books, I next planned the collection of manuscripts.’³

Fortunately, Petherick was never asked to do anything to justify his somewhat empty title. After years of petty squabbles with Wadsworth, he died in 1917 leaving no successor to the title.

By 1912, negotiations with New South Wales to continue the publication of historical records begun by that state before federation were finalised and Dr. Frederick Watson was appointed to edit the series. Trained as a surgeon in New South Wales, he had developed a passion for historical research while studying in Europe and on his return to Australia had rapidly become a respected amateur authority on Australian history. He had a pugnacious streak worthy of some of the 18th century gentlemen whose careers absorbed him and was accused by his enemies of unscrupulous use of political influence. Convinced of his own rectitude however, he saw grand opportunities in the Commonwealth project and, plunging avidly into the new task, soon acquired a far wider knowledge of archives than any of his contemporaries. Watson would in fact have made an almost ideal Commonwealth Archivist but, although a number of competitors in the federal capital design competition included fanciful designs for archive buildings in their plans, nobody was yet really convinced that the Commonwealth needed an Archives at all.

In spite of some friction, Watson had, by 1924, published 29 volumes of the Historical Records of Australia and was well aware that future progress depended on a national archives policy. He knew that colonial archives were the property of the states, but believed, perhaps naively,⁴ that a system could be devised under which the Commonwealth could accept responsibility, not only for records which it had itself created but also for records relating to the foundation of the nation. On 14 August 1924 he wrote to Professor Arnold Wood of Sydney University:

‘I propose to recommend to the committee that, on the termination of my agreement, the publication of the records should be temporarily suspended and that an Archives office should be established . . . in a similar manner to that which has been found so satisfactory in the Dominion of Canada’.⁵

Before the termination of the agreement, Watson, and the Library committee had clashed finally and irrevocably. He was paid on the publication of each volume and when the Government Printer failed to produce the specified four annual

3. Petherick to McDonald (Draft) 18 Oct. 1910. NLA, MSS. 40.
4. There was some justification for this view since both Canada and South Africa had national institutions holding provincial records. Australian federation however, was different.
5. Watson to Wood 14 Aug. 1924 Wood Papers NLA, MSS. 2490.

volumes in 1925, he claimed compensation. Rejection of the claim aroused all Watson's inherent pugnacity and the dispute turned into open warfare. In July 1926, Watson's contract was terminated and on 12 August Sir Littleton Groom, chairman of the Parliamentary Library Committee rang Sir Ernest Scott, Professor of History at the University of Melbourne. He explained that in spite of the dispute with Watson, the committee wished to continue publication and invited Scott to collaborate with Professor George Arnold Wood of Sydney University in advising on the future of the project. Almost as an afterthought, the two professors were also asked to advise on the establishment of a Commonwealth Archives Office.⁶

When Scott visited Sydney early in November, he was told by Wood that Watson had flatly refused any assistance, declaring that he would have nothing to do with anybody but the Prime Minister. 'At the psychological moment', he declared dramatically, 'I will publish the full truth about the records'.⁷ The two professors therefore went ahead without him.

Scott returned to Melbourne within a week and while preparing the report wrote to Wood:

'I think there is every advantage in placing the Archives and the editing of records under the same control. An archivist is not a librarian. A librarian does not need to have historical training. A good archivist should be a historian . . . while it is perfectly true that the Commonwealth Archivist would be largely concerned with documents which have accumulated since 1900, he would also have to look for or institute the search for documents relating to the establishment of Australia dating from before the establishment of the Commonwealth . . . I know that there is a movement to bring both the Archives and the records publication work under the direction of the Parliamentary Library . . . it is too big and important a work to be made subordinate to the Library. If Binns . . . calls on you, please be cautious. His idea is to get control. I think that most undesirable'.⁸

By the beginning of December, the two professors had reached agreement and on 8 December, Professor Scott left the completed report at Sir Littleton Groom's Melbourne chambers.⁹

The first section of the report dealt with record publication. It suggested that documents should not always be published in full but should be calendared where possible. Editorial notes, it was suggested, should be prepared by specialists but the Editor should not be required as Watson had been, to work to a timetable. The

6. Scott to Wood 13 Aug. 1926. NLA. 2490.

7. Watson to Wood, 3 Nov. 1926. NLA. 2490.

8. Scott to Wood, 19 Nov. 1926. Ibid. Binns was Kenneth Binns, Assistant Librarian in charge of the Australian section of the Parliamentary Library.

9. Scott to Groom, 8 Dec. 1926 enclosed in Groom to Wadsworth 23 Dec. 1926. National Library Archives.

indexing and the format for publication of the volumes produced by Watson were considered satisfactory though unnecessarily expensive

The report went on to justify the establishment of an Archives office by referring to the absence of any regular system of record control in the Commonwealth government and the destruction of records which had already occurred. It was recommended that the Archives Office should henceforth control all destruction of government records and should have permanent authority over papers deposited in its custody. After emphasising that deposit in an archives does not necessarily imply immediate public access, the report went on to recommend the creation of a position to control both record publications and archives, a position which should be paid at £800 – £1200 per annum and should be filled by a historian. The idea of placing the position under the authority of the Parliamentary Librarian was firmly rejected because the work was quite different from library work and the incumbent needed the authority of his own act. He might be placed administratively under the authority of the Speaker as was the Librarian but should otherwise be completely responsible.

The trenchant annotations made by Kenneth Binns, on his copy of the report, suggested the weaknesses of the scheme:

'Practical impossibilities – new dep. of archives – enormous work on establishment – 38 years – no time for records – travelling necessary for records – dissimilarity of material – assumes that archives would have record material in office – confusion of term, records – ridiculous to consider put cw'.¹⁰

The Library Committee considered the report early in 1927 and proposed ad interim that no official documents should be destroyed without the agreement of the Parliamentary Librarian.¹¹ In the meantime Scott and Wood were still corresponding. Scott was concerned lest the position of archivist should go to a public servant in whom the historical fraternity could have no confidence.¹² He had already been pestered by a man in one of the departments who had made some reports about records to the Public Service Commissioner. 'He knew all about it, even before the Speaker communicated with us!'¹³

Wood too was anxious to see the position go to the right man. He had already rejected proposals that it should be offered to A.W. Jose, a retired journalist and War History writer with some small historical reputation, and proposed instead that the position should be offered to Scott. If Scott refused, he felt that it should be advertised at £1500 per annum.¹⁴

In November 1927, the report was formally submitted to the Prime Minister

10. Undated report by Professors Scott and Wood, National Library Archives.
11. Sen. G.F. Pearce to Groom, 30 Mar. 1927, National Library Archives.
12. There is some evidence to suggest that he coveted the position for S.H. Roberts, his research assistant.
13. Scott to Wood, 28 Mar. 1927 NLA 2490.
14. Wood to Wadsworth 8 June 1927, National Library Archives.

with a recommendation that the Government should introduce an Archives bill, a draft for which was enclosed.¹⁵ The subject was considered by Cabinet in April 1928 but was deferred until information had been collected about Canadian and South African practice,¹⁶ despite the fact that the draft bill submitted had been based on the South African, Canadian and South Australian acts. Before the Canadian and South African information arrived the Bruce-Page government was in its final agony. The House was dissolved on 16 September 1929 and the Public Archives Bill did not even get as far as a first reading.¹⁷

The economic crisis of the early 1930s prevented any immediate revival of the idea but in 1932, the Commonwealth government did authorise the National Library to assume temporary custody of archival material pending a permanent arrangement.¹⁸ Under this arrangement, the library acquired residual records of the British Australian Wool Realisation Commission when it was wound up,¹⁹ some of the earliest letter books of the Sydney Customs House and a small consignment of the surviving archives of German New Guinea which were transferred to Australia after the Rabaul eruption of 1937.²⁰ When the Commonwealth War Archives Committee was formed in 1942, the National Library therefore seemed to be a completely logical choice as one of the two executive agencies of the Committee.

These abortive efforts to establish a Commonwealth Archives demonstrate the existence of a curious blind spot which afflicted and indeed still afflicts far too many of those concerned with Archival policy. By 1924, it would undoubtedly have been possible to make quite a strong case for the establishment of a Commonwealth Archives Office without any strings. Like all belligerents, Australia was still getting over a paper war and one department at least had already been forced to undertake massive and frequently misguided destruction programmes to avoid annihilation. None of those concerned however, gave any very serious thought to the preservation of the Commonwealth Archives as an end in itself. Scott and Wood saw it merely as an ancillary aid to the historical publication scheme which must be kept away from the Public Service at all costs. As Binns pointed out quite justifiably, they were absurdly optimistic to believe that one man could successfully cope with the two enormous tasks proposed. Their scheme must inevitably have failed too because neither of the professors was ever able to see the complete absence of any logical relationship between the publication of the Archives of an early 19th century colonial government and the preservation of the records of a considerable federation.

Binns undoubtedly had a clearer conception of political and administrative reality than either Wood or Scott, but he too saw the Commonwealth Archives not

15. Speaker to Prime Minister 25 Nov. 1927, National Library Archives.
16. Sen. McLachlan to Speaker, 21 Apr. 1928. NLA Archives.
17. A typescript copy of the bill exists in the Archives of the National Library of Australia.
18. Sec. Prime Minister's Dept to Gen. Sec. ANZAAS 19 Feb. 1937, copy in NLA Archives.
19. These records were recalled to duty at the beginning of World War II and have not been seen since.
20. Both these latter consignments remained in cases because of space shortage. Knowledge of their whereabouts was lost and they were not disinterred until the clear out of the old Government Printing Office Building in 1964.

as an enterprise in its own right but as a means by which his own beloved Library might be expanded into the great national institution of his dreams.

Had either party to the transaction been able to sell the idea of Archives as a matter of administrative expediency in 1927 the Commonwealth Archives Office might by now have a longer history. This is however probably asking a bit much of 1927 since the Public Record Office was still well bogged in a mediaeval morass and the United States National Archives was still a distant dream. The only serious work in modern Archives was in fact being done by the Germans, who were enemies and the Dutch who, though neutral, were completely incomprehensible.