

GEORGE HENRY PITT

by J. H. Love

The death occurred, on 4 April 1972, of George Henry Pitt, South Australia's first Archivist. The son of James Pitt a jeweller of Norwood, and Annie nee Jeffrey, he was born on 21 January 1891, and educated at a public school, Prince Alfred College, and the University of Adelaide, graduating as Bachelor of Arts in 1920.

He joined the staff of the Public Library of South Australia in 1906 as a junior cataloguer, was promoted to the position of Cataloguer in 1910, became the Senior Cataloguer in 1918. When the Archives Department was established under the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Board in 1919, Pitt was appointed the first Archivist, a position he held until 1945. He was in charge of the newly formed Adelaide Lending Service from then until 1948, when he became Principal Librarian. He retired in 1955.

The establishment of the Archives Department, as it was then called, was very largely the work of G.C. Henderson, Professor of History in the University of Adelaide. He had reported to Parliament in 1915 on his inspection of archives institutions in Europe, recommending, among other things, that South Australian Government archives and manuscripts from other sources be collected together. He was Chairman of the Library Committee of the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery when it became the Library and Archives Committee, and it was he who drafted the first regulations for the use of the archives, based on his overseas observations.

However, he did not report on the basic principles of arrangement and description of archives. Pitt had to organise a system for the acquisition of documents, and devise a scheme of finding aids, when there was very little English literature on the subject, and when little work of the kind was being done in Australia outside the Mitchell Library. Adapting his cataloguing experience to a collection of archives and manuscripts, he produced accession registers, in large books, and card entries in what can best be described as a mixture of dictionary catalogue, archives guide and subject index, complex, highly detailed and marvelously accurate. In addition, he began a number of specialised indexes, relating to particular records or particular subjects. Much of this was done in his own time, although he was assisted by a bevy of intelligent women volunteers.

With hindsight, we can affirm that library cataloguing methods do not lend themselves to the treatment of archives. The system eventually broke down under its own weight. Within two or three years, Pitt was forced to adopt temporary measures to gain limited control of material that could not be fully processed at once. This, and occasional difficulties caused by lack of *respect des fonds* are the drawbacks in a scheme that is, nevertheless, still used and appreciated by many readers. The subject is discussed more fully by G.L. Fischer in his paper "Archival development in South Australia." ¹

1. Australian Library Journal Vol. 18, no. 3, April 1969.

Minutes and correspondence held in the Archives testify to the zeal and energy with which Pitt set about gathering material from Government and private sources, visiting Public Service departments to list valuable records, and even asking the South Australian Agent General in London to try to trace a likely donor believed to be living in Morocco. This does not mean that he was an uncritical collector – with great confidence in his own judgement, he could be quite ruthless in rejecting what he considered to be rubbish. Selection policy is more inclusive now, but rapid acceleration in the production of government paper may yet prove that he was right!

His employers were well aware of his worth. Faced, in 1920 with the possibility that he might apply for the position of Assistant Principal Librarian in the Public Library of New South Wales, the Library and Archives Committee resolved that the Archivist's salary should be increased in order to keep him in Adelaide. The present staff remember a courteous gentleman, cheerful in greeting and pertinent in conversation.

Although his cataloguing methods have been largely superseded by more 'orthodox' archival practice, abundant evidence of his work remains, while his tradition of service to the public will continue to influence the South Australian Archives in the foreseeable future.