

INDEXING THE AUSTRALIAN JOINT COPYING PROJECT MICROFILM

by

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One of the most difficult problems posed by the operation of the AJCP has been the need for an adequate guide to the microfilmed material. This has generated more discussion, correspondence and censure than any other single facet of the project in recent years.

Physically, the dimensions of microfilm present problems to readers, many of whom find concentrated use both tiring and uncomfortable. These inherent difficulties are compounded in the case of the Joint Copying Project Microfilm where the order of shelving has been the order of filming, an order which in fact was never strictly logical and is now no longer even chronological. Problems of rapid retrieval of a desired document are magnified by the very inflexibility of the microfilm roll recording documents in the order of the camera. The perplexing order of copying caused Janet Hine, Convener of the Corresponding Committee appointed by AACOBS, in 1962 to comment on the filming:

All the time the driving criterion seemed to be to produce something quickly for the photographer, and of possible sets that could be micro-filmed as they stood without searching and selection, regardless of logic, or the convenience of the user.¹

From an early period, demand for a satisfactory index to the microfilm has been voiced by scholars and academics in addition to librarians and archivists. Not long after the Project was formalised in mid-1949, Miss Mander-Jones examined the possibility of detailed description of the reels of the Colonial Office being made by both the National and Mitchell Libraries, and suggested to the National Librarian that each of the two institutions should undertake description of half of the batch of reels received.² Unfortunately, although there seems to have been initial enthusiasm for her proposal, nothing concrete emanated from it.

In 1953 a conference of representatives of the Commonwealth National Library and State Libraries was held in Canberra and resolved:

1. J. Hine, (Convener of AACOBS Corresponding Committee to Draw up a Plan for The Preparation of a Guide to the PRO Microfilm) to M. Lukis (Member of the Corresponding Committee), 16 February 1962.
2. P. Mander-Jones (Mitchell Librarian) to H.L. White, (Commonwealth National Librarian) 14 October 1949.

. . . that each State Library be encouraged to undertake descriptive listing of material on microfilm relating to its State.³

This resolution was reaffirmed at the subsequent conference in 1955.

By the late fifties and early sixties, it had become apparent that agitation for a scheme to index the PRO microfilm, particularly some of the more important classes from the Colonial Office Record Group, was being mounted on at least three separately identifiable fronts. In 1961 a Conference on Source Materials for Australian Studies was convened in Canberra and much discussion centred around the need for a guide. It was suggested⁴ that an alternative to the resumption of publication of *Historical Records of Australia* might be the production of an analytical catalogue to the existing (AJCP – PRO) microfilm series, which while not a detailed guide in itself, would provide some degree of subject indexing. At the 11th Biennial Conference of the Library Association of Australia held in the same year, a significant contribution to the discussion was made with the presentation of a paper on approaches to the PRO microfilm by M. Lukis and M. Medcalf of the J.S. Battye Library, Western Australia.⁵ They aimed at providing a general guide to the material as a background to specific finding aids, and, at the same time, they hoped that problems arising in the compilation of finding aids for microfilm records could be overcome. They emphasised that, in the case of the AJCP “nothing had been incorporated in the films themselves to lessen this difficulty”.⁶ A guide to the records should contain a general introduction and descriptions of each group followed by a description of individual classes on a geographical rather than numerical basis. CO 397, Entry Books of Correspondence, Western Australia, was the class detailed by Lukis and Medcalf as a descriptive basis for their discussion.

A resolution arising from the Lukis/Medcalf paper and proposed by the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia at the 1961 Conference, received consideration by General Council of the Library Association of Australia. The motion moved by Miss Medcalf and seconded by Mr G.D. Richardson of the Public Library of New South Wales ran:

3. Conference of Representatives of the Commonwealth National Library and State Libraries, 9–10 November 1953.
Minutes.
4. Conference on Source Materials for Australian Studies, Canberra, 12 July, 1961.
Minutes. Agenda item 4.
5. M. Lukis and M. Medcalf. Finding aids for the microfilm copies of Australian records in the PRO: paper delivered at the 11th Conference of the Library Association of Australia, Melbourne, 1961 in Archives and Manuscripts, v.2, No. 4, December 1961, pp. 6–15.
6. Ibid. P.6.

That it be recommended to the Standing Committee of AACOBS that it appoint a representative committee of three people to draw up a plan for the preparation of a guide to the microfilm copies of the Australian material at the PRO – this would involve instructions about the form and content of the guide. This is recommended in order to make the microfilm more readily accessible to scholars.⁷

AACOBS then recommended – ⁸ ‘that a committee be appointed to draw up a plan for a guide’ and in August of that year a Corresponding Committee of three began deliberations.

AACOBS interest in finding aids to the microfilm had dated from 1958 with the announcement at its third meeting that the Library Board of Western Australia planned to prepare “a public inventory of the West Australian section of the PRO and other records to be included in the Joint Copying Project . . . the Board will be pleased to present copies of the inventory to archival authorities in other States and the Commonwealth and hopes that other States will be able to reciprocate by preparing similar inventories and forwarding copies to the Board”.⁹

The members of the 1962 Corresponding Committee were Misses Janet Hine and Mollie Lukis and Mr G. Fischer and they quickly decided that “the object of this scheme is that it should be based as far as possible on existing lists and therefore not impose any impossible burdens on those compiling it”.¹⁰ In 1963 the Committee reported, recommending a guide to the microfilm in four sections: An introduction, contents list, a systematic review arranged State by State, and an alphabetical index to sections 2 and 3. It was hoped that section two, the core of the guide, would be based on a compilation in the Mitchell Library consisting of a set of lists for the various groups. While acknowledging that the lists comprising the Mitchell Library guide were of uneven quality, “the publication of all of them as they stand, including the bad patches” should still be of considerable value to those using the film.¹¹ Of most long-term benefit in the recommendations of the report was the response to a questionnaire addressed to all authorities holding AJCP microfilm, to submit particulars of any local guides, lists and finding aids. Resulting from this stimulus, it became apparent¹² that the major repositories of PRO microfilm had produced, in sum, a variety of domestic finding aids and local listings.

7. As recorded in R.C. Sharman. The General Council and Library Conferences, in Archives and Manuscripts, v.2, No. 2, December 1961, pp. 36–7.
8. W.D. Thorn (AACOBS Secretary) to J. Hine, 7 December 1961.
9. AACOBS. 3rd Meeting, Canberra, August 15, 1958. AACOBS/S.21.
10. J. Hine to W.D. Thorn, 21 May 1962.
11. Report of the Corresponding Committee Appointed by AACOBS....., London, 1963.
12. AACOBS, 8th Meeting, Hobart, August 19, 1963. AACOBS/S.50.

At the end of 1966 the AACOBS Corresponding Committee delivered its final report and its tone was one of disenchantment. They admitted to having been “more dazzled by the idea that something should be done than the thought of what can be done”.¹³ The Committee came to the reluctant conclusion that the Mitchell Library guide was too much a “house” finding aid to suffice as a general guide for all holders of AJCP microfilm. The production of a truly useful guide, they submitted called for full-time work and firm direction from above.¹⁴

While the Corresponding Committee was deliberating, alternative proposals for indexing the microfilm were being subjected to close scrutiny. The publication of the first volume of the *Australian Dictionary of Biography* in 1966 had accelerated the rapidly growing number of scholars working in the field of Australian history. At the 13th Conference of the Library Association of Australia in 1965, Professor Douglas Pike¹⁵ was explicit:

“We watch with concern the accession of sources outstripping not only the catalogues and indexes but also the conventional channels of inter-library communication”.¹⁶

He expressed anxiety at the difficulty experienced by ADB authors in making effective use of the PRO microfilm. Pike had urged the production of a print-out of CO 714, arguing in June of the same year¹⁷ that this class could usefully be Copy-Flowed thus providing a lead in to the microfilm generally. (CO 714 ranges from 1812 to 1870 and consists mainly of despatches from colonial Governors arranged in order of despatch number; for each colony there is also a comprehensive departmental subject index to names and places). This suggestion was echoed by H.J. Gibbney whose plan originally published in *Archives and Manuscripts* in 1966 was later presented to AACOBS.¹⁸ Gibbney favoured the use of existing finding aids, although he was concerned to take the indexing project a stage further than Professor Pike. Briefly, his suggestion was for a print-out from the Colonial Office group, of selected indexes and registers, obviating the necessity for a subject and nominal index. However, in opposition

13. G. Fischer (Member of the Corresponding Committee) to J. Hine, 7 December 1961.
14. Final Report of the AACOBS Corresponding Committee, 18 August 1966.
15. Professor Douglas Pike is General Editor of the Australian Dictionary of Biography.
16. D. Pike – “Historical biography and Australian libraries”: paper presented to the 13th Biennial Conference of the Library Association of Australia, Canberra, 1965. Proceedings, Vol. 2, p.491.
17. J.L. Cleland (Manuscript Librarian, National Library) to D. Sprod (Principal Reference Librarian, National Library) October 6, 1965.
18. H.J. Gibbney. “Problems of the Australian Joint Copying Project” in Archives and Manuscripts, V.3, No. 2, May 1966, pp. 3–6.

to his plan it was argued that print-outs of the more detailed indexes to the original correspondence of the various colonies might be of equal value; then again if it were possible to include the indexes to the individual colonies, why should it not also be possible to embrace the indexes to the *Colonies, General* classes, which contain so much valuable material, but of its nature difficult to retrieve because of the diffuse quality of the classes.¹⁹ Other restraints to the implementation of his plan involved the cost of reproduction, thought to be excessive in terms of its final value as a finding aid. (The cost had been estimated at \$4,600 per each set of 150 volumes);²⁰ and the absence in his proposals of any real advance in the indexing of material of other Record groups such as the Home Office, Admiralty, War Office and Foreign Office, all of which assumed important functions prior to 1801.²¹

Finally it was felt that the print-outs would occasionally result in the reproduction of illegible manuscripts hampered moreover by indexing methods of an earlier age. The variable validity of his plan, due to differences in record keeping over the preceding century, was another point needing further examination. The Gibbney proposals were in effect a breakthrough in the history of attempts to index the microfilm. Their value lay in providing a new insight into possibilities contained within the microfilm itself.

AACOBS interest in the notion of indexing the microfilm did not terminate with the final report of the corresponding Committee; the Council now decided to review all the findings of recent years. At its direction, Mr J.L. Cleland of the National Library submitted a further report²² in which he described a new scheme for a guide to the AJCP microfilm, and his plan, drawn up early in 1968, was accepted by AACOBS and provides the framework for the Handbook now being produced. In designing the Handbook, (the term 'Handbook' replaced 'Guide' because of a proliferation of guides existing or in the process of compilation on related subjects) Mr Cleland was able to incorporate

19. J. Baskin (former National Library Liaison Officer and Adviser to the Mander-Jones Guide to Manuscripts in the United Kingdom relating to Australia and the South West Pacific) to H.L. White, March 25, 1968.
20. R.C. Sharman (AACOBS Archival Representative) to G.D. Richardson (Principal Librarian, Library of New South Wales) March 25, 1967. AACOBS /SC/1968/26 Appendix A.
21. Colonial Affairs in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries had been the responsibility successively of the Board of Trade and the Home Office. In 1801, the colonial business of the War Office was transferred to the Secretary of State for War and Colonies and it was not until 1854 that these two departments were separated. For some explanation of Colonial administration of this period see Cambridge History of the British Empire, vol. 3: The Empire Commonwealth (Cambridge University Press, 1959) pp.711-13; and Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office, vol. 2 (London, HMSO, 1963) p.52.
22. J.L. Cleland. Report on a Guide to the Australian Joint Copying Project Microfilm Canberra, AACOBS, March 1968. AACOBS SC/ 1968/39.

and consolidate on much of the work of the earlier committees and interested individuals.

While the proposals described to date represent suggested approaches to the microfilm prior to Cleland's report, there were in fact a number of published and manuscript guides to specific groups and classes already in existence.

Most regular users of the microfilm were familiar with a number of basic and very general aids, i.e. the three volume *Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office*,²³ giving a broad class arrangement of the material; Pugh's very useful *Guide to the Colonial and Dominion Offices*,²⁴ some knew of the *List of Colonial Office Records*, published in 1911 as volume 36 of the *PRO Lists and Indexes* which offered a key to the relation in a particular series between volumes and colonies by bringing together under each colony or other territorial unit, the various classes of records concerned with it. Extracts relating to the area of AJCP interest were photocopied by Miss Mander-Jones in 1961 and bound into four volumes commonly referred to as the Blue Books. Selections included in the Blue Books, marked up with reel numbers of the sets in the National and Mitchell Libraries, form the basis for the Colonial Office class and piece lists in the Handbook. In addition the various *PRO Lists and Indexes* had been made generally available by the Kraus Reprint Corporation of New York, and in 1965 the List and Index Society was launched by subscribers to reproduce and distribute bound copies of some of the unpublished lists supplementary to those being handled by Kraus.

The existence of lesser-known finding aids was publicised by the work of the Corresponding Committee. Thus M.E. Deane's typescript *Index to CO 201/146-9, 159, 160, 170, 180, 190, 199, 208, 217 and 237*, originally compiled in 1929-30 now received new attention. The object of Deane's research was to supply indexes to those miscellaneous and analogous volumes of the class known as New South Wales original correspondence (CO 201) between the years 1823-1878 for which contemporary indexes had not been made. While there were deficiencies in Deane's index - she did not cross index, and applications from prospective settlers are entered only under the name of the individual supporting the petition - her work does provide an index to individual correspondence with the Colonial Office for that period. Departmental finding aids were brought to light when replies to the AACOBS Standing Committee questionnaire from libraries participating in the project were scrutinized in mid-1963. The work of the Mitchell Library in this field was fairly generally known, but this was not the case with the other State libraries, almost all of whom were able to cite domestic compilations of records relating to the microfilm. For instance, the Archives section of the State Library of Victoria had produced a preliminary guide listing reel number, date of material, reference to Record Group, with

23. Guide to the Contents of the Public Record Office. 3 Vols. London, HMSO, 1963-1968.

24. R.B. Pugh. The Records of the Colonial and Dominion Offices. London, HMSO, 1964.

PRO reference; the Public Library of Queensland had compiled detailed lists of some series; a rough guide to all material received, and in greater detail, guides to CO 234. Original Correspondence; Secretary of State, Queensland; CO 423 Entry Books of Correspondence for Queensland, and CO 424 Queensland Register of Correspondence. The Guide compiled in the Mitchell Library itself and originally intended to serve as the basis for the projected Handbook, comprised searching notes prepared by AJCP Staff in which a detailed description of the material was given together with a comprehensive view of selection of the records for copying and a perception of change and different emphases in selection. Its main deficiency lay in the fact that the Lists and Indexes to Colonial Office records had been superseded by the *List of Colonial Office Records* and this new information had not been incorporated. Then there were the internal registers referred to by Gibbney, CO 326, Inward Correspondence, CO 332, and the separate series for each colony, CO 360, New South Wales, CO 370, Tasmania, CO 331, South Australia, CO 332 Western Australia and CO 424 Queensland. Finally there were the results of projects undertaken from time to time to index in detail a sample number of reels sometimes using the index to *Historical Records of Australia* as a subject and nominal guide.

When J.L. Cleland presented his report to AACOBS in 1968, he was able to include many of the features of earlier investigations. He emphasised that the responsibility for the preparation of the Handbook lay with the National and Mitchell Libraries. "What is required is continuing firm control in the maintenance of contacts with the cooperating institutions"²⁵ he wrote. He suggested that "perhaps the cooperative nature of the AJCP was too much in people's minds . . ." when the importance of a guide was first generally realised. He proposed that this cooperation should find expression rather in a developing knowledge and experience on the part of staff in the various Australian institutions.

In design, the Handbook was a "direct lineal descendant of the 1963 Report (proposing) a guide in multiple parts issued seriatim".²⁶ As an external tool it was hoped that description of the microfilm would be provided in progressively greater detail. At a very general level there would be two shelf lists; the first to the major portion of the copying embracing the Public Record Office material and the second to items filmed outside the Public Record Office constituting the M (Miscellaneous) series. The intermediate level would comprise class and piece lists incorporating introductions to each of the Record Groups and linking reel and frame number with the specific volume. The final level, termed detailed description, would provide a guide to the microfilm at a level of depth and detail in which use could be made of existing departmental finding aids.

25. J.L. Cleland to H.L. White. March 1968.

26. J.L. Cleland. Report ... op cit. p.10.

Under Cleland's editorship, work began on the Handbook mid 1969 with the circulation of draft shelf lists to the participating libraries who were asked to check and indicate their holdings on these lists. With its consequent revelation of gaps of individual libraries' holdings in particular series and minor discrepancies in the holdings of contributing libraries generally, this exercise proved to be of great value not only to those working on the Handbook but to the libraries themselves, providing for the first time in many cases an overview of the whole project. The data supplied by the contributing institutions was combined with two additional sources: a record of copying maintained in London by the AJCP Officer, and a statement of copying from AJCP negatives prepared in the National Library in December 1970. Final drafts of the two shelf lists were then completed and should appear in published form shortly. Work on the Handbook is currently concerned with Stage II, and in many instances, these class and piece lists should provide a degree of description adequate for most users. It is interesting to note that in the whole history of indexing attempts, attention has naturally centred around the PRO series. But this has not implied a complete neglect of the non-PRO material. The Miscellaneous series has always been able to claim a better degree of coverage than the PRO material through guides such as the Mitchell Library-produced guide to the London Missionary Society, a guide to the Church Missionary Society, a guide to the records of the Society of Friends and the general coverage provided by the Mander-Jones guide.²⁷ There is still some uncertainty about the form that stage three will take. However it is agreed that searching notes, lists of material despatched and reports should constitute the first and immediately available source for this final section of the Handbook.²⁸

Much work remains to be done on the Handbook but its publication will be welcomed by librarians and scholars concerned with the product of the AJCP.²⁹

27. P. Mander-Jones. *Manuscripts in the United Kingdom Relating to Australia and the South West Pacific* (To be published shortly).

28. J.L. Cleland. *Report ... op cit.* p.6.

29. Correspondence cited throughout this article is from the files of the National Library.