

LETTER TO THE EDITOR

The future of Archives and Manuscripts

Sir — On June 5, I received a letter from you in which you raised a number of specific points and one or two others by implication concerning the editorship and future of *Archives and Manuscripts*. I would like to make a few observations on the matters you raise for I regard them as being of no small importance to the profession. Since your letter was a circular and has been published to that extent, I hope you will allow me to recapitulate its substance.

First, with what I can only regard as a quite remarkable absence of rancour, you reported that you had not been receiving the number of contributions necessary to keep the journal going. Second, you raised the question as to whether there exists a widespread belief that a librarian should not be the Editor of the only archival journal in Australia. You went on to say that you are of this opinion and invited others of a like mind to write a Letter to the Editor expressing that view. I should perhaps say here that I have adopted the form but, as will appear, not the simple topic you suggested. Third, you posed the question “Does Australia need an archives journal?”

You concluded by writing “If Australia is to continue to have an archives journal, one or other of three things must happen —

1. You should write an article for it; or
2. You should see that someone else is appointed Editor — someone who can attract the needed articles; or
3. You should see that some organisation other than the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia takes over responsibility.”

Now if I may be allowed to take your points seriatim, your first complaint of lack of contributions is one which should strike home to every member of the profession as it has done to me. The question to be asked is why has there been this dearth of contributions? I am certain other people’s rationalisations are as satisfying as mine — and have as little validity. I think there is an answer to this question and I shall return to it, but first I would like to dispose of your second point. There may be a feeling such as you describe but I cannot imagine, as you seem to imply, that the lack of articles is attributable to the fact that after a period of 20 years as an able and respected archivist you have returned to library administration. If there is any reality in the suggestion I think it is likely to be a more general objection which is implicit in what I have to say below.

There would be, I think, universal agreement that Australia does need an archives journal. Certainly I and those with whom I have spoken, are of that opinion. Clearly if such a journal is to continue, the first of your alternatives is no alternative at all. Although people outside the profession will have much to contribute from time to time it is the archivists who must bear the burden. That is to say, not only those at the top of their respective archives nor those whom they can badger into writing something. Ideally every working archivist should see writing as part of his professional life. *Archives and Manuscripts* is *prima facie* the journal of the profession and as such should be the forum where matters of professional importance are aired and the medium for the dissemination of experience, technology, technique and scholarship.

My suggestion is that this lack of response is a symptom of a general apathy on the part of archivists in Australia (of which I stand convicted along with the rest). A new editor is likely to have no more success than the present one unless we decide to act like professionals and support our professional journal actively rather than by simply paying our subscriptions. But this raises the whole question of the meaning of professionalism. A profession might be defined (and I have no doubt many will differ with me) as a group bound together by the exercise of common skills in the pursuit of common goals and subscribing to a common ethic. Are Australian archivists a profession in the light of this definition? I think they are (although at least one of my acquaintance prefers the word trade). But one important factor is that they lack a professional body to set professional standards of training, practice and conduct, to act as guardian of those standards and to promote the interests and objects of the profession.

I am aware that such a view may be regarded as heterodox in L.A.A. circles particularly amongst those who deny that there is really any difference between libraries and archives. But I shall be a little surprised if the archivists of Australia rise up to tear me for it, for in my experience they have accepted the L.A.A. in the absence of anything else, indeed in many instances have declined to join it, and in general regard the Archives Section as utterly impotent. In short they regard the L.A.A. as the association of another profession which has its own problems and is neither constructed for nor capable of representing or leading the Australian archivist.

I am not saying that the lack of an effective professional association indicates an absence of professionalism. I am suggesting that this lack may have much to do with the suppression of an active spirit of professionalism and in turn with the growth of the apathy to which I have referred.

Which brings me to your third alternative – that *Archives and Manuscripts* might be taken over by some body other than the Archives Section. Since no such body at present exists I take this proposal as either a call for its formation or a challenge to try to create it. Either way, if such a suggestion is to have any reality, then consideration must be given to forming a society of archivists.

And I would emphasise that “consideration” means consideration by *all* Australian archivists. If anyone calls himself an archivist or regards himself as one then he (or she) must consider this matter or forfeit any moral claim to membership of the archival community.

My present and growing conviction is that the time has come to forget the failures of the past and to make a new attempt to organise ourselves in a society which can lead and support the archivists of Australia in their professional lives.

This is not something to be embarked on lightly or quickly. It requires organisation, support and careful planning, it requires consultation, discussion and mature consideration by members of the profession. I hope your letter and mine will prompt such discussion and that the pages of *Archives and Manuscripts* will be opened to it. In addition I would invite all those who agree in principle with my suggestion but who do not wish to go into print about it, to write to me at the Research School of Social Sciences, A.N.U., P.O. Box 4, Canberra so that when (or if) in due course the group discussions (which I personally would see as a necessary stage in the process) are held, a list of “supporters in principle” will be available and those organising the meetings will be able to contact each one personally – a more certain method than notice boards and newspaper advertisements.

Finally, to revert to your immediate problems may I revert to your three alternatives? First, I pledge myself to place on the Editor’s desk as soon as possible an article for *Archives and Manuscripts* and I urge as many of my colleagues as are neither blind halt nor lame to go and do likewise. Second, since your stated belief is that an archivist should be editing the journal and since I imagine that your present responsibilities make the burden heavier than ever – quite apart from the extra work entailed because of lack of support – that at Perth in August you do one or both of two things: Insist that the burden be moved to another pair of shoulders (and I reaffirm my belief that this will have no direct effect whatever in attracting contributions) and/or insist that an editorial panel be appointed with a representative in each State and territory to act as correspondents, assist in rounding up news notes and other editorial drudgery, and in particular to promote the writing of articles by both archivists and non-archivists with relevant interests. Your third alternative is of course a long term one, on the prerequisites for which I have already expanded – probably for too long.

Michael Saclier.