

EDITORIAL

Archivists have for a long time cherished a belief that the archival materials in their care do, to a large extent anyway, constitute a record of what actually happened. To be sure, archives are not a perfect record. We know for a fact that those who recorded the events of their time were fallible; they suffered from prejudices, they were sometimes too lazy to record all that they should have said, they sought to a greater or lesser extent to deceive those to whom it was their duty to report, and they occasionally made quite unintentional errors, sometimes serious ones. What is more, even given the best will in the world, no one could possibly record everything that happened, down to the most minute detail. For instance, William Landsborough may well have recorded how many horses he used on his expedition in search of Burke and Wills, but it is unlikely that he bothered to record whether they were chestnuts, bays, greys or skewbalds. Even if he did, it is unlikely that he conveyed to paper an observation that one mare had a blaze, two white socks and a tendency to shy at the sight of bunyips.

The archives of the Landsborough expedition, however, and those of countless other events and movements in the history of Australia, have been preserved and to a large extent enable posterity to discover what actually happened. The historian can be reasonably sure that what these records say is correct, especially if there are (as is usually the case) other records extant which to a greater or lesser extent corroborate the story.

Is it possible, then, that someone, wishing for his own reasons to deceive others as to what actually happened, can introduce into the archives a falsified document, and pass it off as genuine? Or would it be possible for some such evil-doer to alter an existing archival document so that it presented a false picture of what actually happened? Archivists will probably admit that, despite fairly rigorous supervision in their searchrooms, it would be possible for a really determined person to falsify a record in this way. But as to whether or not a person could profit by this falsification is another matter.

In order personally to gain from the introduction of a false document into an official series, a fraudulent person would have either directly or indirectly to draw attention to that document. If the fraud were being perpetrated by an historian, for instance, in order to prove some point, he would need to draw it to the attention of other historians. If it were being carried out by someone who was seeking to gain property, by means of a fraudulently altered deed of grant, or respectability by means of a false entry in a passenger ship's list of cabin passengers, he would again have to say "See. Here is the evidence".

His action would immediately bring the document to the notice and quite probably to the scrutiny of other students, and possibly to that of the archivist. It would need to be a very clever forgery indeed to deceive the archivist. If it were a 19th century document, it would require the skill of a paper chemist to fabricate paper that would pass for the genuine article; it would require also painstaking experiment with inks to match the faded greys and blues of the 19th century. There would also need to be quite a deal of care exercised in the penmanship. Finally, there would be the problem of imitating the impression of a metal inked stamp or whatever other paraphernalia was used to complete the deception.

Maybe falsification of the record will not be nearly so difficult in the archives institution of the 21st century. There are articles in this issue of **Archives and Manuscripts** which indicate that that is the case. Mr. J. Shaw, for instance, writing on Archives and Automation, and dealing with developments that will probably come to pass by the year 2000, says that by then recorded information, which will consist of things no more durable or verifiable than arrangements of magnetic particles, "will be easily changed". He goes on to suggest that in the Australian environment adequate safeguards will be provided to prevent information being manipulated or corrupted, but we must beg leave to express some little doubt about this. We remember that Ministers of the

Crown in the Australian Parliament have on occasion declared that certain records do not exist, when it was later shown that they did, and that a telegram had been sent to a foreign power, when in fact it had not. Would it not have been much more convenient had it been possible, by the manipulation of a few switches, to have made the alteration to the record before making the declaration in Parliament? In the year 2000 this will be very easy indeed.

Also in this issue are two articles dealing with the preservation on magnetic sound recording tape of interviews with people. There is also a news report about another person, who hopes to be able to record on tape the recollections of veterans of the Gallipoli campaign of 1915. The present generation has heard so much about Watergate that the very first thought that comes to mind when tape recordings are mentioned is "Falsification of the record". President Nixon's secretary — or rather, her evidence in the Watergate affair — has taught us how easy it is to accidentally wipe clean a section of magnetic tape — or, alternatively, how easy it is to claim in court that a section has been wiped clean accidentally, when it was purposely erased. Once this section has been "wiped", it is very easy indeed to re-record other sounds over that section. It would not take very much skill to re-record words, even words uttered by the original speaker but belonging in a different context, in such a way as to completely falsify the message.

One remembers the comment of the F.B.I. man who deplored the conduct of the Watergate breakers-in — not because of their illegal entry into the Democratic Party Campaign Office, but because they went about it in such an amateurish manner. If the White House tapes have been doctored, it seems that the job has been done in a very inexpert way. It is cold comfort indeed to reflect that there are some people who think it could have been done so well that no one could possibly tell.

If that can happen to some archival materials today — that is to materials which will presumably one day be in the Richard M. Nixon Library (somewhere in California?) — it seems that it may well happen to any or all of the materials that will originate from the departments and offices of the 1980s, 1990s, 2000s — and be in the archives institutions of 2001 A.D.

1984 seems like a good year, compared with 2004.