

ON ACQUIRING AN ARCHIVES: THOUGHTS ON THE TASMANIAN ARCHIVES IN 1974

By *MARY McRAE*

After more than a year as Principal Archivist for Tasmania, I am still conscious of the strange difference of vision I have undergone since quitting the office of deputy-archivist. As a deputy I am sure I could see ever so much more clearly how and where we ought to be heading, and problems usually appeared much less complex from that desk.

One of the main problems of my not-so-lofty office is the necessity to attempt to dissuade about seventy per cent of would-be researchers from the idea that without my personal help their endeavours in the search-room will be to no avail. They must see THE archivist. Not that I am against personal service – it is a very good discipline and keeps me in touch with the working of the search-room. But I was never very good at family trees, and have no imagination when it comes to dating middle-aged houses – “Have you seen the Deeds?” is not really a helpful stock-response. Valiant attempts to enforce Readers’ Tickets for all fall against the onslaught of determined middle-aged matrons who can see the indexes looming in the middle distance and sail determinedly to their goal. Having got to the indexes and removed several score of cards referring to Smith (or whatever) families, then begin the patient explanations, “No madam, not all those Smiths are necessarily related. No, they are most unlikely to all be your relatives”. Madam is later found to have pocketed those of the Smith cards she has decided are of relevance to her family. If tackled on this she will probably answer that, “they are about my family”. She has probably already asked the archivist on duty in the search-room to amend several index entries, since family legend refuted what was stated on the cards. Along with the lady of mildly kleptomaniacal tendencies will be the gentleman who firmly believes that if he would like a map to exist, then of course it does. He wants a chart of Bruny Island for 1825. That one is not produced forthwith is due to staff intransigence and inadequate finding aids rather than to the fact that such a chart never has existed. Then there is the other gentleman who perused the list of burials at Queenborough cemetery and demanded those for the Kingborough cemetery, logic having dictated that if there was a Queenborough cemetery there must also be a Kingborough cemetery.

I retreat from the search-room to my office where the photographer waits with his problem. He has an architectural plan to be copied, but our 35 mm camera will reduce it too much. Tasmania has a Department of Film Production capable of doing this job – and an archivist who is loth to send material out of the Archives, even accompanied by a staff member. But this is what must happen, and the photographer loses another afternoon of productive dark-room work while acting as an escort to the plan. The photographer gets further behind in his work, thus threatening our policy of no Xerox-copying from bound volumes. The plea that it is so much quicker and easier is valid, but what effect does constant exposure to the Xerox light have on already faded ink?

I can see the effect on the binding, but the harsh green Xerox light may well be more insidious. Does every Archives and Record Office accept every order for copying be it ever so short or ever so long? Where is the professional association through which I can have access to other archivists’ ideas on the subject, short of writing individually to each State. I muse on whether there really is some sort of divine right to have a copy of everything demanded, and find the question inter-tangling with the horny perennial one of the *raison d’être* of keeping the records in the first place. I would like to write on just how “public” should public records be, but find most of the issues upon which I feel most strongly involve matters of policy and such things upon which the well-behaved civil servant does not intemperately sally into print. Perhaps this is a good thing, but it certainly makes the writing of a meaningful article difficult.

To the records themselves. I guess the reason I left academe for this job was because of a very real affection for these vitally important sources of information. I am guilty of viewing them as more than this, as things in themselves, requiring care and protection, and can a history graduate offer the protection records must have? The professional journals warn me of the necessity for de-acidification of paper. How can this be achieved with thousands of bound volumes? With due naivete I wonder if we can ever hope to miraculously de-acidify via the air-conditioning system. Which reminds me, our air-conditioning system has no filters or purifiers. But then, our secondary storage vault lacks air-conditioning at all, and while it once maintained a most equable climate, building alterations have inspired dampness in one of the walls, duly recorded by the pink of the once blue silica gel. The non-science trained mind seems to have to accept so much at face value. Our fumigation chamber was provided with the wrong specification (for its volume) for the quantity of chemical to use to produce formaldehyde gas. A fire resulted which was more damaging to nerves than to records, but which, given adequate information, should not have occurred. We still use formaldehyde gas for the frequent transfers of mouldy records, although more effective methods are probably available, and I did read in some learned journal that formaldehyde was not regarded as "good" for leather bindings. Methyl Bromide is available to attack bugs. We used to have 400 pounds of the stuff, until it showed signs of eating its way out of its cylinders. Again, must we use something quite so lethal to ourselves? Problems of conservation technology will I hope be met with the expected appointment of a conservator later this year, but I am not sure that even a conservationist's training will yield the degree of chemical know-how an effective records administrator would appear to require.

Classification of records has been an area of controversy in Tasmania. Should we try to adhere to what one observer called "Peter Eldershaw's elegant series system", or should we concentrate on plastering location numbers over our boxes, bundles and books? Pace, the previous regime, but the conservatism of my Vandiemonian training makes me try for the appearance of "elegance", even if the backlog of un-series-ed records is enough to make any right-thinking Archivist rethink his/her principles. Present plans are to continue to use the series system, complete with mnemonic for each record group.

We will have to be more flexible than Jenkinson would approve of, and use the series number as a location device as well as an expression of the relation of one item to the whole. Out of storage come the unwieldy Accession Books, where each item accessioned should find itself listed. Perhaps I try to rationalise a natural tendency to reactionary behaviour, but a return to the status quo ante seems to be the quickest way of imposing order on our holdings, and to get down to the urgent task of producing more adequate finding aids. Too often the researcher is dependent on the knowledge and memory of the individual archivist, and he has remained too long without a practical list/inventory/guide to our holdings. What sort of findings aid is best — our existing ones are probably too ambitious, and maybe we should be looking more to computer print outs. I was not at the "Schellenberg Conference", now two decades away, and thus perhaps feel less bound to the ideas there propounded for the style of guides.

The production of finding aids to our nineteenth century records is seen as a matter of priority. Tasmania's peculiar historical and demographic situation has left us with, for all the smallness of the state, perhaps a greater proportionate quantity of colonial and post-federation records than the other Australian states. This in itself creates a strong demand both from Australian and overseas scholars for use of the colonial, especially pre-Responsible Government records. This demand situation can become tyrannical in regard to priorities and staff resources: it would be so easy to concentrate on the nineteenth century, and to ask staff to be "colonial" history oriented, to concentrate on governors, convicts and land grants, even genealogy. The popular image of archives amongst Tasmanians is that the nineteenth century is what the job is all about. The

demands of the twentieth century need energetic and positive action to counter the heavy pressures involved in administering the nineteenth century records. Advisory and administrative Boards can see more easily the value of their "old" documents — the buying back of estrays reminds them of this, and thus policies are all but instinctively geared away from the records management area.

Despite the State's small population and consequent relative smaller governmental activity, Tasmania conforms to the western pattern of the proliferation of "modern" records. It is a society with a tendency towards the multiplication of boards, sub-departments and commissions — and each instrumentality not only creates further record groups, but many now actively are seeking advice on records management from the Archives Office. The problem is how to fit our nineteenth century orientation into the service required of records managers. Should our concentration remain on history honours degrees, or should we be looking to graduates in public administration or business management. It appears that the Archives Office must offer management techniques to the departmental records clerks, whose own status, and to a large extent expertise, has declined from that of the Registry Clerk of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. I doubt that in Tasmania there is a justification, *quo Canada, quo Kaye Lamb*, for having a trained archivist permanently in each major department, and at present the Archives Office does not have a sufficient number of trained staff to adequately function with "new" records. I hope that we can train archivists to double as semi-current records managers, thus having a holistic approach to the total holdings of the archives. Sheer bulk of records will perhaps show this hope to be impracticable, and it is perhaps the sort of thinking generated from a small institution with a small staff, nearly all of whose functions are inter-changeable.

The smallness of the society, and the existence of a fairly effective Archives Act, seems in Tasmania to put extra demands on the Chief Archivist, who in a larger community would probably have much less direct dealings with heads of departments than exists here. The Archivist is not a head of department as such, but the powers and intent of the Archives Act produces personal contact between the Solicitor or Auditor-General, or whoever, which can be of immeasurable benefit in getting the archival message through to the various levels of the departments. And these officers judge the effectiveness of the Archives largely by our competence with their semi-current records by the swiftness of their production and the maintenance of their confidentiality. We recently had cause to seek out a criminal file for the Crown Law Department. The file had apparently never been transferred. Enquiries elicited the information that "special cases" were kept in another run, within the Crown Law Department's own walls. A measure of our success in breaking out of the antiquarian and gossipy image from which some archives have suffered in the past is that all this series of "special cases" are now transferred.