

REVIEW

*Guide to the State Archives of New South Wales: no. 15:
Colonial Secretary: Correspondence*

by IAN PEARCE

My first thoughts upon being asked to review this Guide were "what can one really say about it?" It does, I think, in some ways defy reviewing. The great bulk of the volume consists of lists of either file numbers or file headings and there is certainly not much one can say about a list of file numbers.

The Guide is divided into three main sections not including a list of Colonial Secretaries from 1821-1970 (one wonders how Mr. Willis might feel about being called 'Colonial Secretary'). Within these three main sections, "Description of the Correspondence", "Letters Received" and "Letters Sent", there are over 20 subdivisions which are sometimes called Appendices and sometimes not, for example, the shelf list of "letters received" is called an appendix while the shelf list of "letters sent" is not.

Probably the best way of offering any comment on the Guide is to go through these sections in order giving, as it were, a brief guide to the Guide. Before doing this, I should perhaps point out that the Guide needs long and careful study (of all sections) if one is to make the best use of it — it is not something to browse through.

The first section is a Description of the Correspondence. This takes the place of the introduction and departs from the usual practice of giving an administrative history of the Department. Apart from the staff and time needed to compile an administrative history (this being the reason given for its non-inclusion) there is, I think, some justification for omitting it from what is a guide to only a part of the Colonial Secretaries' records, even if it is the longest and most important part. The description of the correspondence basically gives a detailed and invaluable commentary on the physical arrangements (and, the unfortunate re-arrangements) of the records themselves. The inward letters to 1826 have particularly suffered from re-arrangement during the publication (1888-1890) of the *History of New South Wales from the Records*. Not only does this description indicate the arrangement of the records but it also explains partly why the Guide is arranged as it is.

It is followed by a list of periodical returns from Government Departments which were to be sent to the Colonial Secretary and gives some indication of what may be expected in the records in this area. The last section of this first general part is a list headed "Administrative Arrangements" which conveys "some idea of the scope and diversity of the Colonial Secretary's duties" between 1856 and 1901. This is particularly useful as it provides a quick guide to the type of information likely to be found in the correspondence files.

The second part, "Letters Received: List of Series", lists series title, covering dates, location numbers and (except for the "special bundles") the number of boxes or columns. There are also notes on indexes and references to the more detailed lists in the eight following appendices. These appendices are:

- A. Letters and Petitions received 1789-1826.
- B. Special Bundles 1794-1825.
- C. Minutes and Memoranda.
- D. Indexes and Registers to Letters Received 1826-1941.
- E. Main Series of Letters Received 1826-1934.
- F. Special Bundles, 1826-1934.
- G. Memorials and reports received from the Commissioner of Claims, 1832-1855.
- H. Plays submitted to the Colonial Secretary for approval.

It is perhaps a minor criticism that E does not follow on after A and similarly F after B but this would, I think, have improved the arrangement somewhat. The reasons for the division at 1826 is explained in the "Description of the Correspondence".

All these appendices are basically chronologically arranged lists giving details of the file numbers or file titles in each box, bundle or volume together

with notes on some of the series. The location numbers are also given and although I am not familiar with the use of these numbers in the Archives Office of New South Wales, I felt that it was a little odd that these numbers did not always run on in sequence in Appendix E which claims to be a shelf list. For someone not working in the Archives Office of New South Wales, the usefulness of these appendices varies considerably although it is probably worthwhile being faced with page after page of file numbers for the advantage of having a detailed list of file titles, even if they are arranged chronologically. I am half inclined to feel that an alphabetical subject list of the file titles would perhaps have been more useful. As long as one remembers that this Guide is particularly for the use of readers in the Archives Office itself, one can forgive the long list of location numbers, file numbers and covering dates which make up a large proportion of the Guide but which would not, I should imagine, be of much interest or use to outside readers.

The remainder of the Guide covers outward letters from 1809. There are five sections in this part. The first is an alphabetical list of addressees sometimes with covering dates and a reference to the series number. Whether by accident or design, this does not appear to be as complete as it might, as some officers listed as addressees in series 38, do not appear in this main list. The second section is a list of series titles. As there are quite a number of series of letterbooks each containing letters on a particular subject, or addressed to a particular individual, this list is quite useful for a quick check of the series. The series titles are also listed chronologically by the opening date of each series.

Then follows a general description of the series with notes on contemporary titles, registration systems and indexes followed by the main descriptive lists arranged by series number. The last section, a shelf list of letterbooks, expands on lists of covering location numbers given in the detailed description.

Overall I think that if one is willing to spend time on using this Guide then it will be found to be well worthwhile despite its rather daunting first appearance. There are though, a number of relatively minor points which could perhaps have been altered. Here and there throughout Appendix F the location number column is disconcertingly blank, the location number having been moved into the Title column. The reason is presumably because these items are sub-groups of a large file title (e.g. Reports on Gaols – Individual Prisons) but it does seem unnecessary. Some of the “special bundles” 1826-1934 do, in fact, contain material dated well before this which makes one wonder whether the pre 1826 and post 1826 bundles really needed separate lists (and series) at all.

As I have mentioned already, there are some inconsistencies, particularly with regard to the dating of lists, etc. The covering dates for the series of minutes and memoranda are not given in the contents list or elsewhere until one consults the “shelf list”. Here again it is hard to believe that this is really a shelf list rather than a chronological list giving location numbers.

As is perhaps almost unavoidable with a work of this size, there are a few spelling errors and such like, for example, “Governor Sorrell” and the cover page for the “Minutes and Memoranda” section headed “Minutes and Memorandum”. Due apparently to a misunderstanding with the printer, the Guide has on the cover ‘Part II’ which it is not, and its date of publication as 1972 whereas the correct date is 1973.