

THOUGHTS ON NEW ZEALAND'S NATIONAL ARCHIVES

by Judith Hornabrook

The development of archives in any country must I think be coloured by certain factors — the history of the country; the nature of its government; the circumstances under which the archives organisation was developed; and the people who pioneered the setting up of the archives.

New Zealand presents a contrast to the long span of time covered by holdings of the Public Record Office in London and the archives of other countries of the old world. The official written documents of New Zealand date from 1840, though there is a small quantity relating to the 1830s — the days of the British Resident (1832-9) and early settlement. Prior to 1840 of course, New Zealand came under the administration of New South Wales and the original documentation is to be found there and with the archives of the Colonial Office in London.¹

New Zealand differs from, for example, Australia and Canada on account of its size and the fact that we have a unitary rather than a federal, decentralised, system of government. This has obvious effects on our archives administration. It is true that New Zealand in the period 1854-75 was divided into Provinces. But, and here they differ from perhaps the closest example, South Africa, the Provinces were also subject to the general government. When the Provinces came to be disbanded their records were transferred to the central government, and hence in due course to the National Archives. This is with the notable exception of Canterbury, whose archives are held at the Canterbury Museum which is a repository under the Archives Act. Incidentally the period of provincial government and a measure of decentralization had a bad effect on records keeping — the earlier archives are comparatively far more intact and better kept.

As so often happens in the archives world, the National Archives of New Zealand was comparatively late in being properly established. Prior to 1926, which has been suggested as the date of the birth of the National Archives, there had been some concern but little had been done. Even in 1926 we were far from a national archives in the full sense of the term. In that year Dr G. H. Scholefield the General Assembly librarian was given the additional duties of Controller of Dominion Archives. The appointment at least showed some tangible official interest, but the good doctor had no staff or particular premises for the purpose. Our charter, the Archives Act, was not passed until 1957 — at which time the institution functioned with a staff of no more than three or four, without formal provision for a Chief Archivist or any official powers or formally acknowledged programme. For most of the time the infant archives operated from limited space in the attic of the General Assembly Library.

Despite the early tie with the General Assembly Library, and although we have always worked in close co-operation with the Alexander Turnbull Library, the National Archives has retained its separate entity. For some time the National Archives and the Alexander Turnbull Library were in the same department, the Department of Internal Affairs. Now the Library has joined the National Library under the Education Department so that formal link no longer exists.

The relationship of the National Library and the National Archives must be viewed in the light of history. The National Library dates only from 1964 — with no building or central structure the library system could not provide the necessary organisation for the incorporation of the National Archives.

The National Archives functions as a branch of the Department of Internal Affairs. The Chief Archivist is an officer of that Department and works under the general direction of the Secretary for Internal Affairs. It is noteworthy that the Colonial Secretary, predecessor of the modern day Secretary for Internal Affairs, had responsibility for the care of archives when British administration came to New Zealand in 1840. The Department today is one of wide and varying functions including such diverse subjects as local government, wild life, gaming and the National Museum. With a distinguished institution such as the Alexander Turnbull Library established in 1918 and collecting paintings, maps and manuscripts it was rather too late for the National Archives to have such a broad sphere of interest as the Public Archives of Canada. New Zealand, which has a shorter written tradition, has less of the family archives to be found in homes of the nobility of the old world. The National Archives interest has therefore been almost entirely confined to the public archives.

New Zealand has indeed been fortunate in the people who have worked in its National Archives. No consideration of the National Archives and its development can be complete without reference to the work of Dr G. H. Scholefield as Controller of Dominion Archives.

Mr (later Dr) E. H. McCormick for a period before and after World War II and as War Archivist during the war years made an invaluable contribution. His torch was taken up by Michael Standish, Officer-in-Charge from 1947 and later the first full-time Chief Archivist, and Miss Pamela Cocks (now Mrs Hall) who became his deputy. Mr Standish served until his untimely death in 1962 and Mrs Hall was on the staff from 1950 until 1968. During their lengthy service these two outstanding archivists were able to build up the institution and establish it in the way it was to go. I had the privilege of working with them and am grateful for the sound grounding they tried to instil in me and for the insight they gave me into what were the joys and satisfactions of pioneering. When I joined the staff in 1958, we three and one superannuitant at an out-of-town store were the staff of the National Archives. In addition a retired engineer had been especially engaged to sort out the charred relics of the 1952 Hope Gibbons Building fire. I cannot speak too highly of the thoughtful, patient attention to the details of archival theory allied to the active practical enthusiasm and dedication, of Michael and Pam. Archives may not sound an exciting occupation but they made it so. New

Zealanders are renowned as “do-it-yourself” people. Michael and Pam were exponents of “do-it-yourself” adaptation to circumstances. They also fought for something better and did achieve something. More still, they left the way open for others to progress further. The late John Pascoe who succeeded Michael Standish was just the man to take up a challenge and work for the promotion of archives. To work with this lively, generous man of wide experience was another piece of good fortune. He too has left his mark on the development of the National Archives.

The shortage of finance, space and the small staff have been of course important factors in our progress but “it is an ill-wind”, Especially in the earlier years we gained something from the more personal intimate character of operations. When staff and also readers were few and we were less involved, because of the very factor of our small scale, we could maintain a rather special relationship. This I believe was of advantage to readers and archivists alike. Although there has been some expansion some of this remains. Lack of space and staff certainly still continue significant factors — accommodation is scattered in leased premises, which are at present almost full to capacity. The staff numbers seventeen; a contrast to major archives overseas.

Beginning in such a humble way Michael Standish and Pam Cocks and their predecessors had time to prepare for more activity ahead. They experimented and spent hours of study to get the best systems for the local scene and laid down policy and methods which, for the most part, have stood the test of time. We have the newer country’s advantage of being able to profit from experience. The New Zealanders studied European and American practice in theory and later during overseas study tours. The teachings of Sir Hilary Jenkinson and Theodore Schellenberg had an influence on New Zealand thought and practice. The visit of the latter in 1954 was well-timed.

Let us now consider certain aspects of our work. The archives are divided into archives groups, corresponding to government departments or major divisions thereof. The groups are designated by mnemonic symbols, for example IA for Department of Internal Affairs; NZC for New Zealand Company. For the most part, this works well in the New Zealand context. Recently, however, with expansion and the constant changing of departmental titles, it has presented some awkwardness and we have the uninitiated wondering why for example EA (for External Affairs) should appear for the Ministry of Foreign Affairs — the modern designation for the same department.

A very high proportion of archives have some form of rudimentary series list, but more detailed finding aids and published inventories have perforce been delayed. Generally there has been difficulty in handling accessions because of the small staff and the dispersal of holdings amongst several repositories, some distance apart. We have been obliged to concentrate on immediate demands. This situation should improve shortly. Apart from inventories, the annual summaries since 1966, and a few information circulars, there has been little in the way of publication. I hope there will be more in this field soon also.

The circumstances existing in the 1950s — the lack of space and

the poor conditions under which official records were scattered around Wellington — influenced what was probably a greater emphasis on the disposal of records, on records management, from a very early stage in the history of National Archives in its post war, “operational” phase. The Hope Gibbons building fire of 1952, in which important archival material of four key government departments was lost was a significant factor in the National Archives’ history. It emphasised the urgent need for action for proper care and control of the public records.

The part taken by archivists in the appraisal of records is greater than usual. This can be appreciated in the light of the local situation. When this work was first undertaken, departments were understaffed and there was a lack of personnel with sufficient training and experience. So the archivists were obliged to do most of the actual appraisal themselves. Classification systems and the state of records management in general were such that more file by file examination was required than desired. This state of affairs still exists to some extent. Despite early activity, the system of disposal schedules has not been fully established yet. With time and improvements, new procedures will be feasible and such itemised examinations should be unnecessary.

Today we have a very high proportion of more current archives amongst our holdings. This is a factor which needs tidying. I think we shall have to consider holding records as storage (records centre) material for longer periods before transferring them formally as archives. It should here be noted that parts of the Records Centres, established to accommodate semi-current records in storage, have perforce been allocated to archives to ease the shortage of space for archival material. This is not an ideal situation and can cause some confusion.

A study of the Archives Act will draw attention to three factors which are worth noting:

- a. There is no 30-year rule. When the Archives Act was passed in 1957 this was not so topical as it is now. The Public Records Act the following year made provision for a 50-year rule. The demand for access in 1957 was certainly not so great as it is now, but then the National Archives held little in the way of papers to which restrictions would apply. The present system of access is one whereby departments can deposit archives with restrictions and each request for access is treated on its merits. This can be more easily managed in a small country such as New Zealand and to date there has been little problem. New Zealand obviously needs to work in with other countries, more especially Australia and Britain, on this subject.
- b. There is no advisory committee. Disposal of official records requires only the approval of the Chief Archivist. To act as a check and enable objections to be heard there is a provision for gazette notices giving warning of such approvals. This has not been very successful in practice and in fact has seldom been used. The policy is being reviewed at present. In actual fact in cases of doubt the Chief Archivist has always called on expert advice when necessary and this has been freely given.

c. The Archives Act provides for regional repositories. Much can be expected from this in the future of archives in this country. I believe Dr McCormick and Michael Standish both envisaged and hoped for this. In practice the development has not been as effective as it might. It has rather grown up "like Topsy". Because of lack of staff and finance both for the National Archives and local institutions, there has not been adequate liaison and development and the repositories present the picture of a miscellany of different standards. The shortage of trained staff and problems of finance will unfortunately remain a handicap for some time. I should say here that some institutions, notably the Alexander Turnbull Library and the Hocken Library in Dunedin, are doing most significant work in the archives field and have increasingly sizeable holdings. Interest in the setting up of local archives is showing an encouraging advance.

To travel from Auckland in the north or Invercargill in the far south is not to be compared to the distances in the larger countries; though it can still prove expensive and inconvenient for scholars. The benefit of shorter distance is rather cancelled out by something of a lack of local archives repositories such as the county archives in England.

Where does New Zealand go from here? My personal ambition is to have our own archives building with an adequate staff of archivists of high professional standards, spurred by the incentive of reasonable career opportunities. (This is rather difficult in a small country such as ours.) I hope we will be able to build on the excellent foundations provided by our predecessors. An active records management programme and conservation facilities are required. Lately we have not had the staff to devote to these important activities — the State Services Commission has taken over a large section of records management work, including records classification and this will influence development in this field. With the appointment of Miss Rosemary Collier as Senior Archivist with qualifications in repair, a conservation programme becomes more practical especially with the co-operation of the National Library's Conservation Section. Further we must maintain our activity in other aspects of archives work and produce more publications. I hope also it will be possible to do more in the way of educating people to think archivally and to take a prominent part in raising standards throughout the country. A lot to ask — but worth trying to attain.

1. Microfilm copies of these archives are held at the National Archives.