

ROBERT SHARMAN, ARCHIVIST

An appreciation

It must be said at the outset that Robert Sharman is alive and well and living in Adelaide, gainfully employed as Assistant State Librarian of South Australia. One of the dangers of writing an appreciation of anyone's work is that the reader too quickly assumes that the subject of the article is either dead or not long for this world. So let it be clear that Robert Sharman is retiring from the editorship of *Archives and Manuscripts*, and from that alone. After fifteen years of carrying it almost single-handed — producing it for much of that period four times a year — he has handed this journal to the newly-formed Australian Society of Archivists, probably with a sigh of relief. His has been a magnificent achievement.

It is appropriate that Sharman should be the first honorary life member of the A.S.A., an honour bestowed in August last year. The Society's rules decree that life membership can be given in recognition of service rendered either to the Society or to the archival profession. Sharman has done both, for without his efforts, notably through *Archives and Manuscripts*, in what is fashionably called consciousness-raising, it is certain that the development of a professional association of archivists would have been many years delayed.

He has not just been a theorist. Parallel with his advocacy of archives and his editorship of this journal, he has been active in the most practical way in establishing or maintaining archival institutions on 'correct' lines in three Australian cities. He has developed—as many archivists and librarians do, perhaps to protect them from their public—a mystique or reputation; in his case it is best illustrated by the reputed advice of a history professor to a timid M.A. student: 'Don't worry about Mr Sharman, his bark is worse than his bite.' But as Mary McRae points out below, people in need of his co-operation can be overwhelmed by the response. The new Editor of this journal can also testify to that.

After many years of pioneering archival work, Robert Sharman has returned almost exclusively to the arms of librarianship; although one point which ruggedly-independent archivists may do well to consider is that he never forsook librarianship in those archive years. He has been, of course, a member of the Library Association of Australia, but also a representative on its General Council and its Standing Committee; he has served as its President, and is Vice-President of the South Australian Branch; he has represented it on A.A.C.O.B.S. The 1973-74 Annual Report of the South Australian Library Board also notes that

He has been a member of the Committee on Museum and Libraries of the Australian National Commission for UNESCO and has represented the library profession on a Committee of the Literature Board of the Australian Council for the Arts concerned with the 'Public Lending Right' . . . He is a member of the Advisory Committee on Library Studies of the South Australian Institute of Technology. He is also a member of the A.A.C.O.B.S. Working Party on Research and Development.

Clearly the archival profession is not the only one in his debt. But let us leave the library part of it aside and look at the archival career up to the time he left the Australian National University Archives to take up his position as Assistant State Librarian in South Australia. Perhaps in time more chapters will be added. Let us say, 'The story so far . . .'

A.G.F.L.

Tasmania

How much I didn't know about Bob Sharman was brought home to me when I started to write 'something' about his contribution to the institution which I now head. He has always been quite literally the 'father figure' of the place, and folk memory preserves an image of the all-round Renaissance man, equally skilled at erecting makeshift wooden shelving as at establishing criteria for selection and disposal.

Sharman was the man who established order out of Chaos, who got the records in and classified them, who often wrote monumental replies to enquiries which tickled his imagination, thus establishing the Tasmanian Archives' reputation as being 'good' with its correspondents, and who personally (under the terms of the 1943 Act) supervised the destruction of records. At a time when the Australian Society of Archivists is concerned with professional qualifications, it is perhaps a salutary reminder to note that Sharman was appointed to take on the ordering and administration of the Tasmanian Archives when he was at the advanced age of 21 and held a B.A. degree, the preliminary certificate of the L.A.A., and had had some eighteen months experience working in the University of Tasmania Library as a junior assistant.

His referees for the position of Archives Officer found him to be a young man of sound judgement, thoughtful, reliable and painstaking, always willing to work hard, and one was moved to remark 'there is nothing slapdash about him'. Appointed in 1949, Bob was to spend 1950 training in the Mitchell Library and to 'ensure that he was well grounded in librarianship' he attended lectures at the Library School, studying for the Qualifying Certificate of the L.A.A. In January 1951 he commenced formal duty as Archives Officer, and it is clear from the State Library's files that the Librarian saw the archivist as nothing more than a manuscripts librarian, servicing historians and antiquarians with authentic historical information. Fortunately Sharman did not completely share this image of his new job.

My impression of Sharman—gained from the files I have inherited—is of a man of seemingly boundless energy, tremendous drive and possessing great administrative skills, who also single-handed set up an archives, and having done that proceeded to set up the local historical association as a logical adjunct to the proper exploitation of the records. Sharman's very drive probably led him into fairly frequent collisions with a more conservative administration, and the letters of appreciation from the historians he ably helped are ironically matched with the rockets from officialdom for real or apparent contraventions of their code.

The real tribute to be paid to Bob Sharman's work as founder of the Tasmanian Archives in its present form is that he was able to

sell to the Public Service and to the Library itself the idea of just what an archives is and should be, and that he was able to make this idea real.

Mary McRae

Queensland

Robert Sharman was appointed Archivist in Queensland in 1959, as a result of the Proclamation of the Public Records provision (Part IV) of the *Libraries Act* of 1943. The situation facing him upon his arrival was daunting, to say the least. First, the accommodation provided (in the State Stores, formerly Commissariat Stores building) next to the then Public Library, was not satisfactory. The regrettable tendency of administrators to equate the storage of 'old' records with 'old' buildings was readily apparent. Second, though some public offices had preserved their records remarkably well, some record holdings 'had for many years lain bound together in a confused chaos, under corroding, putrefying cobwebs, dust and filth . . .'¹

With only a small staff he made an immediate, worthy and considerable impact on the archival scene in Queensland. He was able to arrange transfer and processing of a large amount of public records and to begin a reference and research service based upon them. It is very true to say that the achievements of Queensland State Archives so far owe a great deal to the influence and guidance of Bob Sharman.

Very early in his appointment, he was involved in a survey of record holdings in Government Departments, undertaken in conjunction with the then Public Service Commissioner's Department. This survey resulted in the clearance of both valuable and disposable material from Departmental storage.

The major event in Bob's Queensland career would undoubtedly be the planning and subsequent move to the new building at Dutton Park. The building itself reflects many of Bob's ideas and experiences and has proved itself a workable unit standing the test of time. At the time it was built, it was a pioneer venture, being the first new State Archives building in Australia.

During his Queensland career, Bob was active as a member and office bearer of the Library Association of Australia. He gave freely of his time to many associated projects, including the editorship of the Queensland Branch periodical, and as a speaker at public functions. Another legacy of the Sharman energy is *Queensland Heritage*, the Library Board's continuing twice-yearly publication carrying articles based on research materials held in the John Oxley Library and the State Archives. He was also a member of the Oxley Library Advisory Committee.

When he left Brisbane in 1970 to take up his appointment as Archivist in the Research School of Social Sciences, Australian National University, Robert Sharman left an efficient, respected and energetic unit, established in its own building and providing a valuable administrative and public service.

Paul Wilson

Australian National University

When Bob Sharman took up his appointment as Archives Officer in January 1970 he became the third person to hold that position. The appointment represented a marked change for both Bob and the Archives.

His predecessors (to overgeneralise somewhat dangerously) had both been archival entrepreneurs of a particularly active kind. Bruce Shields had set the Archives on its course, particularly in the area of trade union records, had conducted far-ranging surveys of available records, and had collected aggressively. John Joseph Jones in a relatively short active tenure made his mark by arranging for the deposit of some and the microfilming of other records of the A.W.U. and for the deposit of Dalgety and Company's records.

Bob Sharman's period in contrast was one of consolidation. It was Bob who shouldered the task of actually microfilming the Queensland A.W.U. records and it was he who arranged the later deposits of the London records of the Australian Agricultural Company and Australian Mercantile Land and Finance to complement the Australian records already held, to give only a couple of examples. In fairness it should be mentioned that he also initiated and carried through the microfilming of the records of the Queensland Trades and Labour Council, a new departure of considerable importance. He did a great deal of work in regularising archival procedures in the unit, building on the work of Mrs Barbara Ross and placing the unit on a sound archival footing in such areas as description and finding aids.

That he achieved so much in the relatively short space of two years is a measure of the man, particularly when it is remembered that from the time of taking up his appointment he had to contend with the final details of building and then moving the Archives into its present quarters from scattered locations; that he was involved in the planning and then the teaching of the first archives administration course in the library diploma course at the Canberra College of Advanced Education; that he continued to edit *Archives and Manuscripts*; and that he became the first (and perhaps the only) practising archivist ever to hold the position of President of the Library Association of Australia.

The A.N.U. Archives was a new departure for Bob in the sense that he came to it from a long experience of State Archives. The conditions and assumptions under which an institution like this one operates are very different to those of a government archives. Perhaps equally important, this was the first time Bob had inherited a going concern. He had started the Tasmanian State Archives (as it then was) from scratch and the stories of his ingenuity and resourcefulness in solving the problems he found in doing the same thing in Queensland are legend. At A.N.U. on the other hand he found an established archives with established procedures and his positive adjustment to that situation has already been mentioned.

Bob visited Britain during 1971 in his capacity of President of the L.A.A. to attend the I.F.L.A. Conference and a conference to form a Commonwealth Library Association. He also worked very hard

investigating relevant record holdings and making valuable contacts in the business archives field.

I would hope that Bob would not want me to conclude this piece without balancing the good and positive with a mention of some of the difficulties which he experienced. Government archives with a captive audience of depositors and users chained to their objectives, are pretty well insulated against changes in the archival climate of the kind that institutions like ours were (and are) going through. Collecting records was posing new problems and in some ways was becoming harder. The academic community which we serve has research interests which it naturally wishes to have catered for and its expectations sometimes outrun the collecting possibilities. There are other areas too which are potentially tension-makers. So I have found the situation and so, I believe from the records of the Archives, did Bob. But if his two years in Canberra were a few degrees less than idyllic I hope that Bob can look back on them as having been basically enjoyable and satisfying. Certainly they were successful.

Having written (inevitably, I suppose) what sounds like the tag end of an obituary, I would like to conclude by saying how happy I am that Robert Sharman is still in the land of the living and that I hope he will continue for many years to come to maintain an active interest in the archival scene in general and the Society in particular. Very few people have worked so long in Australian archives as Bob has done, even fewer have given so much of themselves to the profession, and I would hope that nobody would cavil at my contention that no one was more deserving of being elected as the first honorary member of the Australian Society of Archivists.

I am sure that all members and friends of the Society will join with me when I express my gratitude to Bob for all his work on the occasion of his retirement as Editor of this journal and my hope that now he no longer has to worry about its production we may look forward to seeing his name in its pages as a contributor, thus giving us all the benefit of his experience.

Michael Saclier

REFERENCE

- I. T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques*. Cheshire, Melbourne, 1956, p.6 quoting William Prynne, Keeper of the Records for Charles II.