

ARCHIVAL TRAINING: A CANBERRA EXPERIMENT DIES

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This year marks the end of an attempt to keep alive an institutional interest in general archival training in Canberra. Since 1971 the Canberra College of Advanced Education has offered, as one unit of its Diploma in Librarianship, an elective unit called Archives and Manuscripts. The unit's subject-matter was initially devised by Bob Sharman who, at that time, was Archives Officer of the Research School of Social Sciences at the Australian National University. He was a member of the Course Committee which drew up the syllabus for the Librarianship programme, and when the first semester opened in 1971 he was both lecturer and tutor of the Archives and Manuscripts course.

The objects of the course were modest enough: the emphasis, in theory anyway, was to be evenly weighted between archives and manuscripts. The draft of the programme stated that the aim was

To introduce the theory of archives and of the preservation and use of manuscript material; to study the nature and scope of archival collections especially in their relevance to the work of reference libraries; to analyse the problems of acquisition, control and use of manuscript collections in libraries; to survey the main collections of government business and private archives and manuscripts in Australia . . .

The printed Handbook of the C.C.A.E. warned prudently:

The course does not provide an adequate preparation for work as an archivist, in which the College hopes to develop a programme of professional education at a later date, but it is designed primarily for the librarian who is interested in manuscript collections.

The Canberra C.A.E. was, in those days, a single building on a windswept plain in Belconnen, the northern district of Canberra. It was draughty and exposed. But the tutorial room was up above the canteen so the second half of Thursday's three-hour session of one lecture and two seminars was blessedly more relaxed than the first. A further seminar was held on Fridays to complete the full programme.

About fourteen students, armed with a reading list which included Jenkinson, Schellenberg, Posner and Muller, Feith and Fruin, puzzled through the first few sessions, struggling to understand just what archives *were* and how they differed from manuscripts. They were all graduates from a variety of disciplines but none, if I remember correctly, had ever had occasion to use archival material. Provenance, *fonds*, group, series, original order, annual single number were confusing terms which probably bedevilled some of them till the end. Other concepts were more tangible: after some weeks access, custody, appraisal, disposal were flung around quite nonchalantly. Access was controversial; appraisal was deadly serious.

For me, as onlooker and occasional participant (I filled in a lecture and several tutorials when Bob Sharman was away on field-trips), the most interesting aspect was watching a practising and devoted archivist of long and intensely down-to-earth experience striving to define

procedures that are largely intuitive, to refine unwieldy concepts found in the texts, to explain the peculiarity of the idea that a series might be one item or a hundred feet of records*. The series was the king-pin, and proved to be elusive. In its simplest form it could be nailed down, but it was necessary, unfortunately, to introduce the complications of open and closed and split series, and to provide examples of problems caused in public records by changes of name or function in departments; of records still held in departmental offices; or of the confused jumble of private records when one could argue interminably about group and series. The most difficult thing was to delineate the archives themselves, in a blank room to uncomprehending faces. In the recesses of my mind as I listened, and still there four years later when it was my turn to talk, were the cool dark cobwebby corners in the State Stores building where local government rate books lay waiting for processing side by side, or up one floor where the silent rows of run registers bulged, laconically informative; across to the bundled miles of correspondence, blue paper with spidery writing, venomous marginal comments. Impossible to tell the sheer impressiveness of a repository where stack after stack is mute tribute to literate man and the minute details of past administrations; where the enigmatic enclosure, the mysteriously unfinished transaction tantalises, where the clamorous voices of forgotten generations beat in silent tumult against the bindings and covers.

In line with the stated aims of the course, the seminar topics spread the net wide to cover all aspects of archives of possible interest to librarians. As examples: conflicts between collecting interests at State and National level, separation of archives from libraries (for and against), universities' roles in collecting archives and manuscripts, publications of archives, the best format for inventories and guides to archives, indexing of archives, collecting historical material in a provincial city. The students looked at the Guide to Collections, the Mander-Jones project, the Australian Joint Copying Project; they pondered some purely archival concerns such as the ideal training programme for archivists, the ideal form of professional association, the order of priorities in archival work and the problems involved in assisting research workers. Mrs Barbara Ross of the then Commonwealth Archives Office lectured on the office; the students were taken to visit, and some of the problems of the C.A.O. in providing reference service and in registration and disposal were treated in seminars. Relations between archivist and user, archivist and historian, and archivist and antiquarian were explored. Only the relations between archivist and records manager were not touched explicitly. The National Library (Manuscript Section) was visited. There were seminars on practical problems of storage and cataloguing of maps and pictures, and of microfilms; manuscript repair and restoration was looked at briefly, and other practicalities such as fire, fumigation, air-conditioning, and shelving were discussed.

*As Sharman's deputy in the Queensland State Archives I had worked alongside in the days when the Archives were housed in that notorious edifice, the State Stores building, constructed in 1829 by the convicts. In those days archivists not only wrapped the bundles and tied the tapes, but built the wooden shelves as well.

The end result of all this was that the students were well aware that they were scratching the surface, but they seemed genuinely interested, and appeared to find the course a relief from some of the other more abstruse units in the Diploma programme. We hoped that they would go off to their respective library appointments with real understanding of the problems and peculiarities of any archival or manuscript material which might be entrusted to their care. In return they had provided us with quite helpful bibliographies (appended to their seminar papers) which became rough guides to the journal references pertinent to a variety of archival topics. I have found many uses for them in subsequent years.

In January 1972 Bob Sharman left the A.N.U. Archives to go to Adelaide as Deputy State Librarian. Dr Peter Biskup, who had been Law Librarian at A.N.U., joined the staff of the C.A.E. and took over the Archives and Manuscripts course. Since he was not an archivist, he relied heavily in the next few years on guest lecturers from different institutions in Canberra. I explained the intricacies of private records, and the A.N.U. Archives collection of business and trade union records in particular; Jim Gibbney lectured on the early days of the Commonwealth Archives Office; Barbara Ross and possibly others from the current staff of the C.A.O. talked on present problems of that office. Graeme Powell of the National Library's Manuscript Section and Bob Langdon from the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau (A.N.U.) were also involved. There may have been others. The seminars were reduced from three hours to two per week, and the written work was increased. The semester's work was settled as two tutorial papers and an examination, and (from 1973) one essay, one practical assignment and one short exercise. Essays were on broad topics such as access or the validity of manuscript libraries or microphotography. They were done in the first half of the semester and usually forced the students to lurch into Jenkinson *et al.* The short exercise was almost invariably to review several different types of archival or manuscript guides or inventories which included not only the ones on most archivists' bookshelves but also *Monumenta Germaniae Historica* and W. W. Manross, *The Fulham Papers in the Lambeth Palace Library*. The practical assignment was the *pièce de résistance*. In 1974 when the tutoring work was shared by three of us — Jim Gibbney from the Australian Dictionary of Biography, Kevin Green (then Director of the Papua New Guinea Records Project) and myself, all here at A.N.U. — the students were given a choice of (i) a description of private papers: family, personal, or of some business association to which they had access; (ii) a find-and-describe expedition amongst the Australian Joint Copying Project microfilms; and (iii) a similar descriptive exercise with a Trades and Labor Council deposit of records in the A.N.U. Archives (also on microfilm).

It was unfortunate that the two most popular choices happened to be microfilms. What the students needed more than anything else was to get the feel of documentary material. It was not possible in Canberra for any archival repository to unleash such a large number of students on unprocessed material, especially given the time span of a semester. Over a whole year it might have been possible to space them out in

small groups, but their entire programme in any case left very little time available for extended research for assignments.

At the end of 1974 Peter Biskup asked me to draft a tutorial programme for the course, and to take over as sole tutor for the 1975 semester. The programme I drew up was not exactly adventurous. It was more in the line of weeding out those too-specialized topics which had crept in over the preceding three years. I thought it unnecessary, for example, that the students spend a critical-evaluation seminar on each of the major authorities, Jenkinson, Schellenberg, or Muller, Feith and Fruin, or that they outline the main features of the Colonial Office record system, or describe the administrative-history position in Australia. While right and proper in any true archival training course they were too detailed for a survey unit for intending librarians. Instead, the theory and principles of archives were attacked in one seminar in the first week, and of course underlay every other topic in the weeks that followed. Historical surveys of archival development in each State was transferred to one of the essay topics, so that it could be avoided by those who found the saga less than fascinating. Records management, public relations, archives in libraries, archival legislation, finding aids and the other favourites were left in but I did introduce some variety with oral history, archival architecture, and rationalization in the collection of private papers.

I also re-introduced one topic from Bob Sharman's 1971 programme: 'How does one justify the costs of archives to the taxpayers?' This is one of those questions no archivist should be asked on rainy Monday mornings after a hard weekend. The reply leads into spiral-staircase type explanations which leave us eyeball to eyeball with Henry Ford saying 'History is NOT Bunk'. In 1971 it had not really seemed to me an arguable proposition, but in 1975, whether from an excess of rainy Monday mornings or the difficult economic circumstances of the times, I could make no pronouncements on the subject without hesitation. Did we really need (so many) historians? A lot of archival material had been destroyed without bringing the country to its knees; some of us were keeping too much that was valueless, or were collecting for the sake of the empire more and more when a sample was all that was required. Anything could be valuable source material if you thought about it for long enough, but repositories were full of records that were ignored by hasty or careless researchers even when they were pertinent to the topic researched. (Was this because the finding-aids were inadequate, because the users' techniques were sloppy, or because we had simply kept too much?) Even State Archives which take careful note of the large numbers of enquiries answered by phone, mail or personal service must be forced to admit that the same few records (comparatively speaking) are used heavily, and linear foot per dollar the rest hardly pulls its weight! Publicly one can speak warmly of the national estate, the race memory, lessons from the past; but privately one must admit that both archives and historical writing are luxuries, adornments of the prosperous society or the cultivated mind, but not advancing the human condition in any really basic way.

The students' response to the problem was not to question the moral

basis of record keeping or the efficacy of disposal programmes, but to see the solution in terms of short-cut methods such as microforms or computer-processing of information. Archives institutions would henceforth be technocratic empires, with information scientists as consultants and liaison officers!

In general the group was grateful that I did not make too much of a mystique of archives work. Training for librarianship may be becoming too esoteric and jargon-ridden. I think we archivists have enough trouble defining the terms we have without inventing any new ones, or investing simple ones like 'appraisal' with connotations of processes difficult and mysterious. While I wholeheartedly support the manifesto of the Australian Society of Archivists, which proclaims our existence as a small but vigorous professional body, I would not, in fact, like to take up the argument about whether the established body of principles we work by is enough to form the basis of our demand to be accepted as a profession. The work we do presupposes a certain level of education; it requires temperamental aptitude; the rest is training and skill. An examination of the current literature on which we rely, both monograph and journal, does not reveal more than accepted precepts and guidelines. The adaption of classical texts, such as Jenkinson's *Manual*, to twentieth-century records and conditions does not really constitute the large and growing body of knowledge which might seem prerequisite to professional status.

The set assignment was an effort on my part to persuade the students to look critically at a whole archival institution rather than at a group of records. They were asked to report on the organization, accommodation, staffing, holdings, clientele and work methods of one of the following institutions: the A.N.U. Archives, the Australian War Memorial, the National Library (Manuscript Section), the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, or the Academy of Science. All hold material which has some claim to the title of either archives or manuscripts. I must say I really would not repeat this experiment. When I had drafted the course work I had counted on the usual fifteen or so enrollees. Twenty-four, however, decided to do the Archives and Manuscripts unit. So there were rather more than I expected turning up at each institution asking pointed, tactless or obvious questions. Staff found it disconcerting to be faced by the earnest inquirer with poised notebook and pen saying, 'What do you actually DO here?' Heads of institutions proved vague or simply not forthcoming on budgetary details, or to whom they reported. Finding-aids proved difficult to unravel without many hours of concentration (which most students left too late before the deadline to devote to the subject) and lastly the students themselves refused to a large extent to make any real criticism of the institutions they visited. The majority came, saw and wrote it down.

The group who chose the Academy of Science asked if they could substitute a descriptive list of a collection of papers in the Academy for the original assignment. Since this seemed to be more convenient for the officer-in-charge of that institution, I agreed. These students put in the most effort in man-hours. The collections were already stored, after only rough sorting, in boxes, and the students were told

by the librarian to produce an inventory similar to that produced by the National Library's Manuscript Section. The result was in each case an enormously careful and detailed box list, with no attempt to analyse the material by form or content, or indicate even the most tentative series. One of the collections amounted to 26 boxes, so there was a certain amount of anguish involved in reshuffling (on paper) the large number of items so that the shape of the whole collection could be perceived, and some sort of logical arrangement imposed on it. Possibly these students finished the course with the most understanding of archival theory and operations. They were certainly, for the remainder of the semester, more vocal than their fellows in tutorials.

This year the Canberra C.A.E. has decided to eliminate the Archives and Manuscripts unit from the Diploma course, for reasons of economy. In the face of the pruning of staff and money currently required by most semi-government institutions, archives has a low priority. Pious hopes for a full-time archives course to be set up at the C.A.E. sometime soon, when present restrictions are eased, are still sounded, as they were two or three years ago. The cause of archives was perhaps in this instance weakened by not having an archivist on the full-time staff of the college.

While not grieving at the demise of the unit too much—this article is really a sentimental farewell to an exercise which was bikkies in the tin for me—I think its passing should not go entirely unrecorded. There are now a certain number of librarians around the country who have read Jenkinson and Schellenberg and the archival journals; who realise that archive and manuscript material requires treatment different from other library resources, and specialist staff; who are aware of archival repositories around the country and what they contain. In the terms of its charter it was, I think, tolerably successful.

To those of us who were connected with the course in any teaching capacity, it never represented more than a stop-gap; a method of keeping interest alive until such time as a full-time archival diploma course could be introduced at the Canberra C.A.E. There are substantial arguments which could be advanced for such a course: a national school of archives administration and practice, established in the national capital with the Australian Archives Office and the A.N.U. Archives as major teaching aids, and drawing people from all the eastern States, is surely a development which task forces planning the new archival millennium must be considering.