

AUBREY HOLMES

An Australian archival footnote by ROBERT FRENCH

In March 1927 it seemed that something might be coming out of the Report, for Scott wrote to Wood that he was being pestered by someone in the Public Service who wanted the job of Archivist-Editor and seemed to know the most private dealings about the matter. Hopes in the end were disappointed, despite such auguries and despite the drafting of legislation.

R. M. Crawford¹

Scott was concerned lest the position of archivist should go to a Public Servant in whom the historical community could have no confidence. He had already been pestered by a man in one of the departments who had made some reports about records to the Public Service Commissioner. 'He knew all about it, even before the Speaker communicated with us'.

H. J. Gibbney²

IN August 1926, the Honourable Sir Littleton Ernest Groom, Speaker of the House of Representatives and Chairman of the Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament, formally invited Professors Ernest Scott and George Arnold Wood to report to the Committee on, among other things, the completion of the publication of *Historical Records of Australia*, the definition of the duties of the Editor, and the steps to be taken for the future preservation of the historical records of the Commonwealth.³ In their Report, presented to the Committee in the following December, Scott and Wood recommended that the publication of *Historical Records of Australia* be continued. They also recommended that a Commonwealth Public Record Office be established and 'that the Keeper of the Records and the Editor of the published volumes should be the same person'.⁴

It is not my intention here to discuss that Report as such. Rather it is to provide an historical footnote to an incident that occurred after the presentation of the Report. Both R. M. Crawford and H. J. Gibbney make mention, from a reference in the Wood Papers, of a certain Public Servant 'who had made some reports about records to the Public Service Commissioner' and who had pestered Scott in an attempt to be appointed to the position of Archivist-Editor. I believe Aubrey Holmes to have been that person.

Aubrey Holmes was born on 8 September 1891 and was first appointed to the Commonwealth Public Service on 1 August 1911.⁵ On 28 April 1924 he was promoted to the position of Clerk Class 4 in the Records and Registry section within the Naval Secretariat of the Department of Defence. Except for a brief period in 1927 when he was temporarily promoted to the Naval Works Branch, he remained in the Records section, at least until 1937.⁶ Little is known of his personal life. He earned a salary of £390 p.a. in 1924 which was to vary little until the advent of the Depression when, in common with all Public Service salaries, it was reduced — in his case to £276 p.a. The amount of Child Endowment which was paid to him between 1924-1932 indicates that the number of his children rose from two to five in that period.

In response to several requests for 'Suggestions by Officers of the Commonwealth Public Service', Holmes, on 15 March 1926, forwarded through his department to the Public Service Board two foolscap pages of 'remarks relative to the inevitable necessity of a central depository

for important records, etc.⁷ He pointed to the fact that the pending move to Canberra had highlighted the problem of the vast accumulations of records within Government departments, and that current directions were insufficient to deal with the need to preserve records of historical importance and to dispose of those of no possible value. Holmes' concern was provoked by his interest in the history of Defence in Australia. This interest was primary to his later correspondence. Because of the vast accumulation of records, he felt that no adequate history of defence could be written from the original documents. The only solution as he saw it was for the establishment of a Public Record Office, along the lines of the United Kingdom Office, which would have authority to sort out and collect historically important records. He also saw the establishment of the South Australian Archives as pointing the way for the Commonwealth.⁸ He concluded by saying that some of the 'best brains', including Professor Ernest Scott and Mr F. Bladen, had considered or were considering the problem, and warned again of the necessity of action as soon as possible.⁹ On 7 May, he forwarded a clipping from the Melbourne *Argus*, of 1 May 1926, as support for his argument. It contained an article by Professor Scott on 'European Archives' which denounced the neglect of archives in Australia.

Holmes wrote twice more in 1926. On 14 July, in another two-page memorandum, he urged the Defence Department to prepare 'Chronologies of Events connected with the Service' and to assist in the formation of 'Defence Historical Societies'. He also repeated his call for the establishment of a Public Record Office. In August, he expanded upon the above comments. In a five page 'report' he suggested the appointment of a Correspondence and Documents committee or committees to assist in keeping records and again called for the 'Establishment of a Commonwealth Public Record Office for the care, and custody, of Public Records'.¹⁰

All three of Holmes' communications were forwarded through the Department of Defence to the Public Service Board, which in turn forwarded them to the Librarian in Charge of the Commonwealth National Library. Other correspondence on the 'Holmes file' attests to this as does the presence of the three communications on a file of the Prime Minister's Department.¹¹ For his efforts so far, Holmes received several polite bureaucratic thank-yous and, on 20 October 1926, an assurance from the Commonwealth Librarian that the matter was being looked into, which of course it was. That, however, was not the end of the matter, and Holmes deserves recognition for his persistence as much as for what he further had to say. On 4 March 1927, he submitted to the Secretary of his department, for forwarding to the Public Service Board, a sixteen foolscap-page report on the establishment of a Commonwealth Public Record Office. It is worth briefly looking at that report.

The 'Holmes Report'

The 'Holmes Report' is divided into eight sections with introductory remarks and a conclusion. In his *Introduction*, he began with the following sentiment:

The care which a nation devotes to the preservation of the monuments of its past may serve as a true measure of the degree of civilization to which it has attained. The archives of a nation are its most precious heritage. They form the chief monument of its history. It is now generally admitted by all enlightened nations that a State owes a duty to its history, and that it should make its public records accessible. This can only be accomplished by having a proper archives administration and proper buildings for housing these priceless treasures.

Holmes goes on to talk generally about the report, and to talk of the need for proper archival legislation. Citing the British Public Record Act of 1838, French and Italian Decrees, and the Dutch *Archief Wet* of 1918, he urges the Commonwealth Government to follow the European example.¹²

Centralisation

Holmes was not a centralist like the former editor of *Historical Records of Australia*, Dr Frederick Watson, who thought that all Australian archives should be housed in the one location. He believed that depositories should be established in each of the six State capitals, and in Canberra, and that the Commonwealth should return to each State depository the pre-Federation records which originated in that State. However, Holmes did have a somewhat naive view of Federalism based upon his knowledge of European practice. He thought that all the depositories should be placed under the control of the Commonwealth Archivist, to whom, also, each of the archivists in charge would report annually.

Departmental Records

In this section, Holmes called for, as far as practicable, the uniform arrangement of records within each department. Further, he urged the need for regular transfers of records into archival custody. One important point here is that he believed that 'when a department's records have been sent to the archives they should come under the absolute legal control of the official in charge . . . as in France and Holland'. He believed that the time for transfer should be determined by negotiation between the archivist and the department. Finally, Holmes laid down a simple procedure for transfer:

The documents should be accompanied by a duplicate inventory, one copy of which should be returned after the contents have been checked, accompanied by a receipt from the archivist in charge.

Care, Custody and Arrangement

I find this to be the most fascinating section of the whole report for in it Holmes shows just how wide ranging has been his reading of archival theory and practice. He begins by saying that buildings should be adequately constructed against 'fire, theft, damp, rust, and rough handling'. Within each depository he believed the regular use of a vacuum cleaner to be essential. Also, for reasons of protection from fire and loss, Holmes believed that documents should be either bound, bundled between cardboard protectors or stored in cardboard boxes. But then, we find the following statement:

After a collection of papers has come in to the archives the problem of classification demands attention. With the experience of older countries to guide us there is little difficulty in deciding at the outset which is the best principle. They should be classified according to the 'principe de

provenance', with 'respect des fonds' as the French call it, or 'Het Herkomstbeginsel', as it is termed by the Dutch, and 'Die Provenienz seiner Bestände', as defined by the Germans. This may be explained as the method of classifying archives according to the arrangement of each document in the collection, and in the series of that collection to which it belonged at the time when the collection was a living organism . . . No library methods, no purely chronological or alphabetical arrangement can be applied successfully to the classification or archives.

I doubt that many people in Australia in 1927 could have made that statement.¹³

Buildings

Holmes again urged that buildings should provide safe protection for the records. He called for the use of steel shelving and thought rolling bookshelves compactus units?) a good idea. He also urged that proper accommodation be provided for the public researchers.

Repair: Destruction of 'Valueless' Documents

Holmes pointed to the need for adequate conservation. He also called for 'some general and uniform practice in all Government Departments regarding the periodical destruction of valueless documents'. The decision to destroy, he believed, should be taken by a committee which could call upon expert advice and give notice of the intention to destroy in the *Government Gazette*.

Administration and Staff

He saw the need for properly trained staff in each of the seven archival centres. There would be a need for a University course on archival administration, Holmes believed, but Australia was 'not probably ripe yet for the establishment of such a course'.

Publications

'When the archives have been properly classified', Holmes said,

it becomes a duty to make them accessible for administrative and literary purposes. Lists, indexes, and calendars should be prepared and published to aid those who would use the archives, but one of the first essentials is a guide, or a brief conspectus of its collections.

Unlike Scott and Wood, he believed that the publication of *Historical Records of Australia* should be undertaken by a body separate from archives.

Public Use

Finally, Holmes urged that 'every facility should be granted to *bona fide* researchers [sic]'. He set out twenty 'rules and regulations' that should be employed to aid the public in the use of the archives.

It can be seen that Aubrey Holmes put a great deal of effort into his 'report' but it was all for very little result. The report was forwarded to the Public Service Board and, on 27 May 1927, Holmes was informed that 'this matter is receiving the attention of the Board and that any decision as to procedure which may be arrived at will be communicated later'. In 1928, a Circular giving guidelines for the disposal of records was circulated within the Department of Defence — the only really positive result of Holmes work.

Holmes now turned his attention back to the publication of Naval Records 'in conjunction with the future publication of the Historical

Records of Australia' and to the formation of a Naval Historical Society. That he hoped to be appointed the editor for the publication of the records is evident from his further correspondence on file. In 1929, he appealed against the appointment of officers within the Library of the Commonwealth Parliament as announced in the *Commonwealth Gazette* of 10 October 1929. He hoped thereby to gain entry into the one area of government wherein the publication of *Historical Records of Australia* was still being considered as a possibility. He was informed by the Commonwealth Librarian, on 25 October 1929, that the 'appointments' were in fact re-classifications of existing positions and therefore not subject to appeal.¹⁴

The last correspondence from Holmes on file was on 10 December 1929. In a letter to the Secretary of the Department of Defence, he offers some comments regarding War Memorials and then concludes:

If the necessity for a Public Records Office (as set forth in previous papers) is realised might it not stand for all time as a Memorial to perpetuate the memory of services rendered, and encourage National Services in the future ?¹⁵

On 4 March 1930, he received a terse reply from the Secretary to the effect that his remarks on War Memorials were noted but that,

The establishment of a Public Records Office is not a matter for this Department. Mr. Holmes' views on this subject have previously been brought to the notice of the Authorities likely to be interested.

Conclusion

I think that there is little doubt that Aubrey Holmes is the person to whom both Crawford and Gibbney refer. He was aware of Professor Scott's interest in archives, and he did write several reports to the Public Service Commissioner. However, despite his good knowledge of archival theory and his records-keeping experience he does not seem to have been interested in the job of archivist unless it was to be combined with that of editor as recommended by Scott and Wood. His chief interest lay in the position of editor of volumes of historical documents, particularly Defence documents.

I suppose that in the long run Aubrey Holmes can be seen as something of a 'crank'. Unfortunately, his cause, particularly where it relates to the establishment of a Commonwealth Public Record Office, was an important one. It was to be almost another twenty years before an authority concerned with the preservation of Australian Government archives was established. Somehow it seems best to leave the final word to the 'Holmes file' itself. The last entry is a stamped directive: 'Transfer to Archives'.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. R. M. Crawford, *'A Bit of a Rebel'—The Life and Work of George Arnold Wood* (Sydney University Press, 1975), p.361. My thanks to Alan Ives of the Australian Archives who first brought this and other sources to my attention.
2. H. J. Gibbney, 'Prehistory of an Archives', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 4 No. 6 (February 1972), p.5.
3. In addition to the above, see also: Graeme Powell, 'The Origins of the Australian Joint Copying Project', *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 4 No. 5

- (November 1971), and K. Binns, 'Publication of Historical Records in Australia', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (October 1940).
4. A copy of the Report is contained in: K. Binns, *Report on the Historical Records of Australia and recommendations for the resumption of publication* (Canberra, 1939), pp.8-18. See also: Australian Archives. CRS A461 [Prime Minister's Department] Correspondence files, Multiple Number Series, third system, 1934-1950, *item*: B370/1/9 pts. 1 and 2. *Historical Records of Australia*.
 5. Information in this paragraph was gained from: Commonwealth of Australia, *List of Permanent Officers of the Commonwealth Service on 30 June 1924* (Melbourne, 1924), p.62; *on 30 June 1926* (Melbourne, 1926), p.61; *on 30 June 1927* (Canberra, 1928), p.63; *on 30 June 1933* (Canberra, 1933), p.82; *on 30 June 1935* (Canberra, 1935), p.86; *on 30 June 1937* (Canberra, 1938), p.104; *on 30 June 1946* (Canberra, 1948).
 6. No List of Permanent Officers was published between 1938 and 1948. Holmes does not receive an entry in the latter volume.
 7. Holmes' communications and reports are to be found in: Australian Archives. CRS A664 [Department of Defence] Correspondence files, multiple number system (class 401), 1924-1940, *item*: 404/401/58. *Proposal re Disposal of Records by A. Holmes*. I am indebted to Colin Smith of the Australian Archives who first 're-discovered' this file and brought it to my attention.
 8. For more information on South Australia see: G. H. Pitt, 'Archives in South Australia', *Historical Studies*, Vol. 1 No. 2 (October 1940), pp.46-56.
 9. For the Bladen report see: Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Papers* (1903), 'Archives—Report on European Archives by Mr. F. M. Bladen', pp.993-97.
 10. Australian Archives. CRS A664, *op. cit.*
 11. Australian Archives. CRS A461, *op. cit.*
 12. Following the presentation of the Scott-Wood Report a draft Public Archives Bill was drawn up by the Library Committee of the Commonwealth Parliament. This was forwarded to the Attorney-General's Department early in 1927 where two further re-drafts were prepared. The Bill however was never presented to the Parliament. Now, fifty years later, still no Commonwealth archival legislation has been enacted. Indeed, some of the problems with which Holmes was pre-occupied in his Report still concern Commonwealth archivists today. Australian Archives. CRS A2863 [Attorney-General's Department] Bill files, 1901-, *item*: 1927/55. *Public Archives Bill, 1927*.
 13. Holmes also makes mention of the Dutch *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives* by Muller, Feith and Fruin. However I doubt that he would have read it. The English translation was not published until 1940. Holmes states in the covering letter to his Report that it was based on the publications and reports written or issued by Robert Hall (1925), M. S. Guiseppi (1924), C. Graham Botha (1921), and H. M. Stationery Office (1914).
 14. National Library of Australia. CP 740/3 [Parliamentary Department, Commonwealth National Library], General Correspondence, 1929-1939. My thanks to Michael Piggott of the National Library who brought this reference to my attention.
 15. The Australian War Memorial in Canberra was being constructed at this time.