

## ARCHIVES IN NEW ZEALAND: PERSPECTIVES ON THE SMITH REPORT

A Professional Viewpoint, by R. H. GRIFFIN

**Editor's Note:** *In 1976 archivists and others who worked with records formed the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand. One of its earliest actions was to request the New Zealand Government to provide funds towards commissioning an overseas archival expert to visit the country to inspect archival establishments, confer with archivists, and make recommendations for future developments. The Government agreed to the proposal and the following year Dr Wilfred Smith, Dominion Archivist of Canada, accepted the Association's invitation to make the proposed survey and report. In his six-week visit from early February 1978, Dr Smith visited archival institutions in all the major New Zealand cities, addressed seminars of archivists and academics and drafted his report. The Report was published later that year by the A.R.A.N.Z. in Wellington, and is of 39 pages plus appendices. In his Report Dr Smith, after discussing the nature of the project and its context, considers at some length various aspects of the National Archives. Briefer consideration is then given to other subjects, including the Alexander Turnbull Library, Business, Labour, Church and University Archives, Oral History, Photographs, Conservation, Training, and the use of archives. He makes recommendations at each stage. R. H. Griffin, who is Archivist at the Bank of New Zealand and Treasurer of the A.R.A.N.Z., gave this critique of the Smith Report and business archives to the second annual conference of the Association, held in 1978.*

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### **What Dr Smith said on Business Archives:**

*'Business archives are a valuable record of one of the most significant aspects of life in New Zealand. In the A.R.A.N.Z. survey, ten repositories reported holdings of business archives but 90% of these holdings were in the custody of three institutions: the Turnbull Library (339 m), the Hocken Library (260 m) and Massey University Library (90 m). The experience of Massey University illustrates the vulnerability of business archives. The Librarian, realizing that many dairy companies had ceased operations, made a systematic effort to locate their records and thus saved from destruction the records of 136 companies which record the development of a significant New Zealand industry. Recently a faculty member of the University of Canterbury acquired the records of several companies. In neither case is there space to store or staff to look after the records which have been saved. It is evident that most of the surviving business records in New Zealand are still in the custody of the businesses themselves. It is fair to say that companies as a whole do not appreciate the value of their archives. The tendency is to become interested only occasionally, for example in the preparation of a centennial history of the company.*

*'The only solid basis for a viable business archives is a sound records management system in which an archives is the product of a continuing normal progression through creation, a good classification and retrieval system and the application of disposal schedules. It has always been surprising to me that enterprises which depend upon sound business practices which are reflected in profits have been so slow to recognize the importance of their efficient and economical management of the information which is vital to decisions and planning. A company archivist, like a government records manager, should control the records of his company from 'cradle to grave' and be able to demonstrate the practical as well as cultural value of archives. Experience in other countries has shown that while companies are reluctant to establish archives, they are convinced of their value when they are established. What is required is the availability of archival expertise to advise and assist companies. The initiative in this respect has been taken by the Business Archives Committee of A.R.A.N.Z. and the establishment of a business archives centre with a business archives advisory committee deserves serious consideration.'*

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**P**ERSONALLY I think the *Smith Report on Archives in New Zealand* is a washout as far as business archives are concerned.

This paper is a personal viewpoint and does not necessarily reflect the views of either the Business Archives Committee of which I am the convenor or of the company that employs me. Furthermore any remarks I make which may seem critical of various national institutions are not intended to place those institutions in a bad light.

The *Report* devotes nearly a whole page out of fifty to business archives. Business archives may be the poor relation of the archive world but surely they deserve better treatment than this. Most of the first paragraph has little or nothing to do with what I would define as business archives. It deals with Massey University librarian's laudable and successful attempt to collect the archives of various dairy companies. Likewise a Canterbury University lecturer merits a mention in this paragraph. These are not strictly business archives in my opinion but rather they are notable collections of archives from mainly defunct businesses. Perhaps archivists employed by businesses should be called company archivists because such an archivist looks after archives of an existing company which concerns him intimately as an employee; they are not merely collections of records from a variety of companies in which he has little direct interest.

A truism is contained in the last sentence of the first paragraph, namely: 'The tendency is for companies to become interested only occasionally in their archives, for example in the preparation of a centennial history of the company'. This, to my mind, is a sentence that can only have been written by a person who looks after the archives of a variety of institutions or who looks after large quantities of government archives and is only remotely concerned with the people who produced the archives or with their descendants. No company archivist could shrug off the importance of a centennial

history to his company just like that. A centennial history is a public relations exercise as well as a staff relations exercise. It is an opportunity to sell the company to outsiders in a novel way; it is an opportunity to enthuse the staff about the soundness of their company. There are other aspects of a centenary which could be discussed but what I have said is, I hope, enough to show the difference between a company archivist looking after his company's records and an archivist caring in the abstract for collections of papers from different companies which have little personal interest for him.

The other paragraph under the label 'business archives' in the *Report* does give an idea of a function which the business archivist should pursue, namely, looking after both the current records and the old or archive records. The importance of a good classification and retrieval system is emphasized. The need for the efficient management of company records is also brought out. This is the message which I think we must put across to our companies loud and clear.

Unfortunately that is the only message, the only Word our overseas expert is able to give to those of us endeavouring to set up and manage company archives. The rest of the *Report* seems to be devoted mainly to universities who happily cold-shoulder archives (with the notable exception of about six individuals), two or three major collecting institutions and the National Archives. Perhaps this is reasonable as it was a government grant that paid for Dr Smith's tour.

However, scattered throughout the *Report* are little bits and pieces, a few morsels which company archivists can convert to their own uses. I shall select but one morsel for a brief examination.

The status of archivists is a highly important and perhaps contentious issue in any organisation whether public or private. Archivists tend to be junior or low caste members of a department, a department subject to the jealousies and power struggles of its own personnel as well as the rivalries with other departments. Archivists should be able to stand aside from the bureaucratic struggles and not be forced to curry favour with one group or other. Furthermore they should have direct access to the most senior executives particularly those in the financial sector.

Status is also needed in dealings with other members of the organisation. The archivist must be able to approach all persons at all levels throughout the company without the likelihood of being shown the door or palmed off on to some individual who knows little or nothing about the organisation of, say, a branch remote from Head Office, and far less about its potential archive material. Furthermore archivists have to be able to extract the material they think needs preserving.

The National Archives perhaps are fortunate in having an act to back them up even if it is more often honoured in the breach than in the observance. On the other hand the company archivist is better off than his colleague in the Hocken or the Turnbull Libraries because he can become acquainted with many people in his company and so be led to important archive sources. He can be better informed of

events in the recent history of the company through his contacts; he can keep abreast of what is going on in the company and be ready to claim material as archives at the opportune moment. This, I submit, is among the essential differences between the company archivist and the mere curator of disparate groups of materials. If, as Dr Smith recommends, he is in charge of the company records, his position for obtaining the company archives is enhanced.

What worries me most, and no doubt worries other company archivists, is that this *Report* for many years will be the bible for archives in this country. As far as company archives are concerned it is scarcely a beginning let alone the last word.

Although the Smith *Report* has scarcely given business archivists any guidelines for the future nevertheless it has done us a favour. Its lack of interest in our area should stimulate us to form our own theories, to present to our own people (that is, other company archivists) and to our employers our own ideas. You could say that the *Report* in a way is a propaganda exercise on behalf of National Archives. This it certainly is not for company archivists. We have to be our own propagandists. We have no overseas expert to assist us with the weight of his experience and authority.

Having criticised the *Report* destructively it behoves me to be constructive and I am sure you will not object to my suggesting some of the things the *Report* should have mentioned.

There is a curious omission from the Smith *Report* when referring to archive material. There are occasional references to 'microfilms, films, photographs, plans, maps, sound recordings, etc.' In that 'etc.' lies my displeasure. What has happened to the poster? To that monster which disfigures the verges of our roads and decorates the blank walls of our towns and cities? Most posters are ugly and disfigure our environment but businesses, so we are told, depend upon them to attract the consumer to their products. In the case of the industry to which my company belongs this kind of advertising is relatively recent. True, banking has been advertising in one way or another ever since the Union Bank of Australia arrived on the beach at Petone heralded by advertising in *The New Zealand Gazette*. But the present type of advertising—going into the market with a loud voice, or rather, large signs, to capture deposits has only been in vogue for about thirty years or so. The pre-war style was generally a discreet notice in the classified columns of newspapers, advising customers of the opening of a new office.

Advertising is a public relations exercise. We can present archives to our companies as public relations exercises. We can show how the resources of the archives may be used for advertising the company. In my own case because my company has branches in towns and cities all over the country and has been operating in some of them for over a hundred years, I can provide historical material for most of our branches in one form or another. I have produced booklets to celebrate the centenaries of over a score and a half of our branches. These are public relations exercises (and good advertising) having a particularly sound impact in smaller areas such as Leeston, Rakaia

and rather larger areas such as Hawera, which tend to think that businesses with their head offices in Wellington or other distant centres have little interest in the local area. The impact is perhaps not so easy to assess in the bigger centres, such as Hamilton and Palmerston North.

Advertising in newspapers is a common feature of our society. When a company advertises in the local paper specially produced for a borough or county centenary or silver jubilee, the archives can frequently produce a historical photograph or two. The company may be opening a new premises. Once again the archives can produce a series of photographs illustrating earlier premises, staff of bygone days, and so on. Naturally this assumes that the photographs are adequately housed and easily retrievable: another point in favour of the archives. Those then are some ways in which archivists can assist the public relations area of their companies.

Archives can relieve the pressure on certain departments. I have already referred briefly to premises. I have had several enquiries from around the country about the buildings my company has owned in various towns and areas not forgetting, of course, the various enquiries relating to our main office building in Wellington on the corner of Lambton and Customhouse Quays (in fact it is four buildings). But for the archivist, such enquiries would be directed to what we call the Premises Department or the department that looks after buildings. Today such enquiries are passed on to me. This relieves the pressure on a department which is really mostly concerned with seeing that the staff of the company are adequately housed for the work they have to perform and are only indirectly concerned with history. The Archives of my company at any rate, are geared towards this sort of historical question.

Another area of interest to the general public is biographical details relating to staff. I have had genealogists seeking their family history. Someone recently asked about a Clerk of Works whom we employed, for example. This sort of enquiry would otherwise be thrown upon the staff section of the company which, in my case, has passed all its early staff registers on to me. And of course I, as a historian, have rather more interest in this sort of enquiry than the average clerk. Further, I find information in other sources besides the staff registers from which to build up a picture of the person.

There are other areas which could be referred to particularly items peculiar to banking, such as values of particular currencies in certain years. You can find this by laboriously searching back copies of *Whitaker's Almanac* or the *N.Z. Official Yearbook* but I have it already set out in volumes prepared for its day to day use by our International Department in years gone by. The movement of the foreign exchanges is an interesting aspect of economic history and a backdrop to political history.

Price of gold and quantities of gold produced are old chestnuts, but all the N.Z. banks bought gold over the counter, melted it, poured it into ingots to make bars, assayed for its fineness and exported it. In the 1860s it was our most valuable export. Gold is not handled by

banks today so questions relating to gold business are answerable by the archives only.

In general archives can be looked upon as an aid in public relations and as complementary to other departments of the company. It should not be looked upon as 'those dusty old books and things' in the basement. It has a worthwhile function to perform as an essential part of the company. Archive materials have, of course, an intrinsic interest for archivists.

I might add that today history—or more particularly her handmaiden, conservation of our environment and heritage—is of national importance and archivists should be prepared to convince others of the worth of the archives to their company, if only along the lines of conservation of our heritage.