

The Australian Society of Archivists: the first five years

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I have been asked to mark the fifth anniversary of the founding of the Australian Society of Archivists by an article which would set out the why and how of its formation and its development during the period. It was suggested, in addition, that I try to make some assessment of the work of the Society and suggestions about its future.

Articles of this kind are likely to be subjective and it is best if I preface what I have to say by embracing that subjectivity publicly. You have been warned!

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Readers will be aware of the existence of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia from 1951 to 1975. Its history has been ably (and eruditely) handled by Gerald Fischer elsewhere and those interested in the background to the formation of the A.S.A. will gain much by a reading or rereading of that paper.

It will be sufficient for our purposes here to say that one of the elements in the formation of the Society was the condition and prospects of the Archives Section in the early 1970s.

The Archives Section had never encompassed all archivists for a variety of reasons. Amongst these, the unwillingness of many to accept the L.A.A. as their professional body, either on principle alone or in conjunction with the resentment against library domination of archives, ensured that membership was not large and this had two self-reinforcing effects.

The loss in active membership meant that *Archives and Manuscripts*, the journal of the Section and the main if not the only benefit to be gained from membership of the L.A.A. and the Section, was perennially short of contributions. Despite heroic efforts by its editor Bob Sharman to make it more attractive it simply did not attract those new members to the Section who were essential if it were to constitute a viable organization and *A. and M.* a viable publication.

Similarly, the Archives Section of the Biennial Conference of the Library Association suffered from the same lack of members to

organize, contribute and attend. This aspect was compounded in my view, by the changing face of librarianship.

When the Section was set up in 1951, both librarianship and archives were relatively unsophisticated and straightforward. An archivist attending an L.A.A. conference could find much in the papers being offered in other fields which would be of interest. With the changes in librarianship and library administration during the 1960s such conferences became more and more narrowly focussed on questions of interest to librarians only (and even librarians, I suspect, began to find papers outside their own speciality of less immediate appeal) and the Archives Section became more and more isolated.

By 1973 the Archives Section of the L.A.A., whatever it may have been in its heyday, had ceased to do much more than organize the conference section (its committee being elected — or coopted — from the city in which the next conference was to be held) and of course, to publish *Archives and Manuscripts*.

In June 1973, Bob Sharman sent out a circular letter warning of the imminent demise of *Archives and Manuscripts* unless members of the profession did something forthwith. He concluded by throwing out a challenge. If Australia was to continue to have an archives journal, the recipients of his letter had three options — not necessarily mutually exclusive: (a) write articles for the journal; (b) find another editor who could attract the necessary articles; or (c) 'see that some organization other than the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia takes over responsibility'.

This third alternative may, I think, be taken as the spark which ultimately produced the Australian Society of Archivists, and Robert Sharman, along with all his many other claims to the respect and admiration of his contemporaries, might be given credit as the initiator of the Society.

In a letter to the editor which was published in the August 1973 issue of *Archives and Manuscript* I wrote:

Since no such body at present exists I take this [third] proposal as either a call for its formation or a challenge to try to create it. Either way, if such a suggestion is to have any reality, then consideration must be given to forming a society of archivists . . . My present and growing conviction is that the time has come to make a new attempt to organize ourselves in a society which can lead and support the archivists of Australia in their professional lives.²

At a meeting held after the AGM of the L.A.A. Archives Section in Perth in August 1973 and attended by the members of the Section who had attended the AGM, together with some others, a steering committee was created to investigate the feasibility of forming an association of archivists and to work towards the formation of such an association.

It would be of little interest to retrace the detailed work of that committee which continued over the next twenty months and came to an end with the inaugural meeting of the new Society in Canberra in April 1975. Enough is said if tribute is paid to the dedication and work of its

members — Pat Quinn, Gerald Fischer, John Cross, Chris Hurley and (in place of Chris when he went overseas) Max Franklin. Mention should also be made of the corresponding members who organized the discussions in the other states — Paul Wilson, Anne Green, Margaret Medcalf and Mary McRae.

The word 'discussions' used above is significant. I very much doubt that any society anywhere was launched with a greater degree of consultation and participation and, while we have hardly been free of contentious issues in the intervening period, I think that we have maintained a stability on basic matters which is principally due to the consensus which was reached in the preparatory discussions.

With the inaugural general meeting in April 1975 and the adoption of a constitution the Society came into being. At the L.A.A. Conference in Melbourne in the following August the Archives Section of the L.A.A. very gracefully voted itself out of existence — in effect; the formal dissolution was dependent on the resolution of the Council of the L.A.A. which came some time later. The L.A.A. also very generously handed over *Archives and Manuscripts* to become the journal of the new Society.

And so we were away and running but where were we running to?

I think that question is one to which we still have to find a firm answer and much of the remainder of this paper will be devoted to the search. But first I have to make some sort of attempt to chronicle the first five years of the Society's existence since that was part of my brief and that is no easy thing to do.

In the first place we are dealing with the work of three councils over one of which I presided, on another of which I sat as a somewhat unwelcome relic and a third which I am watching as an outsider. Thus, my viewpoint cannot be Olympian.

Consequently I think it would be best to concentrate on the high points and on such objective measurements as we can identify; to point to those positive things which we can see as arising from the existence of the Society in contradistinction to the situation before its creation; and those elements which have characterised the whole period and which may perhaps give us a clue to what we are doing right and what we are doing wrong.

One of the obvious indicators which we might look at to see how we are going is that of membership. The following figures³ will give some indication of the progress made over the past five years.

Year	Prof.	Assoc.	Instit.
1979/4*	140	130	20
1977/7	140	90	13
1978/3	142	88	21
1978/11	134	86	24
1979/11	140	107	26

*The figure given is the estimate made by the steering committee of the potential membership.

We can thus consider the membership of the Society with a certain amount of satisfaction but the smaller-than-predicted number of associate members should give us food for thought — obviously we are not providing a sufficiently attractive proposition to those non-archivists who might be expected to be interested in the aims and activities of the Society.

Moreover, while a sense of satisfaction is allowable, a sense of complacency is not. After all, the profession has grown in the past five years and we need to ask ourselves why it is that the growth in staff numbers in such institutions as the Australian Archives and the Archives Office of N.S.W. has not been reflected in our professional membership figures.

The conferences which have been held have been successes both from the point of view of the conferences themselves and of the fact that they were either self-supporting or profitable. What is clear is that the conference can attract the membership and (as evidenced by the 1979 event) people from other areas.

Some of the objectives which we wrote into the rules in 1975 have proved elusive, but I think our greatest cause for satisfaction, looking back to 1975 and beyond, is the way in which so many of the things which we saw then as necessary for the welfare of the profession have been promoted by the Society in a way which was impossible for the Archives Section because of lack of resources — both financial and human.

Notice has already been taken of the somewhat sad state of *Archives and Manuscripts* which led to the formation of the Society. The last edition of the journal should be sufficient to convince all but the most unreasonable critic that its existence is 'A Good Thing'. Credit is primarily due, of course, first to Andrew Lemon as its first editor after the handover and subsequently to Baiba Irving for carrying on and developing Andrew's work. But it should not be forgotten either that a lack of contributions was the original malaise of the journal — a lack which was symptomatic of a more general malady within the profession i.e. terminal apathy. Had the general milieu not changed, no degree of enthusiasm and hard work could have produced the transformation in *Archives and Manuscripts*.

For this change I think credit can reasonably be given in large part to the Society. I admit that there are other factors at work, for example the increasing number of better qualified people in the profession and the general effects of individual personalities, but this does not, I believe, detract from the validity of the claim that it is the Society which has provided the vehicle for the new awareness and enthusiasm — sometimes muted as I shall remark in a moment, but still discernible.

Again, thanks to the Society, there is now, I believe, a sense of community within the profession which was not there before 1975. Archives, or at least those within the Society, are conscious of the existence and interests of colleagues beyond the walls of their own institutions as they

were not before the formation of the Society. We have, I believe, attained substantial fulfilment of objective number (10) of the Rules ('To promote a professional identity amongst archivists and to advance their professional standing and welfare') although the subordinate clause remains a challenge. Similarly, I believe that the Society has done much to 'establish and maintain communication and cooperation amongst archivists' in accordance with objective number (2) although, as I shall observe below, the rest of that objective remains a far-off goal.

Because of the existence of the Society, both in the sense of its members and of the Council, archivists are now able to react to events and issues which affect them as they could not before. In the absence of that sense of community of which I have spoken and with their only representative body being a subordinate part of the Library Association, only the most drastic events could call forth a reaction from the profession and that had to pass through the filter of the L.A.A. During the past five years the Society has, either at the instigation of individual members or by the Council of its own motion, intervened in numerous public issues of interest or concern to archivists. The submission to the Senate Standing Committees on the Archives Bill is the most noteworthy of these but there have been many others. Whether such interventions are fruitful may be a matter for argument, for as virtually everyone learns, it is a lot easier to talk or to write than to get 'them' to listen to you. Nevertheless, the effort is worth it, for until an organization acquires the reputation for having something worthwhile to say it has little chance of making an impression with what it says.

Having said so much, I must turn my attention to those areas where the Society has succeeded less well and try to make some observations about what it ought to be doing or trying to do. In doing so I run the risk of appearing to be playing from the sidelines and I would like to make clear that nothing I say is intended as criticism of anyone, but merely a recognition that there are areas where we ought to be doing better.

The first point is that (a) we have not attained anything like a total coverage of the profession and (b) we have not attracted as many associate members as we should. In both cases the Society has failed, in general, to prove that it has sufficient to offer potential members to offset the money they have to pay for membership. It is no use railing against the shortsightedness of those archivists who refuse to involve themselves with their colleagues in working for the benefit of the profession as a whole. Instead we must look at our own attitudes and recognize that, as in the case of union membership, the most potent forces in persuading non-members to join, are positive attitudes towards the organization and constant gentle publicity as to the benefits to be gained from membership. Alas, the Australian archivist, no less than his countryman in other walks of life, tends towards a negativism which borders on the neurotic. If professional members do not feel that they can in conscience try to persuade non-members to join then they should

examine their own attitudes to the Society, decide what is wrong with it and set about changing those features they are dissatisfied with.

At the same time, a certain amount of responsibility must rest with the committees and convenors of local branches who are sometimes laggardly in organizing attractive activities which will bring the Society to the attention of members and potential members. The two elements — personal commitment and an entrepreneurial organization — need to go hand in hand. As regards the Associate Membership issue, the responsibility lies with the Council and the various regional bodies. Clearly there needs to be greater concentration on communicating with the users of archives who are the potential Associates.

The area of cooperation between institutions is another in which much work still remains before the Society can be said to have fulfilled its objective number two. This was recognized at the second B.G.M. when it was resolved to appoint a working party to investigate the possibility of creating some sort of consultative machinery to bring archival institutions together to discuss matters of common interest. The work of that committee is still in the very early stages and it may well not have completed its work by the time the next B.G.M. comes round, but at least this important question is being actively considered.

I could probably go on for some time examining various aspects of the Society's operations, its successes and failures, but I am running out of space and in any event I doubt that I would be usefully employed in so doing. I feel that I have said enough to draw attention to some of the salient features of the Society as it is today, five years after being brought into the world. There is really only one further thing which I think needs saying and it is this: Five years is really a very short time in which to create an organization from scratch and get it working. It would be unreasonable to expect a Society such as ours to have achieved all of its objectives in that time. Consequently, I think that we have done remarkably well so far and, provided we continue to develop as a Society over the next five years and don't atrophy as all organizations tend to do, then an article such as this, written to commemorate our tenth anniversary, may be both a better guide to where we are heading and a more impressive catalogue of achievement. Whether that prediction is accurate or not depends entirely on the willingness of members to contribute by their work and their imagination to the achievement of the Society's objectives. It's up to each and every one of us.

FOOTNOTES

1. 'Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia 1951-1971', *L.A.A. 16th Conference Proceedings* (Sydney, 1971).
2. *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol.5, No.4, 93-94.
3. The figures are drawn from the *Newsletter* of the Steering Committee and from subsequent Secretary's reports to Council.