

The Australian War Records Section and its aftermath, 1917-1925

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Australian War Memorial

This article is intended to direct attention to a neglected corner of what a well-known bibliographer recently called “the dark labyrinth of archival practices in Australia”, namely the administration of First World War operational records and the part played in it by the predecessors of the Australian War Memorial between 1917 and 1925.

There are several reasons for wanting to do so. At the most general level, there appears to be a suspicion that the official primary source records in the War Memorial’s custody are not really archives. The use of “war relics” in relevant legislation gives rise to the doubt. The most recent example, however, is Gerald Fischer’s modified Presidential Address to the 1979 Biennial Conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, which included comments on the employment of the term “archive”. It has been used to describe collections of a particular material such as film, he argued, and there may even yet be sport and music “‘archive’ archives”, the War Memorial having established a precedent. The very strong impression is gained that somehow the archives in the Memorial’s custody are not the real thing”.¹

Secondly, no satisfactory historical account has been published yet describing the administration of military archives in Australia, quite apart from one on operational records produced during 1914-1918. Even for a description of those now with the War Memorial, one is forced to rely on a dozen or so paragraphs in articles and books, and a single paper on the wartime measures to preserve records and library and museum items in the 1920 volume of the *Transactions of the Royal Historical Society*.² It is hoped that this brief account of the 1917-1925 period will prompt the production of a full scale history.

Thirdly, the episode has an element of intrinsic interest, for the decision in 1917 to house military archives in a war museum is so unusual. Ostensibly this ought to cause no surprise, as at that time,

* The views expressed are entirely the author’s and not those of the Australian War Memorial.

Australia lacked the main alternative, a national record office. The examples of Great Britain and Canada support such thinking, the P.R.O. and P.A.C. both predating the 1914-1918 conflict and both subsequently receiving the bulk of wartime service records. Unlike the Australian development, however, when other belligerents such as the United States of America and New Zealand came to establish military museums and national archives, virtually all placed their records in the latter, or in departmental and service historical sections.³

In broad outline, what did happen to Australia's war-time operational records between 1917 and 1925? The administration of the Australian Imperial Force (AIF) and the Royal Australian Navy between 1914 and 1917 did not include separate units with specific records management or archival functions. Nevertheless, procedures did exist (in the form of Field Service Regulations and General Routine Orders for the A.I.F.). Accordingly, original copies of war diaries were forwarded to the Historical Section of the Committee for Imperial Defence, while some duplicate copies and unit correspondence and other papers were sent to the Adjutant General's Branch at Base in Cairo and later London, or to Base Records, Melbourne. Logs and other Navy records were sent directly to the Admiralty. At the same time, there was some preliminary record work, mainly with photographs, performed by the Official Secretary's Branch of the Australian High Commission in London. When the Australian War Records Section, A.I.F. was established, this was formalised into a National War Records Section headed by Lieutenant H. C. Smart.

In May 1917, General Sir William Birdwood, General Officer Commanding the A.I.F., approved the creation of an Australian War Records Section (AWRS) with Administrative Headquarters, London. The decision was formally announced in A.I.F. Order 758 of 13 July 1917, which also laid down procedures for the disposition of war diaries and "official correspondence". Authority was thereby granted to units to decide what correspondence "may be of historical interest" and what was required "for local reference". General Routine Orders 1597 and 2374 were to be consulted in conjunction with the Order. H. C. Smart was the Section's first Officer-in-Charge, but on being called to more pressing duties in France, Captain J. L. Treloar took over.

Many reasons have been advanced to explain why the AWRS was established. In my opinion, the role of the Official War Correspondent, C. E. W. Bean, was crucial.⁴ The deficiencies in both quality and content of the duplicate war diaries which were being retained at the Australian Base, coupled with the failure of many units to keep correspondence not required for reference during 1914-17, affected him personally. He knew from the Minister for Defence, G. F. Pearce, that he would probably be asked to direct and write much of the official history of Australia's participation in the war. To rectify the first of the problems, the

duplicate war diaries, the obvious solution was to obtain permission from the War Office to keep the far better documented originals.⁵ Before agreeing, it appears that one of the conditions the British insisted upon was the creation of a War Records Section.⁶ The work of the Canadian War Records Office, established in London in January 1916 under Sir Max Aitken, greatly impressed Bean, as did its freedom to keep their original war diaries, and provided a ready made model and precedent. Nationalism played a part also — there are too many references in the sources to Britain getting the originals and preventing the true story of Australia's part being told to ignore it.⁷ A similar concern was a factor influencing Australia's decision to seek from the British permission to have her own Official Photographer. Lieutenant-General C. B. B. White's position was also important. Interested in the preservation of A.I.F. records, from 1914 onwards he supported the negotiations with the War Office about the war diary originals. According to Bean, the AWRS was formed "entirely on the initiative of General White at the front and not by the Authorities at the Base", an assessment he subsequently toned down in his biography of White many years later.⁸

A study of AWRS's work between May 1917 and December 1919 which can be found in reports by Treloar and Bean and the 25 boxes of files from its central registry which survive, leaves one greatly impressed by the scope and energy of its output. Finally employing over 600 men and women, the Section had branches in France and Egypt, representatives attached to units in Palestine and an agent in Berlin. Its people administered the work of the A.I.F.'s own artists; oversaw the preparation of "special histories" intended to supplement the official account; collected statistics, maps and aerial photographs; answered reference enquiries; began collecting books, pamphlets, posters, and transport, trench and other unit newspapers; and even began a collection of surgical and pathological specimens. It also carried out the functions of an official archival authority.

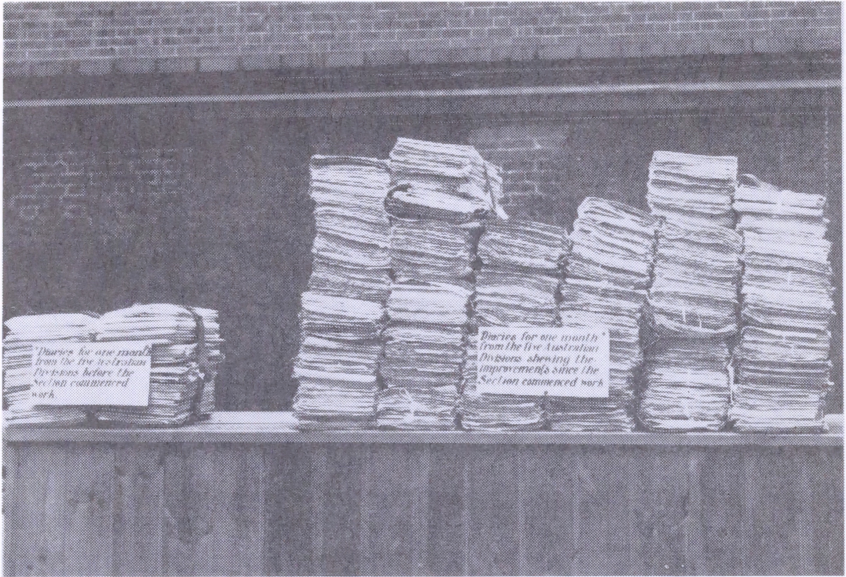
The definitive account of the AWRS, 1917-1919, has yet to be written. Excellent unpublished accounts have been produced, however, the most detailed being that by a former War Memorial Chief Historical Records Officer, Bruce Harding, in 1973. The Report by J. L. Treloar cited earlier is also valuable for the brief period it surveys. My aim here is not to summarise AWRS's story but, given the introductory comments, to highlight its archival work. The Section certainly had authority. The Memorandum to all Staffs and Commanding Officers issued in conjunction with AIF Order 758 stated: "This Section is responsible for the collection, preservation, classification, etc of all official documents relating to the AIF subsequent to the embarkation in Australia. These documents comprise — (i) War diaries (ii) Maps and air photographs (iii) Official correspondence (iv) Regimental histories (v) Other historical records." Other responsibilities were later added, such as for Naval

records, photographs and cinefilm, and the registries of the various AIF administrative headquarters and depots.

True to Jenkinson's hierarchy of archivists' responsibilities — although there is no evidence that any knew his Manual — the Section's first priority was the physical safety of their records. To give just three illustrations: it refused to allow its Egypt Subsection to send records to London whenever there was danger of the transport being attacked by submarine; strict precautions against fire were established whenever the Section occupied the many temporary quarters allocated to it in London; and duplicate negatives of photographs taken by Official War Cameramen were sent to the High Commission for publicity purposes rather than the original glass plate negatives.

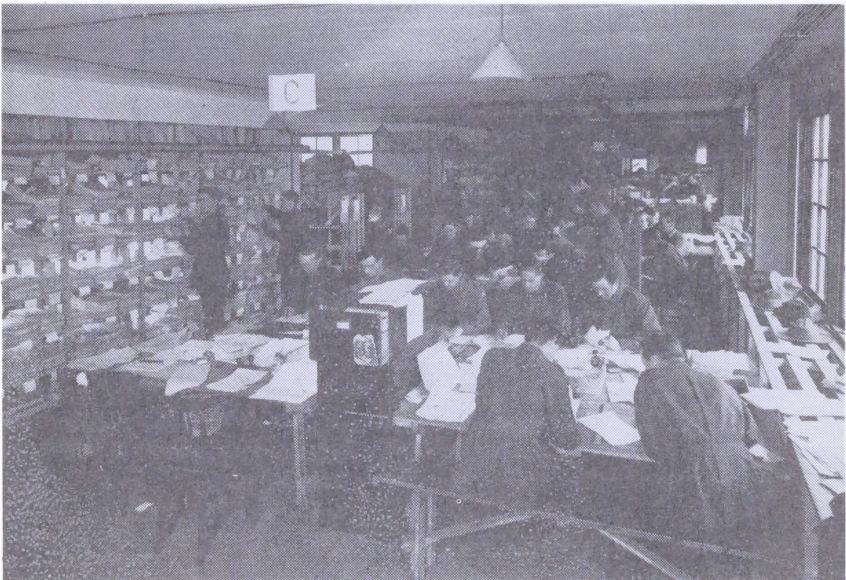
As for the secondary responsibilities, before citing instances of arrangement and disposal work, it is interesting to note that in addition the Section performed a quasi records management function. Officers of the France and Egypt Subsections regularly visited and communicated with their "record creators", issued special stationery to foster better record keeping and advised in particular on the value of complete records and war diaries. Treloar especially was conscientious in this regard, and in the early months of his appointment would read at night the diaries received earlier in the day and despatch his criticisms to the units and subsections the following day. The coverage of the photographers and the captioning of their photographs were also greatly improved by the active encouragement of the Section.

For the registering and arrangement of the war diaries — the premier operational record which more than any other was the pretext for the creation of the AWRS — instructions were established by Treloar in July 1918.⁹ The principle of arrangement stipulated was the British concept of Order of Battle, the diaries being placed chronologically within units ordered to reflect their position in the hierarchy. Thus the diaries of Headquarters, Cavalry and Engineering units were placed before those of Infantry, Supply and Postal units, just as in a traditional battle the first three units would be in action before the latter three. The effect of arranging by Order of Battle guaranteed the identity of the creating bodies which produced the diaries, thereby, unwittingly I consider, preserving the principle of provenance.¹⁰ By contrast, the treatment of the official written records other than war diaries, the responsibility of the Classification Subsection, was one of subject classification. "The present officer-in-charge" wrote Lieutenant Pretty in a report on the Subsection, "was detailed to consider ways and means of classifying, registering, indexing and filing these papers so that they would be available (a) in bulk by subject (b) as individual files for reference purposes and (c) in bulk by unit of ownership."¹¹ The classification scheme devised was a veritable pudding of subject terms and names of units, and the Subsection thus only partially maintained the origin of the



The diaries of five Australian Divisions for one month before and after the formation of the War Records Section

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The Classification Subsection, June 1917

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material's creation and its relationship to other files. It would be too easy and quite unfair to judge the Classification Subsection's efforts by 1980 archival standards. Its staff, anything but experienced in the ways of European archivists, coped with the 40 tons of records which flooded in as units were demobilised and sent to London. They had to make initial decisions about disposal too, after the Armistice, although final judgements were left to Boards of Enquiry. Approximately fifty per cent of unit correspondence was thus destroyed.

During the last years of the 1914-1918 War, decisions were taken in Australia by the Government which ensured the succession of responsibility for wartime operational records and led ultimately to the Australian War Memorial Act, 1925. On C. E. W. Bean's recommendation, and with Senator Pearce's approval, late in 1917 the Government agreed to the establishment of an Australian War Museum (AWM) within the Department of Defence.¹² The AWM, (also known initially as the Australian National War Museum and War Records Office) had collecting responsibilities similar to some of the AWRS's, the intention being that they would merge after the war. J. K. Jensen and W. Trahair constituted its first staff while a Committee of three ministers (Defence, Navy and Home Territories) and a Melbourne Exhibition Trustee comprised the management. Collecting of "trophy" photographs and a range of library material, one of the new Museum's main functions, was greatly boosted by a nation-wide appeal to the next-of-kin of A.I.F. members in April 1919 by Senator Pearce for personal letters, diaries, relics and photographs. (Another appeal in October 1923 to ex-members themselves added "official documents" to the list of material sought.) During 1919, Bean and Treloar returned to Australia, Bean briefly monitoring the work of the AWM before handing over to the first Director, H. S. Gullett. Treloar was appointed his Assistant Director. The Committee itself was expanded to include people such as Sir Douglas Mawson and Sir Brudenell White. By the beginning of 1920, all remnants of the old AWRS had been disbanded, administrative responsibility for the Museum had passed from Defence to Home and Territories, and records not already sent to Tuggeranong Homestead, F.C.T. for use by the Official History team moved from the Base Records Office to Museum custody in the Engineering Depot, Alexandra Avenue, Melbourne.¹³

Several aspects of the last five years of this survey warrant some mention for their archival import. Public access to the official records was considered by the AWM Committee late in 1920. The conditions laid down the following year left decisions such as exactly what records would be made available and whether the reason for seeking access was "a proper one" up to the Director.¹⁴ Illiberal as this ruling might appear in retrospect, this position was preferable to that covering the availability of Departmental records in 1921 and that covering the A.I.F.'s own



Typists at work on the precis of war diaries

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An Australian War Records Section trophy collecting depot in Peronne, Sept-Oct 1918

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attitude to requests for access to war diaries for private reasons during the war.

A far more significant consideration for the history of archives administration in Australia, was the AWM Committee's attempt to seek departmental records relating to the war. In 1920 it asked the Prime Minister "(a) to approve of the war records of historical value of the various Commonwealth Government departments being placed in the custody of the Australian War Museum as soon as possible, (b) to inform heads of Departments of this decision and request them to afford the Director of the Australian War Museum facilities to ascertain what material is available, how it is indexed, and the storage accommodation necessary to hold it."¹⁵ Within a fortnight W. M. Hughes had approved the request and his Department's Secretary, M. L. Shepherd, circularised all Departments asking them to "make the necessary arrangements". It took more than a fortnight for the records to arrive however; in fact, virtually nothing came of the project. Some Departments, such as Navy and Defence gave their written agreement to cooperate but for various reasons did very little else, while Treasury simply stated that "no records of historical value" are held. The reaction of the Departments greatly hurt Treloar, for all through the inter-war years he was to both suspect that records no longer needed for administration were being destroyed and to argue that sources such as Attorney-General's court martial records and Defence's recruiting and censorship files ought to be at the Museum. Writing to Bean less than two years after the 1920 decision, he stated "I know there is and will be great opposition to the Museum Library getting certain records I think it essential it should have e.g. the war records of Government departments . . ." Speculating on possible measures for the preservation of general Departmental files, he continued, "Of course civil records have nothing to do with the War Museum. But then they seem to be the responsibility of no one, and unless the Museum, the first Commonwealth institution to deal seriously with the preservation of records, undertakes the first step, probably nothing will be done until, through neglect great losses have occurred."¹⁶ Reflection upon the reasons why the Museum failed to obtain the Departments' war time records is beyond the scope of this article. Suffice it to say that the relevant sources clearly show that it was not really the reason Bean propounded, namely, that the Museum did not press for their transfer.¹⁷

In 1925, the Australian War Memorial Bill was passed by Parliament. It allocated to a Board of Management the duty of "the control and preservation of the relics, records, models, pictures, photographs and other articles comprising the Memorial collections" and gave it disposal powers subject to the approval of its Minister. None of the parliamentarians speaking in the debates on the Bill seemed aware that they were approving the first federal law which, inter alia, allocated the

custody of a select body of government archives to a national institution, or that there was anything extraordinary about choosing a military memorial museum. But then, only one of their number, P. E. Coleman, the Member for Reid, had enquired in the debates about all of the "historical records" not produced in war.¹⁸

FOOTNOTES

1. G. L. Fischer, "The Clock of History". *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol. 7 (no. 5) 1979: 240-251, especially pp 242-3 and footnote 3.
2. "Australia's Records of the War (Communicated by the Secretary of the Department of Defence for the Commonwealth of Australia)", part of a survey of British and Allied War Archives during the War in Fourth Series, Vol. III, 1920: 41-7. The "paragraphs" referred to include those in H. J. Gibbney, "An introduction to Australian archives", *Politics* Vol. 2 (no. 1) May 1967: 67-75; V. Blackburn, "Australian War Memorial Library, Canberra" *Australian Library Journal* Vol. 7 (no. 3) July 1958: 71-2; C. Coady, "The Written Records of Australia at War", *Army Journal* No. 283, Jan 1973: 24-33; and C. E. W. Bean, "The Writing of the Australian Official History of the Great War — Sources, Methods and Some Conclusions", *Journal and Proceedings of the Royal Australian Historical Society* Vol. XXIV (Part 2) 1938: 85-112.
3. To anticipate at least one objection to this statement, the history offices of the United States Department of Defense are not considered in the same category. See A. Nelson, "Government Historical Offices and Public Records". *American Archivist* Vol. 41 (no. 4) Oct 1978: 405-412.
4. The Section's establishment was not due to Bean alone, however, although this is definitely the import of the Citation read by Sir Keith Hancock at a ceremony at the Australian National University conferring upon him an Honorary Doctor of Laws degree. See "Honours for two famous Australians", *Stand-To*, Vol. 6 (no. 7) Feb-Aug 1959:15.
5. According to Bean, it was H. C. Smart who first suggested that the Australian war diary originals should be kept by Australia. See his "The Beginnings of the Australian War Memorial", Bean Papers, Australian War Memorial, 3 DRL 6673, folder 619 p. 3. The paper, written late in life, was annotated by A. W. Bazley as follows: "I think Smart is given far too much credit in this narrative but it is possible that he did so because he knew Max Aitken the Canadian".
6. See General T. Griffiths letter to D.A.G., 1 Aust Corps, 29 March 1917, Australian War Memorial Registry file 12.12.1 and J. L. Treloar's *Report of the work of the Australian War Records Section from May 1917 to September 1918*, p. 2. Copy held in A.W.M. Library.
7. "... it was not until we got to France that we realized that all the original maps and so on were going to the British — that Australia was getting nothing". C. E. W. Bean, quoted in the *Herald* (Melb) 22 April 1918. In similar vein, the memorandum issued in conjunction with AIF Order 758 stated, "In the interests of the national history of Australia and in order that Australia may have the control of her own historical records . . . the Australian War Records has been formed . . ."
8. See "The Australian War Records; an account of the present development overseas and suggestions of course necessary to be taken at the end of the war", t/s 22 pp. Bean Papers, Australian War Memorial, 3 DRL 6673, folder 362 and *Two men I knew* (Sydney, Angus and Robertson, 1957), p. 149.
9. *Instructions for collection and copying of diaries* (Roneoed, 19 pp, 18.7.1919) Copy in Australian War Memorial Written Records, 1914-1918 file 1013/8.

10. The New Zealand National Archives also followed the same Order of Battle principle. See Judith Hornabrook, "New Zealand's war archives" *Archives and Manuscripts*, Vol. 6 (no. 7) Aug 1976: 281-4, esp. p. 282.
11. *Report on Records and Classification Section, Australian War Records*, by Lt. A. G. Pretty. (Typescript, 27 pp. June 1919), page 1. Copy in Australian War Memorial Written Records, 1914-18 file 1013/6.
12. A. W. M. Registry file 12.12.1 and Bean Papers, Australian War Memorial, 3 DRL 6673 folders 362 and 621.
13. The paragraph is based upon Australian War Museum Committee Minutes, 1918-1920, Australian War Memorial Registry files 12/12/2 and 1/2/6 and Australian Archives CRS A1, file 21/6401.
14. Minutes of Australian War Memorial Committee meeting of 17 January 1921.
15. Australian War Memorial Registry file 12/5/208/3
16. Australian War Memorial Registry file 12/5/208/1
17. See his *Australia's Federal Archives; John Curtin Initiative* (Reprinted from "Historical Studies", November, 1947, M.U.P.), p. 5.
18. See Parliamentary Debates Vol. III, p. 2483.