

## BOOK REVIEW

# The N.Z. National Register

*National Register of Archives and Manuscripts in New Zealand.*  
Wellington, National Library of New Zealand, 1979.

## Reviewed by Peter Miller

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It has often been said that New Zealand does not make up its own mind on the solution to a problem — it simply looks across the Tasman and follows in Australia's footsteps. This, of course, is a cynical view spread by desperate and envious Australians but, in this instance, it does have more than an element of truth to it. For, early in 1976, New Zealand archivists and librarians gave the go-ahead to the planning for a New Zealand version of Australia's long-established *Guide*. It was to be loose-leaf and modelled on its trans-Tasman counterpart. The appearance, in 1979, of the first instalment brought to fruition the intervening three years of planning and hard work, mainly by a few individuals. Another step towards New Zealand's archival development and maturity had been taken.

As is pointed out in the Introduction to the volume, however, the project's origins date back to 1968/69 when its predecessor was launched. This was the *Union Catalogue of N.Z. and Pacific Manuscripts in N.Z. Libraries*, a two volume work which, through photocopying of catalogue cards for manuscripts held by some libraries sought to provide readers with a published access point to manuscript holdings. It had a number of severe limitations: notably, it only included manuscripts (with a few exceptions); was produced in bound form, which excluded additions and corrections; and had no index. Also, in reality, it only represented a small percentage of manuscripts in the country, including the institutions represented therein, with the exception of the Alexander Turnbull Library which took up all of one of the volumes. These deficiencies were not unforeseen at the time but at least it was a start and better than nothing at all.

During the following years, it became apparent that the format of the *Union Catalogue* was not a sound foundation on which to build the future proposed volumes. In 1976, at a meeting of the Archives Committee of the N.Z. Library Association, a small group was established to proceed with the planning for what eventually became the present *National Register*.

Considerable discussion eventuated over the next year or so and eventually the necessary decisions were made and the project proceeded. An Instruction Manual was issued to all likely participating institutions — libraries, the National Archives, museums, historical societies, etc. The aim was to obtain entries from all repositories holding archives and/or manuscripts. The Manual set out what was required for each entry — Title of entry, Date range, Description of papers or archives, quantity, form (if not original), finding aids, and so on. As well as these details, appropriate boxes had to be marked for subject(s), geographical area and dates of the material. These were required for Index purposes. A joint committee from the Turnbull Library and the National Archives (the two institutions undertaking the editorial responsibility) do the pre-publication work. The National Library of N.Z. is the publisher and distributor.

So much for the background to the project. But what of the content and quality? At the time of writing (August 1980), one instalment of 250 entries plus index (with optional ring binder) has appeared; the second is due in September this year. After four issues, a cumulative Index will be produced. First impressions, confirmed by deeper persual, are highly favourable. A good spread of repositories, ranging from the largest such as the National Archives and the Turnbull and Hocken Libraries, to district historical societies and museums are represented. The standard of the entries is generally good, though one would have liked to have seen more editorial control over the value judgements which appear in the "Description" section of some entries. There are also a few unfortunate proof-reading mistakes which have crept in.

The level of description is more than adequate in most instances — in some cases almost overfull. It is obvious that a lot of research has gone into each one and the contributors are to be congratulated on their efforts. This is especially so when, as one who has been personally involved in compiling entries and found it a lengthy process, the heavy burden thrust on small institutions is realised.

Of course, the whole work really stands or falls on its Index. It is in dictionary format with entry points by name, subject, and geographical area with date subdivision for the latter two. This reviewer has a few doubts, not about the quality of the indexing which has been carefully done, but about the basis of its construction. It is designed very simply and is limited by information supplied as part of each entry. One feels that it could have been made more direct in its approach e.g. "Sport"

could have been subdivided into individual sports. The same comment applies to the other subject headings. Could not an authority file of subjects have been drawn up and direct index entry been arranged? This would seem a more logical and useful approach. However, all this would have consumed more resources than are available in already over-worked repositories and we should be grateful for what we do have.

Reaction from potential users so far has been surprisingly muted. Apart from academics, I suspect that most do not even know it exists and how it can assist them. However, as instalment succeeds instalment, its value should become increasingly apparent. I wonder whether all are aware of the labours which archivists, librarians and voluntary custodians have put into it. I would hope so because there are still a number of unfulfilled expectations for the *National Register*, namely, retrospective entries from the larger institutions, wider scope for its coverage, and so forth. The support of all will be needed if these goals are to be attained.