

From Bulawayo to Battye

Battye Library, Perth

Christopher Coggin

Author's Note: This paper was first presented to a general meeting of the Royal Western Australian Historical Society in October 1980.

To preface this paper I would like to make two points. The first is that the archival picture I am painting is the one which existed in Zimbabwe two years ago, at which time I left the country to take up my present appointment. As far as I know, the broad picture is still very much the same, but as far as my actual experience goes, that time lag exists. Secondly, I shall often refer to present-day Zimbabwe as Rhodesia, because that is the name by which the modern state has been colloquially (if inaccurately) known since the mid-1890s, and because that is how I am used to thinking of the country in the context of the things I shall mention about it.

With a population of about seven million, Zimbabwe is a land-locked country 720 kms long and 830 kms wide. In area, it is slightly less than half the size of New South Wales and, compared to Victoria or the United Kingdom, more than half as big again. It lies within the tropics, approximately between the latitudes of Wyndham and Exmouth in Western Australia. However, the climate is semi-tropical rather than tropical; factors such as altitude and rainfall combine to make conditions far more temperate than outsiders often imagine. The main population groups are the Shona (well over 70%) and the Matabele (15%). The whites comprise about a quarter of a million, and there are various other tribes such as the Batonka, the Venda and the Shangaans, comprising another 4%.

The stereotyped history of Rhodesia starts with the occupation of the country by Cecil John Rhodes' Pioneer Column in 1890. That, of course, was the beginning of development along western lines. Over the last decade a lot of work has been done on Rhodesia's pre-colonial history and it is now possible to obtain a good overview of the country's more distant past. It would be impossible to sum up in the space available the complete story as it is known. Suffice it to say that in the last 2,000 years three groups of negroid peoples arrived in successive waves from the north, supplanting the stone-age people who were already in the country

and establishing an iron-age civilization there. The best-known legacy of their presence is the large, awe-inspiring stone structures known today as the Zimbabwe ruins, along with a host of lesser stone structures. The Shona tribes in Mashonaland are largely descended from these people. Between the 15th and 19th centuries they established two major empires, named after the dynastic titles of Monomatapa and Rozwi. Intriguing references to them are often to be seen on contemporary maps, along with mysterious beasts and other fictitious horrors.

The next chapter in the story relates to the settlement in the western part of the country by the Matabele, an offshoot of the war-like Zulus 700 miles to the south. The Ndebele, to give the Matabele their more correct name, arrived about 1840 and came to dominate large areas of Mashonaland through periodic raiding parties and tribute collections. It was amongst these people that the first representatives of the London Missionary Society established a mission in 1859.

For many years Europeans had cast fascinated eyes towards the interior of Rhodesia. The Portuguese, in fact, started making incursions into Mashonaland in the first decade or two of the 16th century, and at different times for the next couple of centuries had a tenuous presence of some sort in the hinterland. But it was the Anglo-Saxon, fired by Victorian zeal and other motives, who eventually got a firm toehold in the country. A steady stream of hunters, explorers, prospectors, missionaries and other adventurers traversed the country from the middle of the 19th century, entering it from the South African colonies and the Transvaal Republic. The ensuing publicity, with its theme of cornucopia, led eventually to the granting of a royal charter to a company raised by Rhodes with the ostensible purpose of exploiting mineral rights in Mashonaland granted by the Ndebele king, Lobengula, the previous year. This, the British South Africa Company, was to administer Rhodesia until 1923 and to continue in business under that name until the mid-1960s.

Armed with the charter and quite a few other weapons as well, a force of 200 pioneers and 500 policemen occupied Mashonaland in September 1890 (at the very time when Western Australia was in the throes of winning self-government). That was the beginning of white rule in Mashonaland. Its extension to Matabeleland came three years later when the power of the Ndebele was broken after a brief war with the settlers, and Lobengula's capital, Bulawayo, became the centre of white commercial enterprise.¹ Ironically, it was the last-named episode which gave rise to the institution whose work I am about to describe. In 1933 celebrations were held in Bulawayo to commemorate the fortieth anniversary of the city's occupation. An historical exhibition formed part of the celebrations and aroused the national interest to such an extent that the government accepted the need to husband the colony's historical resources and in 1935 established the Southern Rhodesia

government Archives. Naturally enough, the new institution was to be based in the capital, Salisbury, but a supplementary repository was also provided in historic Bulawayo.

From its inception two happy features were present which were to mark the Archives' development over the next forty-five years. They were the government's acknowledgment that Southern Rhodesia's documentary heritage, like that of any other country, must be preserved; and, secondly, that it (the government) was obliged to support the institution financially and develop it as a national asset. In short, a total commitment.

Twelve years before the founding of the Rhodesian Archives, an important change had occurred in the constitutional structure of Rhodesia. After years of wrangling, the British South Africa Company agreed to relinquish control over the country. So in 1923 Rhodesia was granted a constitution by letters patent and became a self-governing colony.

In archival terms, this change was to present a real challenge. The headquarters of the British South Africa Company were in London, and consequently that office had been the clearing house of vast quantities of official correspondence at a high level. Naturally enough, negotiations had to be entered into between the Southern Rhodesian government and the company for the return of these records to Rhodesia. These negotiations were successful, and many were transferred to Salisbury in 1936. Tragically, the remainder were destroyed in London during a bombing raid in May 1941 while their return to Salisbury was still being negotiated.²

An interesting feature of the scene in Rhodesia has been the National Archives' provision of archival and other professional services to a diversity of countries. The transfer of the British South Africa Company's records to Salisbury can be seen in retrospect as the first step towards a multi-archives concept. Later development along those lines was spurred by the formation of the Central African Council, a body set up to foster and co-ordinate matters of mutual concern and interest to the three British colonies of Southern Rhodesia, Northern Rhodesia and Nyasaland. In 1947, Rhodesia's archival services were formally extended to the other two countries, and this international arrangement was given fuller validity in 1953 when the three participants were transformed into the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland. The headquarters of the newly-styled National Archives of Rhodesia and Nyasaland were situated, in common with all other federal department headquarters, in Salisbury. For the next ten years Salisbury was to be the springboard of various archival developments in both southern and central Africa.

The international flavour of the archives administration in Rhodesia was further enhanced in 1961 when the records of Bechuanaland³ were taken under its wing, having been transported over 700 miles across the

veld from Mafeking for the purpose. It was some years after Rhodesia had made its unilateral declaration of independence from Great Britain before these archives were returned to their homeland.

A challenging complication to the international programme emerged with the break-up of the Federation of Rhodesia and Nyasaland in 1963. The Rhodesian Archives ended up with Federal archives in its possession, charged with the care and arrangement of these on behalf of the three countries that had made up that Federation.

A committee comprising representatives of the three defunct Federal partners functioned effectively for several years, allocating to the country of origin those records which reflected in entirety Federal government activity in that country. But it is a delicate business dividing records in that way, and consequently the committee declared the lion's share of the records to be Federal records, and nothing else. (Incidentally, Zambia's delegate to the first few meetings was Bruce Burne, now a practising archivist in Australia). Physically, therefore, a substantial volume of records remain in Salisbury as Federal archives *per se*. The Federal records committee found its job became more and more difficult after Rhodesia's unilateral declaration of independence because of the complicated political situation.

There must be very few countries whose entire history has been so neatly preserved in a time capsule like the Central African Federation's archives. When a detailed inventory has been published, researchers will have a fascinating opportunity to study the conception, life and last gasp of a sort of experimental colony formed at the very time when colonies were on the way out.

This bird's-eye-view of archival history would be incomplete if it did not touch on at least one aspect of the very recent political and military upheavals. An essential principle of archival care is that of security; archival institutions must provide that security for the material in their care and must convince the public of its effectiveness. This principle was coming into sharp focus some time before I left, as several people in other parts of the world wrote and enquired about the safety of valuable records they had donated years previously, even going so far as to request their return.

Our response was to cite the example of Kenya. Far from destroying records of the colonial regime, that country commissioned an officer to seek out relevant archives in Great Britain and to negotiate for their transfer to Nairobi. Our contention was that the attitude of emerging nations in other parts of Africa to their archives had been a responsible one.

A comparison worth making with archival development in Western Australia is that when the Rhodesian archives was set up, the country in administrative terms was very young. It had only been going for forty-five years, and there were many people around whose memories of the

rumbustious events of the 'nineties were still reasonably fresh. Both personal and official records were, chronologically, all within easy reach. In the Battye Library, it is true that Dr Battye had organized the transfer to the Public Library of some government records as early as the turn of the century, but it was not until 1945 that the State Archives was actually formed, well over one hundred years after the colony's foundation. The matter of gaining archival control of Rhodesian records spanning the period 1890 to 1923 (the era of the British South Africa Company) was therefore a comparatively straightforward one. Certainly, by the mid-1950s, all the record groups had been arranged and described in great detail. It was, and is, possible for researchers to find their way round the collection by means of a comprehensive inventory; possible to follow the ramifications of administrative changes with ease; and possible to identify and specify individual, discrete items when researchers needed these. In short, when dealing with the records of the British South Africa Company, one can say exactly what it is one wants, and no ambiguity enters into the transaction. All in all, a remarkable archival situation.

The records *after* 1923, however, were to present a different picture. They were far more voluminous, and the task of gaining complete archival control of them was a different kettle of fish. Fortunately, the backlogs had not accumulated too much to make recovery impossible, and I expect the recent change in status of the country will be a convenient watershed for consolidating the processing and description of the archives of the country for the fifty-six years of white-dominated government since 1923.

The scope of the National Archives of Rhodesia would be easily comprehended by any regular user of the Battye Library because, as in Battye, printed *and* archival material are all present as one comprehensive research collection. Both primary and secondary sources are represented. However, unlike the situation in Western Australia, in Rhodesia the records of local authorities and statutory bodies are not included in the archival legislation, and the collection of those records is handled more as part of an ongoing public relations policy. Even more dependent on a positive public relations programme is the manuscripts collection. As in Battye, the Zimbabwe manuscripts collection mirrors just about every facet of non-government activity in the country.

A few examples that spring to mind are the comprehensive papers of David Livingstone — those in Salisbury are by far the most complete collection in existence. Another exciting collection is the papers and paintings of the artist-explorer, Thomas Baines, who, during an interlude between his South African adventures, accompanied the Western Australian surveyor, A. C. Gregory on his exploration of northern Australia in 1854. Yet another direct link with Western Australia is to be found in the papers of the energetic and visionary Kingsley Fairbridge whose original scheme to settle underprivileged

English children in Rhodesia had eventually to be transferred and made a reality in Western Australia, near Pinjarra. Fairbridge's statue still looks down nostalgically at the city of Umtali, in a pose which captures all the magic and pathos of the African bush. Again as in Battye, church records are well represented; the Rhodesian archives is the official repository for the Anglican church. And, in further reference to Anglicans, the manuscript collection includes a diary kept by Arthur Lawley, who was not only a devout churchman, but also spent fifteen months in Perth and was a keen supporter of Fairbridge's work. After having served four years as Administrator of Matabeleland, he was appointed Governor of Western Australia in 1901, only to be withdrawn as soon as the Boer War ended and made Lieutenant-Governor of The Transvaal, newly become a British crown colony.

While the range of printed records has its parallel in Battye, in Rhodesia the geographical scope extends well beyond her borders. In fact, acknowledging Rhodesia's links with just about every country around her, the Library of the National Archives contains significant holdings of materials on Mozambique, South Africa, Botswana, Zambia and other African countries. Some of the most valuable early works, in fact, are Portuguese texts recounting the adventures of navigators, explorers, merchants and missionaries whose wanderings took them to the east African coast and, as already mentioned, to the interior as well. In brief, the library of the Rhodesian Archives tries to represent not only Zimbabwe itself in all facets, but to put it clearly into geographical and historical perspective with its neighbours.

The microfilm collection is a well-used one. The Rhodesian Archives was the first such institution in Africa to harness microphotography as a collection-building technique. In the early 1950s, members of staff spent some time in Europe and Goa locating early Portuguese archives reflecting that nation's contacts with the east African interior. These records were all filmed and today constitute a fascinating record of Portuguese colonial enterprise in parts of present-day Zimbabwe and Mozambique. Another collection that is filmed as an ongoing process is the newspaper collection, a project which has its own reward in the form of sales to the United States and Britain. In contrast, an area not exploited to any great extent is the microfilming of whole classes of departmental records, an excellent way of facilitating quick access and avoiding wear and tear. This is something the Battye Library hopes to take increasing advantage of in the coming years. By the time we move into the new Alexander Library Building, we plan to have entire series of records available in this form.

The oral history programme in Rhodesia attracted much favourable publicity when it got off the ground in the late 1960s. Concentrating at first on white personalities in the country's recent past, one of the first interviewees was Garfield Todd, the New Zealander who was premier of

Southert Rhodesia from 1953 to 1957 and has continued to be in the news in one way or another ever since. The programme was enlarged four years ago by the appointment of a second oral historian, Dawson Munjeri, an African who was to record interviews with a wider cross-section of the populace. Already as a result of this man's work in the field, fresh facts about African tribal history and migration have come to light that challenge the long-held traditional beliefs about these topics; no doubt we will be hearing the details in the fullness of time when such research is published. Many Australians will have read in the *Bulletin* some months ago⁴ an article about a fabled tribe in Rhodesia who have only three toes on each foot. Munjen has been responsible for unearthing and recording new information about these people.

Another point about the work done by Munjeri is that during the last three years many of his travels to tape these interviews were made in dangerous country, where mines and ambushes were often the order of the day. Munjen treated all these hazards with cheerful disdain; in fact, his worst fear was to be mistaken for a debt collector, something that apparently happened on more than one occasion. The remoteness of some of the places he visited is well illustrated by one case where, as he approached an isolated village in the bush, he was greeted by an ululating crowd. These cries, as he discovered, were to mourn the death of the very same man he had been going to interview. The vagaries of the bush telegraph had made it impossible for any word about the old man's death to reach him beforehand.

As a *national* institution, the Rhodesian archives is an official depository for every new issue of postage stamps. Signed and sealed copies of legislation are also deposited. Another important part of the acquisition policy is the collection of paintings and prints of historical interest. Many are displayed to good effect in a two-storey exhibition gallery, pride of place going to the magnificent paintings of Gregory's associate, Baines, who was the first man to paint the Victoria Falls.

Who is allowed to use all this material? In broad terms, every adult who wishes to. As in the Battye Library, there is no system of readers' tickets. As far as the pattern of usage is concerned, there is one very interesting difference between the Rhodesian and Western Australian experience. In Western Australia most of the research is carried out by the man-in-the-street — the person who comes in on the off-chance that Battye will have some information about his or her ancestors. This accent on genealogical research is strong throughout Australia, and is something Battye is trying to respond to in a positive way. In Rhodesia, on the other hand, by far the greater proportion of users came from post-graduate students, senior under-graduates and long-term researchers. A high proportion of the statistics reflected the day-in day-out visits of these people, rather than the cross-section of the local population as is the case in Battye. One of the implications of this was that retrieval and

usage of records was far more even; there was not that constant movement of records between the stacks and the search room, a process which inevitably is very hard on the records.

The reasons for the Rhodesian pattern spring from the nature of the society there; by far the most potentially numerous users of archives are Africans. However, as far as genealogical research is concerned, Africans do not usually use documentary archives, for the simple reason that such conventional records are hardly likely to tell them anything about *their* pre-colonial arrivals and departures (a situation very different from the one highlighted recently in the book and television series *Roots*, in which it was shown that blacks in the United States can trace the arrival of their ancestors in documentary sources.) But in Zimbabwe that information is more likely to be present in the oral tradition of the people, and it is the responsibility of the oral historians to capture this tradition on tape for future generations. Looked at in this way, one can readily appreciate that the responsibilities of an African oral historian are tremendous.

The second reason springs from the fact that the greater proportion of the original white settlers got out of the country as soon as they could when they saw there was not as much gold lying around the surface as they had heard was the case, when they experienced the muddy conditions and communication problems brought about by torrential rains in summer, and had to contend with debilitating fevers. When these poor souls saw what they were up against, it was a comparatively simple matter to head south again and return to the Cape, Natal or wherever. In short, in Rhodesia there is not that high proportion of whites who could be regarded as the equivalent of the numerous Western Australians who proudly trace their ancestry back to the first few years of settlement here; people who, in contrast to the white Rhodesian experience, *had* to stay because it was impossible to go back and whose descendants are Battye's most frequent customers.

Closely associated with the Rhodesian Archives have been three historical societies. By far the most dynamic was the Rhodesiana Society which, spurred by the euphoria of U.D.I, took every opportunity of promoting itself by means of meetings, outings, tours, publications and even medals. The Society's journal *Rhodesiana*, a best-seller in African terms, contained both popular and serious articles on all aspects of Rhodesian history; it also had strong coverage of Rhodesian bibliography, including news notes about collectors' items. Altogether a very active body, it did not itself collect material, and could not boast the splendid premises and reference facilities that are the Historical Society's in Perth. Nevertheless, because of the historical interest it engendered, it is fair to say that from time to time items of *Rhodesiana* were donated to the Archives that otherwise might never have been removed from musty cupboards. A far more academic line on Rhodesian history was taken by

the Central African Branch of the (British) Historical Society. The branch's journal *Rhodesian History* contained serious articles embodying research carried out largely at the Archives in Salisbury by local university students, lecturers and others. The third historical society, the National Historical Society, was intended to foster and co-ordinate the collection of documentary material and taped interviews, and to channel it to the Archives.

The Rhodesian Archives itself conducted an active publishing programme. Original manuscripts, like those of Livingstone and Baines, were edited by staff members and published by the institution. Some of them, now out of print, have become valuable works of Africana. *Rhodesian Epic*,⁵ an illustrated history of the country, went into several editions and is still, I believe, a best seller. In the field of bibliography, the Archives was well to the fore. Besides the inventory to the records of the British South Africa Company, which is in fact available in published form,⁶ there is an extensive guide to the manuscript collection.

By and large, it is probably true to say that the achievements of the Zimbabwe Archives have been considerable. In its heyday it enjoyed a reputation in Africa equalled today by no other single archival institution on that continent. In the post-UDI era, it functioned as efficiently as ever, in spite of the sort of pinpricks staff occasionally suffered as a result of the growing political isolation. The collections continued to grow, new plans were formulated and implemented, and staff numbers increased at a rate that was commensurate with the department's organizational development. Not only did the Archives have a good image in the public eye, it was supported wholeheartedly by the successive governments, as befitted a national cultural institution.

In the course of this paper, I have drawn a few parallels with the Western Australian archival scene, and I feel I must end on one. The Battye Library is a repository of priceless documentary and printed material about this State. It is, in fact, the documentary *heritage* of the State. If there is one thing I have learned since being privileged to work here, it is that the State Archives of Western Australia has developed from its humble beginnings in 1945 by dint of sheer hard work on the part of a *handful* of extremely energetic and far-sighted people. In Rhodesia, that sort of dedication on the part of archivists was accompanied and rewarded from the beginning by a level of government support that was as generous as one could ever hope to get from government for a cultural institution. In the Battye Library the present staffing levels are such that it is barely possible to maintain basic services. If we wish to organize our collections better, both for the public and for the government departments we serve, to index more comprehensively, to publish finding aids and to develop some of those features of an all-round archival service as mentioned earlier, an all-out commitment by the State is essential.

The incredibly rich documentary heritage that is ours makes the effort to achieve this supremely worthwhile.

FOOTNOTES

1. For a general account of Zimbabwe's genesis, see L. H. Ganr, *A History of Southern Rhodesia*, London, 1965.
2. An outline of these events is to be found in *A guide to the public archives of Rhodesia, 1890-1923*, Salisbury, 1969.
3. Present-day Botswana. The accretion of records in Mafeking was itself a curious bit of archivology. Mafeking is in the Cape Province of South Africa but until 1961 the so-called "Imperial reserve" there was the capital of the Bechuanaland Protectorate. It could be said that from the moment of their creation Bechuanaland's archives were cared for *in* a neighbouring country but not *by* it!
4. *Bulletin*, 15 April 1980, 64-7.
5. T. W. Baxter and R. W. S. Turner, *Rhodesian Epic*, 2nd ed., Salisbury, 1968.
6. T. W. Baxter and E. E. Burke, *Guide to the historical manuscripts in the National Archives*, Salisbury, 1970.