# Opening Address: Australian Society of Archivists 1981 Biennial General Meeting

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It is an honour to be asked to open this conference. At the same time the occasion has a strong personal interest for me.

In the course of a long official life I have been called on to open many conferences in much the same way as the man who happens to have a tin opener is asked to open a can of beans regardless of whether he has any interest in the contents. Perhaps one of these days conferences will be equipped with some sort of patent device so that the lid can be yanked off in one pull, but at present they still seem to need someone who can wield the tin opener or, more exactly, someone who can go neatly around the rim of the subject with an appropriate speech.

Following established practice of professional tin openers, I warmly congratulate the organisers of the conference, thank those who have prepared papers for it and express the hope that you will all find both pleasure and profit in a keen, friendly and highly argumentative debate. I know you will bring to the meeting both the knowledge and the good manners of true professionals.

After these customary expressions, however, I want to go further on this occasion because I am personally interested in archival work and have had some experience both as a maker and as a user of archives. I was also a member of some of the early committees that pioneered the establishment of archives systems in Australia. Consequently I wish to contribute my own paper to the transactions of this conference.

At the outset I should declare my position. I take a narrow and rigid view about archives. This view was formed fifty years ago when I was working on colonial records in Western Australia during my first venture into historical research. The materials for historical research in Western Australia in those days were all over the place — some in a back room

at the Public Library, some stowed away in cupboards in various offices of the State Government, some in private possession, some in cupboards at Government House, some in the keeping of the Western Australian Historical Society, some held by various semi-public institutions. What I encountered in the course of my research was a strong disposition among those who had anything to do with the custody of documents to identify some papers as being of historical interest and to discard other papers as not being of historical interest. They discovered with joy any pockets of gold, picked them out for safe-keeping and shovelled away the rest of the papers as so much mullock.

Reacting against this tendency, I developed a strong view that any judgment about what is of historical interest is only a transitory opinion that might be relevant today and quite false tomorrow. The whole documentary record should be kept intact and preserved as far as possible in the form in which it was originally created. The research worker's assessment of the credibility and the value of a piece of paper requires the examination of the matrix in which it was embedded at the time it was formed.

From this beginning I also began to realise that the value of archives is not solely to provide material for historical research. The keeping of a documentary record is an essential aid to the continuing tasks of administration. The archives of any institution are not created for the sake of the historian or to provide a supply of bright specimens for the curious but are made primarily to serve the purposes of the institution itself.

In the nineteen-thirties I took some part with others in the moves that led eventually to the creation of an Archives Branch in the State Library of Western Australia. It was not done in the way I would like to have seen it done but the force of circumstances made no other decision possible at that time. So much damage had already been done, so much authority already rested in the State Library and so little innovation was likely to be made by the State Government in providing another organisation or additional funds that it was a sufficient blessing to be able to make any sort of a start in reassembling scattered materials, providing a central repository and having an officer to take care of the papers. Subsequently that Archives Branch has done notable work, especially in the facilities it has provided for historical research, and I make no criticism of the branch itself. It is still my view however that the best decision, although not a practicable decision at the time, would have been to set up State Archives separate from the Public Library and to have adopted and maintained a stricter definition of archives. That definition would not have embraced any piece of paper merely because it was odd, old and

interesting. Let libraries and museums collect the curiosa, the personalia and the detached bits of paper but do not call them archives.

These views were reinforced a few years later when I began to work in a government department in Canberra and became engaged in the daily process of creating current files and consulting the files made in earlier years. They were confirmed when I had the opportunity late in 1942 of making a tour of inspection of the United States Archives in Washington.

It then became my fate again to share in an Australian archival study in which once again my views were not accepted.

In 1942 representations were made to the Australian Government by Dr C.E.W. Bean about the need to collect and preserve Australian records and documents relating to the war. He had been Official War Historian of the World War of 1914-18 and was just completing his notable achievement in that role when the Second World War broke out in 1939. He wished to ensure that some of the lessons he had learnt both as editor and author were applied in preparing any history of the new war effort. Without any disparagement of Bean's standing as historian it can be added that his view of history gave high value to the ideal of commemoration and his chief purpose as historian was that nothing worthy of commemoration should be overlooked or forgotten.

In June 1942 the Prime Minister appointed a committee to investigate the question, to lay down the broad principles to be observed by Commonwealth departments and war-time authorities in connection with the collection and preservation of records and documents relating to the war and to maintain a general supervision of such collection and preservation. The original members were Dr Bean as chairman, Mr Kenneth Binns (Parliamentary Library), Mr Gilbert Castieau (Attorney-General's Department), Mr H.S. Temby (Prime Minister's Department), Lt.-Colonel Treloar (Director of the Australian War Memorial), and myself from the Department of External Affairs. My membership was the result of a personal interest in the subject and not as a departmental representative. Temby, the assistant secretary in the Prime Minister's Department who had been given the carriage of the matter, had known of my interest in archives and had discussed Bean's proposals with me before making the departmental submission to the Prime Minister for the creation of the committee.

We had our first meeting on July 16. At first we were called the Committee on the Collection and Preservation of Historical Records and sometimes the Committee for the Collection and Preservation of Wartime Records. By the end of August, 1942, we were calling ourselves the War Archives Committee.

The clear purpose in the committee's foundation was to collect the materials for writing history. Dr Bean enthusiastically extended that purpose into proposals for encouraging departments and instrumentalities to write their departmental histories and for inviting those who were engaged in any part of the war effort to deposit their personal papers and diaries. Questionnaires were prepared. All this was commendable as an effort to ensure that there would be a wealth of documentation for the official war historian. It did not seem to me at the time to be the best way of establishing the Australian Archives. Even as an approach to historical research I had my doubts about the principles behind the enthusiastic concern about keeping records safe for the historian. History is not well served if documents are created solely for the sake of the historical narrative. That process may even come close to what, in other circles, is called 'cooking the books.'

The original committee evolved into a succession of committees with changing membership. I remained a member of them all until I entered Parliament in 1949 but during a long interval in 1946 and 1947 my absence on official duty overseas interrupted my attendance at meetings. The work of these committees led eventually to the first action taken by the Commonwealth Government to appoint an archivist and to establish a system and regulations to ensure preservation and custody of departmental records. Throughout this work however the primary emphasis was still on the historical value of papers, and, under the continuing chairmanship of Dr Bean, the chief concern was still on ensuring that materials were available for the writing of the official war history.

My own views can perhaps be best expressed by quoting a few paragraphs from a letter I wrote to the secretary of the committee on December 7, 1943. The occasion for my letter was the draft of a circular to be sent to Commonwealth departments giving guidance to departmental officers for the preservation of war records. Suggesting the deletion of certain paragraphs from the draft, I wrote as follows:-

> It seems to me that underlying those paragraphs is the idea that some papers are 'historical' and some are not and that an attempt should be made to distinguish between the two classes. My view is that no such distinction can be made with certainty on any given occasion, and that the ideal in archives work is to preserve the complete archives and not attempt to differentiate between what is considered to be important and what is considered to be unimportant. To include these paragraphs in a list of guiding principles will be likely to encourage records clerks to think in terms of historical and non-historical papers . . . . Moreover there is a further danger in

> describing too exactly the type of document to be preserved in as much as the records clerk may feel at liberty to destroy anything which has not specifically been mentioned as worthy of preservation
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> To sum up, my point is that what we want to preserve for the sake of the future administrator is a complete record of administrative action and not a collection of papers of historical interest.

Implicit in my comment was that there should be specialist and fully-trained professional archivists to advise on all questions of disposal of official papers and to apply strict archival principles.

In keeping with this fundamentalist view I tried to enlarge the committee's interest by suggesting that we should also make proposals regarding a post-war archival policy and organisation for Australian archives. To that end a sub-committee was formed. Its members were the National Librarian, the Director of the Australian War Memorial and myself. With that membership it soon became apparent that the sub-committee would get nowhere. Both my colleagues had a very simple view of what our recommendations should be — hand over the task or part of the task to their respective institutions. Mr Binns in particular was quite clear in his mind that all that had to be done was give the National Library more money and more staff. The difficulty in opposing his case, in my eyes at least, was that much of the material that the Bean Committee was thinking about was in fact library material rather than archives in the strict sense of the term. Our sub-committee had scant hope even of discussing the broader problems that I had in mind.

My own views of the broader post-war task might be gathered from a memorandum which eventually was distributed to the full committee under my own name in April 1948 after my return from duty overseas. I said, in effect, that an Australian national archives system could not be complete and fully satisfactory until every one of the seven governments in Australia was fully meeting its responsibility in regard to the preservation and proper handling of its records. This did not mean centralisation but co-operation. The immediate needs, looking at Australian archives as a whole, were (a) Preservation (i.e., standard practices throughout Australia to ensure no document was destroyed without permission of a competent archival authority); (b) Inspection; (c) Identification; (d) Description both as to contents and location of archival material and (e) Access. Common to all these needs was the need for adequate trained archival staff. This was the beginning of all archival work. I suggested a substantial Federal expenditure in the commencement of an Australia-wide archival survey and the training of archivists, both

measures to be initiated by calling a conference of all Australian archival authorities. In all this I envisaged a permanent Federal Archives authority separate from any other institution and functioning under special archives legislation. Among other details I saw that while the States would bear the cost and responsibility for the custody and preservation of their own archives the Federal Government would bear most of the expense of an Australia-wide survey of archives, the cost of publishing the nation-wide description of archives, and a generous contribution to the cost of common archival services and the training of archives officers.

Young men have dreams. I had three visions nearly forty years ago. Some of them have become fact by reason of the efforts of other persons.

I make no comment on the present state of archival work in Australia for I do not claim to be closely in touch with all that is being done. Out of the experience in the past I would still advance two opinions strongly about the impediments to sound archival practice. One opinion is that the work of a library or a museum is quite different from that of an archives authority and each of the three institutions should keep to its own field. The second is that the work of an archives authority is much broader than collecting documents for use by historians. I shall enlarge on the second of these two opinions.

It will be plain from what I have said up to date that when I speak of archives I have in mind chiefly the cumulative records made by government departments or instrumentalities (or by any other institution) in the day-by-day transaction of its own affairs — the sort of records that are usually referred to as "the files". I have not been thinking of heterogeneous collections of documents gathered together from here and there. I have a clear distinction in my own mind between what is built up in the continuous and unbroken life of an institution and the scattered bits of paper that are gathered together posthumously or which are created as an historical narrative after the transactions have been completed.

Archives in the sense in which I have spoken of them are primarily the tools of administration. They are made and shaped to serve the needs of administration. They only serve those needs if they are complete and accurate in the meaning given to those terms by the administrative officer on the actual day on which the record was made.

In the course of time the files may have value as the raw material of historical research. In the course of time they may prove to be a source of information for inquisitive persons who are more interested in good stories than in good history. But the value of the files to either the historian or the story-teller is only a consequence of creating archives and not the purpose of doing so.

If those who are making the archives day by day fall into the delusion that they are engaged in providing material for historians and journalists instead of serving the ends of sound administration the archives are likely to be falsified either by sins of omission or commission. I deplore any tendency either among archivists or among the public servants and politicians engaged in public administration to look on files primarily as material for the historian or the investigative journalist and not primarily as part of the process and as one of the main instruments of efficient administration for such a tendency is likely to lead to imperfect archives and even a falsified record. To be useful in administration the files need to show the errors and the correction of the errors as well as the final achievement. When the record is being made, the public servant and the minister, while conscious of their responsibility for what they do, should not be thinking primarily about how this or that will look in tomorrow's newspaper or next year's undergraduate's thesis but should keep their minds on the job in hand.

It is relevant to this point to remember that the secondary uses of archives are much wider than providing material for historical research or investigative journalism. The information in official archives is drawn upon for many studies in economics, demography, public administration and the social and political sciences and at times the information may be critical in the determination of legal questions especially those concerning the rights and entitlements of the individual. For these purposes, no less than to repay the curiosity of the historian or journalist, archives need the essential quality of being complete and accurate. If this primary administrative purpose in the creation of archives is not maintained at all times the value and dependability of the record for all these other purposes will be damaged.

Documents are certainly not the only repository of truth; documents may sometimes mislead; documents have to be interpreted as well as quoted. But for those who make documents and those who have the custody of them the old ideal still stands: 'Keep the record straight'.

As a brief digression, may I make a passing reference to the way in which the archival scene has become more complex because of changes in techniques and procedures. The use of the telephone and, more recently, of computers and aural visual appliances of various kinds in public administration, and the changing habits of administrators and politicians themselves have presented the archivists with new problems and difficulties. I am not competent either to describe those problems and the difficulties with exactness, much less to offer any practical advice on them but it is obvious that new professional problems are arising out

of the fact that much official business today is transacted and recorded by other than documentary procedures. Archives of the future will not only be in the physical shape of paper.

Finally I wish to make passing reference to another situation.

I do not wish to enter on the current arguments about legislation on freedom of information but I do suggest that those who are debating that legislation should keep in mind the point I have made about the primary purpose of creating archives as part of the process of administration. This requires some confidentiality and some freedom from scrutiny. In some cases the need for confidentiality may be temporary; in others it may remain for a longer term. In making a judgment about freedom of information so far as it affects departmental files, we all need to keep in mind the needs of sound administration and the serving of the public interest through sound administration. We need to consider the conditions under which it can be ensured that the archival record will be complete and accurate. The claims of the inquisitive journalist or the ambitious historian are far from being the whole argument. Public interest covers both the right to know and the right to protect confidentiality.

Historians and journalists make a claim to share in decisions about access solely because they are potential users of the archives but they need to recognise too that the question is much more complicated than their search for information. Some of the recent rather glib arguments by interested parties seem tantamount to saying that in a public park any passer-by can make his own decision whether a sign 'keep off the grass' is really needed and, if he thinks fit, he can throw away the notice and go wherever he chooses. We cannot dispose of this complicated question of access to papers either by sticking up prohibitive notices or, worse still, by shouting slogans about 'freedom of information'.