

# The Australian Society of Archivists: Presidential Address 1981 Biennial General Meeting

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*Note: The following is an edited text of the Presidential Address delivered by Margaret Jennings at the Biennial General Meeting of the Australian Society of Archivists held at Trinity College, University of Melbourne in May 1981.*

Several events over the last two years demonstrate the Society's participation in furthering professional standards and promoting an awareness of archives and archivists in government and public circles.

One involvement has resulted in the establishment of a post-graduate diploma in records management and archives administration at the Melbourne State College — expected to operate in 1982. This will be, all going well, the second postgraduate course established in Australia — the first being at the University of New South Wales — and the only two devoted exclusively to records management and archives administration — sometimes popularly fused as Information Management.

The Society has now inaugurated a publishing programme to assist those within and outside the Society — and will provide manuals on practical matters affecting the setting up and use of archives. There is a dearth of information in this area and this project will begin to satisfy a much-wanted need. The first in the series will be concerned with school archives and will be available later this year.

In the conservation area, a detailed submission was made to the Treasurer on the exemption from sales tax and import duty, items required in the conservation and restoration of archival materials. This was backed by a most impressive list of institutions, authorities and historians contacted over preceding years willing to endorse such a move. The reply was hardly encouraging — however, it will be pursued.

A programme was also initiated for the testing of various products, used not only in conservation and restoration, but in gauging the durability of products used in the creation of modern records — the archives of the future. Three laboratories are willing to participate in this project, and the results will be published in the Society's publications. Too often have we listened to the claims of 'longevity' or 'archival quality' — this last often meaning that ten years is quite enough. We have been at the mercy of the producers and distributors, and, while we know enough to question their claims, we often have not had access to scientific information to back our beliefs.

In the promotion and publicity area, a questionnaire has been prepared and distributed to archival institutions and collections — the result forming the basis of a *Directory to Archives and Manuscript Repositories in Australia*.

The last two years have also seen the continuation of a survey on salaries and working conditions in Australian archives institutions. This will assist those wishing to establish or to improve salaries and working conditions in existing or proposed ventures.

That concludes a basic account of the directions the Society is pursuing. I would like to take up some more general points on the contemporary and future archives climate.

As archivists (and as the theme of this conference suggests), we exist to ensure the better use of archives; to take a part in the orderly collection of information where possible — and this encompasses contemporary records; to ensure that the most worthy elements survive, and make the records available for research and publication so that the events of our history may reach a wider and, hopefully, more informed public.

Archives — researched, queried, evaluated and re-researched in the light of shibboleths never previously questioned — attest a lasting witness to fact, contemporary climate, prejudice and foible. All are there.

The use of archives in the so-called 'Australiana' publishing boom from the mid to late 1960s onwards, the growth in interest in genealogical pursuits, the use of documentary evidence in contemporary film and theatre production, the awakening history of technology, trade unions, business and company history — all point to a greater awareness of a rich resource.

This is at once a fillip to the role of the archivist and a nightmare, to us, and to the institutions employing us. Sometimes it seems a circuitous argument.

I don't think any archives institution believes that it has a full complement of staff. Most in the government sector are faced with staff

ceilings. Money is short and space rather precious. In the light of this, how may we handle an increasing number of clients?

One way is through the institutions themselves — the production and distribution of guides, indexes and lists so that the researcher is aware of what is available, and of interest, before he or she sets foot in the institution concerned. That's the rub — to devote the time and staff to do it; and, today, the machinery — the purchase of or access to computers and word processors — which we know would shorten the many work hours involved.

While all institutions have their own finding aids, they are very rarely available in toto in other research institutions or libraries. Consequently the researcher has quite a lengthy preliminary search to establish the relevant institutions to visit; and by correspondence or phone, to begin to know whether there is twenty centimetres or twenty metres of records to be searched — and whether access is permitted. A further daunting factor, and rather galling, is to find that an institution is open 9 to 5, weekdays only.

The preparation of a *Directory to Archives and Manuscripts Repositories in Australia*, previously referred to, will seek to provide researchers with basic information such as opening times, the officer to contact, access conditions, principal categories of records held; finding aids available — and whether they are for sale, available by mail, or whether they can be consulted only at the institutions; the physical form of the records, for example, microfilm; and what copying services are provided.

In this way, the researcher will at least have an inkling as to the basic information of an institution and its collection. This publication will be available later this year and will be updated and expanded as necessary.

As to the more detailed information on precise record holdings of specific archives being available — at least in major reference centres — this poses a mammoth task. I think we can all see in our mind's eye the endless folders of guides which we have helped compile and which we have frequently consulted. These often comprise the tip of the iceberg of the great mass of undocumented records that both archivist and researcher know exist.

The diversity of documents, and the diversity of documentary techniques pose a problem for archivists and researchers alike. Do we standardize our descriptions of records? Is this possible? A pilot has been launched between the Australian Archives and the Public Record Office (Victoria) to investigate the application of the Record Series concept to Victorian government records. This is a unique instance of two major institutions

collaborating on documentation procedures. Also, as those who have worked with the Series system leave the Australian Archives for other fields of archives management, the concept is being successfully applied to a wide range of records. However, how far institutions can be swayed to meet a common cause is a matter of conjecture.

The contemporary and future pressures on individual institutions predominantly political, financial and legislative — will produce a range of options that places archives in the middle of the sandwich.

Increasing demand from clients, greater accountability, financial constraints, charges to depositors, fees for services — all these look increasingly imminent.

However, despite the current financial climate, there is an increasing awareness by institutions and companies of the need to preserve archives and records in an orderly manner — more specifically in local government, universities, companies, business enterprises, trade unions. An encouraging number of appointments of archivists and records managers have been made over the last few years.

The present and future must naturally encompass the use of the so-called 'new technology'. We are all aware of it or are living with it in our management of archives and contemporary records; and we must now deal with it as an end product in archives. This increases the links between archivists and contemporary managers, for, without a thorough insight into the processes and documentation involved, the record may not survive a decade.

By the time of the next conference some of these possibilities may well have come about. So, I conclude with that famed expression of Alastair Cooke: '. . . and the rest you know.'