Some Reflections on Sir Paul Hasluck's "Narrow and Rigid View of Archives"

Colin Smith

A discussion of archival theory with regard to the use of archives by administrators and historians.

Sir Paul Hasluck warned, at our 1981 conference, against "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".[1] He argued "that any judgement about what is of historical interest is only a transitory opinion that might be relevant today and quite false tomorrow".

This *premise* has an *implication* and a *corollary*, and Sir Paul seems to accept both without much qualification. The *implication* is that "The whole documentary record should be kept intact" — that we are to preserve

> a *complete* record of administrative action [my emphasis] — 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.[2]

The *corollary* is Sir Paul's view that we keep archives "for the sake of the future administrator" — "that the work of an archives authority is much broader than collecting documents for use by historians" — indeed, that one should deplore

> any tendency among archivists... [and others]... 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...

I consider both of these positions to be untenable, despite the fundamental soundness of the premise cited in the first paragraph. In this paper I shall seek to explain how this can be, and will look briefly at some consequences of these theoretical deductions which run contrary to everyday commonsense.

The *premise*, rightly interpreted, is one of those insights which

distinguishes people who understand about archives from people who do not. It is the answer to those dangerous amateurs — the equivalent in archiving to the fossickers and plunderers of archaeological sites — who have the arrogance to abstract from the record some bits and pieces which happen to interest them (and it does not matter whether their interest is informed and expert or the mere casual whim of an historical ignoramus), and to decree that only these shall be kept for posterity. It is an assertion both of the fact that archival documents have to be seen and understood in their context of other documents laid down in the record at the same time, and a rejection of subjectivity in appraisal.

But must one accept the *implication* that one must keep *all* the records to preserve context and be strictly objective? Strictly, perhaps, yes, but in practice — if one accepts some minuscule risk to the essential integrity of the record as a reasonable price to pay for the sheer viability of archiving — no. The despatch of tons of purchase orders, vehicle log books, time sheets and parking infringement notices would certainly appear to involve such a minuscule and acceptable risk. One is, surely, to preserve the general (not the particular), the substantive (not the facilitative), the central (not the peripheral), the creative (not the routine), and as much contextual material around each matter of significance in these terms as will put one beyond any reasonable doubt of presenting it out of context.

The General Disposal Schedules of the Australian Archives seem to be imbued throughout by this philosophy — in particular, with a concept of a certain relativity of archival values (not to be confused with the above-mentioned subjectivity). The point of departure is always the official statement of responsibilities of the office in question, as defining what is substantive (their word is "operational" or "functional") and what is facilitative ("housekeeping").[3] Thus, regardless of a prevailing prejudice that a TB survey is more interesting than, say, the provision of desks and chairs, the Australian Archives would demand retention of policy files kept by the relevant section of the Department of Administrative Services about getting desks and chairs for the Public Service, while authorising destruction of a file about arrangements for the staff of that section to undergo TB testing in working hours. But in the case of the Section of the Department of Health conducting the TB Survey, the situation would of course be reversed, the subject of TB having become substantive while that of desks and chairs was merely facilitative. The subjective idea that TB is more interesting or important than desks and chairs does not come into it. Rather, the central, general, substantive, creative, "policy" records have been kept, regarding both, — while the peripheral, particular and routine ones have not. No subject has been deleted from the record, but the records regarding each have been somewhat reduced. To use a gardening analogy — instead of pulling out one rose bush and keeping the other (whose flowers we think more beautiful), we have pruned both.

We have refused to think like an historian deciding what records are relevant to his study — recognising, as Sir Paul Hasluck puts it, "that any judgement about what is of historical interest is only a transitory opinion that might be relevant today and quite false tomorrow". The reason, in fact, that we have not allowed ourselves to be influenced by the imagined requirements of any particular historian is that we are catering for *all historians* for all time, and consider their interests beyond our imaginations (only supposing that they, like us, will look for the general, the central, the creative, the seminal, the salient etc. as distinct from the routine and facilitative). And we may broaden this perspective further by defining 'historian' not in the narrow sense adopted by Sir Paul Hasluck, but to include all those who make restrospective studies in "economics, demography, public administration and the social and political sciences" *or* "in the determination of legal questions".

Sir Hilary Jenkinson is primarily responsible for the view that the avoidance of the subjectivity of the historian implies that we must rather trust the presumed objectivity of the administrator. The particular administrator, however, is quite as subjective in his requirements as the particular historian. The real difference between Jenkinson's "Administrator" and his "Historian" is that the latter tends in our mind to be an individual pursuing particular interests, where the former, in deciding what records to keep for how long, is engaged in thinking on behalf of a broad posterity — *all administrators* if you like. Thus he thinks rather more in the objective manner required of the archivist, and comes pretty often to the same sort of conclusion in favour of the general, the central, the seminal etc.

However, even supposing that the administrator's delineation of the high spots in the records will coincide exactly with that of the archivist (which I doubt), we have a problem that in the end practically all administrators will find practically all records totally non-current — i.e. useless for purposes of continuing administrative reference. Jenkinson's notion of *laissez faire* archiving, that is picking up the administrator's leavings, can only avoid disaster if there is intervention by the archivist. The administrator's criterion of records worth keeping for his own purposes may shrink to vanishing point. Fortunately, destruction is often delayed by sheer inertia, or historical conscience.

Summing up, then, we have, on the one hand, an historian's judgement which is too narrow and particular to serve all posterity; and on the other hand, an administrator who takes a broad view but sees very little, if anything, as requiring *permanent* retention. One is too narrow. The other is too short. Appraisal for secondary purposes has to be both broad and long in its perspectives. That is to say, appraisal is to be left neither to historians nor to administrators, but to archivists.

Turning now to the second statement — the *corollary* — that we keep

archives for administrators. This rather stands or falls with the view I have just rejected, that archival appraisal should be done by, or by the criteria of, administrators. I have substituted the more commonsense view that it should be done by archivists, with a catholic impartiality and objectivity as between topics and clients. The clients I have seen as historians (or retrospective researchers) of all sorts for all time — including administrators looking for precedents or legal bases.

But Sir Paul might well argue that this mere broadening of the definition of the historian misses one of his points. "History is not well served" he writes, "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'." According to him "Archives are... primarily the tools of administration... made and shaped to serve the needs of administration". Again, he observes that;

> 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.

I certainly agree with this warning against the self-consciousness that may result from archiving (and Freedom of Information). I share his concern at the prospect of the public servant and minister "thinking primarily about how this or that will look in tomorrow's newspaper or next year's undergraduate's thesis..." This is a problem that has no satisfactory theoretical answer — for there is a conflict of pressures upon the archivist to be, for very good reasons, both obtrusive and unobtrusive, and both liberal and illiberal as regards public access. But that is another debate for another day.

My present contention is that Sir Paul has shaped these perceptions to fit in with his emphasis on the administrator, and that I can reshape them to fit my thesis without much difficulty by making two refinements of his argument.

First, I must reject his lumping together in this connection of archivists with "public servants and politicians engaged in public administation". I do this on the basis that the job of the latter is to *create* records, whereas the job of archivists is merely to *keep* what has been created. Historical unselfconsciousness in the creators of records is devoutly to be wished. But to ask the long-term keepers of records to be similarly oblivious is to deny them both purpose and sense of purpose.

Again, I think there is an ambiguity and confusion in archival terminology, which comes through in Sir Paul's statement that he deplores any tendency "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..."

We talk of the *primary* use of records — the use for which they were created, and of the *secondary* uses for which archivists keep them. I think we need to be very clear that these words *indicate sequence, and not an order of importance.* Unpublished records are amphibians. They are *created* by administrators for administrative uses. Some of them are *kept* by archivists for posterity as represented by historians (very broadly defined). It is as simple as that, but it gets very muddled when we fail to notice the "change of life", and try to agree on one purpose and *modus operandi* to cover the whole career of the record.

Nor is this merely a matter for theoretical debate. Theory is out of line with commonsense, at the expense of the latter. We all know that administrators, more often than not, dump their old records in sheds, cellars and attics, or destroy them wholesale. We have gained from this the distinct impression that they regard them as useless for their purposes, and have accepted that judgement with their word for them — "non-current" i.e. not used. And yet we have often solemnly set about to keep archives for the benefit of administrators, asking them in many cases to produce all the resources required, and we have often seemed to regard use of archives by outsiders (historians) as a mere spin-off.[4]

Some may argue that this policy is vindicated by the success of our large government archives in proving their value in the realm of records management. The entry of archives into off-site storage and retrieval of semi-current records has undoubtedly given them some control of records management and disposal, and a claim to resources. But it proves, if anything, my contention, in that the administrator requires this *quid pro quo* for his largely passive co-operation in our enterprise of cultural conservation (I think it may ill behove us to forget this and attempt to charge him for our housekeeping services).

In my rather tentative view, Kent Haworth is substantially wrong when he argues that "Archives have a value to their creators, and in a good many cases the creators, whether public or private, ought to be prodded by archivists to look after their archives properly" and, when he criticises the "notion abroad" in Canada that if publicly funded collecting archives "do not look after records no one will and these records will inevitably be lost or destroyed".[5] The "notion" seems to me to be shrewdly accurate, while he seems to be flogging a dead horse, or trying to squeeze blood out of the wrong stone.

I began this paper by identifying a *premise* with which I agreed, and an

implication and a *corollary* which I rejected. The implication, that we ought to keep all records, is so impractical and so widely disbelieved as to be without much effect in practice. The corollary, however, that we keep records mainly for administrators, has gotten deeper into our philosophies, and may not be doing our cause much good.

FOOTNOTES

1. *Archives and Manuscripts* Vol.9, No.2, December 1981.

2. However, Sir Paul does refer to the need to "ensure no document was destroyed without permission of a competent archival authority" and does suggest, "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".

3. This principle runs into some difficulties when one is dealing with personal papers of an individual. The *raison d'etre* of a private life is not defined in administrative arrangement orders. Yet this does not seem to prevent archivists and manuscript librarians from applying much the same criterion in much the same way as their primary appraisal test. In fact, I think the emphasis on statutory or administrative directives may be rather dangerously overplayed in Australian archives theory. The most significant work done at McMaster Laboratory during its first decade was probably that of Freney and Lipson on shrinkproofing wool. They did it voluntarily in their own time, and their success was an embarrassment because such work was supposed to be left to the British and was certainly not on the McMaster agenda. Needless to say, I did not decide on the basis of a strict reading of a General Disposal Schedule that the files about it should be discarded. But it is conceivable that a clerical assistant, reading them literally, and with no sense of their underlying intent, might have done.

4. I had rather imagined that Jenkinson took this view. However, a perusal of *A Manual of Archives Administration* suggests he never wrote anything of the sort.

5. Kent Haworth "Welfare for Archives and the Will of Archivists" *Archivaria* No.13. Winter 1981/82 p124-126.