The Foundation of the South Australian Archives

Carl Bridge

The opening of the South Australian Archives in 1920 was the culmination of 18 years work by Professor George Henderson of the University of Adelaide. Though they were really designed as an Historical Manuscripts Department of the Public Library of South Australia for the use of Henderson's history students, they soon outgrew that function and truly deserve the description "the first state archives in Australia."

In a romantic sense the Public Library of South Australia had an archives from the beginning, as the charter which established the colony travelled from London with the first library books in an iron box on the barque *Tam O'Shanter* in 1836. Though this fortuitous archive was reclaimed by Government House once the box's lid was prised open, the South Australian Institute to 1884 and the Public Library thereafter continued, in a rather haphazard and desultory manner, to accumulate South Australian historical documents. Interest quickened in the 1890's, when Board members, Samuel Way, William Sowden and Thomas Gill began actively to seek out material; but it was only after Professor George Henderson, who held the History chair at the University of Adelaide, joined the Board in 1903 that the process was given any method and purpose. Henderson's remarkable talents and energy led, in 1920, to the founding at the library of the first state archives in Australia, a full twenty years before comparable developments in other states.[1] Without Henderson this would not have happened.

The first mention of archival material coming into the library was in October 1867, when the secretary, Robert Kay purchased some documents connected with the early history of the colony from R.G. Symonds for the sum of ten shillings. Exactly what they were is no longer known.[2] Occasionally other material was acquired. For instance, in 1890 Way made a trip to New Zealand and, while there, met Sir George Grey who gave him some letters dating from his South Australian years and Way "handed them over" to the Library.[3] Thomas Gill, who joined the Board in 1896, apart from being the colony's Under Treasurer, was a dedicated amateur historian and antiquarian. An indefatigable bower-bird, Gill found and donated the original 1834 minute book of the South Australian Literary

and Scientific Association in 1900, and he discovered the York Gate Library — an invaluable collection of rare books on travel and discovering — a few years later. Sowden was also an enthusiast whose efforts after six years finally procured some material, including an 1836 charter, from Governor Hindmarsh's descendants in 1906.[4]

Perhaps Sowden's most interesting project was in 1900 when he thought of using the newfangled phonograph to capture the voices of leading public figures for posterity. Lord Tennyson, the state governor, recorded a crackly three minute message on a wax cyclinder, but unfortunately, the experiment was abandoned. This may have been Australia's first venture in the recording of oral history.[5]

But Gill, Way and Sowden were just keen amateurs. Their interest barely extended beyond the collection of icons, symbols of the colony's achievements, rather than real historical sources. Sowden cared more about the voice than what was said. Gill appears to have valued the Literary Association minute book more because it held many famous signatures than anything else. Henderson was different; he was a professional historian.

George Cockburn Henderson, son of an English immigrant coal miner, was born in Newcastle, New South Wales, in 1870. He came to Adelaide to the history chair in 1902, after several years as an extension lecturer at both his universities, Oxford and Sydney. He was a tall, "breezy Australian" whose particular gift was to be able to hold large audiences spellbound while he related the deeds of Drake or Cromwell, or explained the origins of democracy in the Anglo-Saxon moot. Deeply imbued with the dominant liberal idealism of his day, he delighted in the imperial achievements of the British race. In Adelaide he planned to teach about the British in the Pacific, and to write a biography of Sir George Grey, whom he saw as the greatest antipodean empire builder.[6]

When Henderson set out to investigate Grey's work in South Australia, he had great difficulties locating the source material, which, of course, was still with the original owners, all over Adelaide. He had to get special permission to consult Grey's despatches at Government House, material in the cellars of various departments of the public service, and in private hands. Anxious to develop the study of South Australian history in his students, in 1907 Henderson suggested that a £1000 bequest to the University by Sir George Murray be used for a scholarship for history students to do a research year on completion of their ordinary degree. As usual with his initiatives, he was successful, and the scholarship, named in honour of George Tinline, was instituted. Further, the researches of the first five years were to be in South Australian history.[7] Hunting out sources proved just as difficult for the Tinline scholars as it had for Henderson and he began to argue on the Library Board that it should establish an historical records department and negotiate for the systematic transfer of

papers to the library. Previously any manuscript material in the library had merely been bound and treated as a book. His first project, begun in 1906, was to have duplicate copies of all pre-1856 Governors' despatches put in the Library for use by *bona fide* scholars. He succeeded in this in 1912.[8] In 1913, when he was due for study leave in Europe, Henderson secured an honorary commission from the government to investigate and report on the "collection, storage, and preservation" of archives there, and to recommend a course of action for establishing an archives in South Australia.[9]

Thus Henderson's professional need for sources to write his book and for his students to research provided the impetus to convert Way, Gill and Sowden's amateur collecting into a full-blown scheme for a state archives.

In England, Henderson visited C.H. Firth, Regius Professor of History at Oxford and a member of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts. As one of Henderson's favourite subjects was Cromwell, it is very likely that he had attended lectures given by Firth at the University in the 1890s. Firth advised that the Dutch and Belgians had the most efficient archives in Europe — so, after visiting the Public Record Office and British Museum in London, Henderson crossed the Channel to the Hague and Antwerp.[10]

Firth's advice was good; the Antwerp archive provided Henderson with an ideal model. The building, erected in 1906 specifically for archival purposes, was free-standing in a park — fireproof, airy, with large windows, it was of modest dimensions, with a staff of four, keeper, clerk, assistant and servant. Henderson noted the archive's efficiency and cheerfulness, and the methodical way in which the keeper toured his province to collect records regularly from court houses and other public buildings and brought them back to the central repository. Antwerp became the model for Adelaide.[11]

Planned visits to German and Italian archives were cut short by the outbreak of war. Early in 1915, home again, Henderson presented his report, which the Board later described accurately as "a most exhaustive and valuable guide", an opinion the Governor endorsed wholeheartedly.[12]

The eleven-page report recommended that an archives be established for the collection, storage and classification of "all important historical documents that are likely to be of service in the compilation of a history of the state." Initially documents up to 1880 were to be collected from both government and private sources. Henderson saw no use in singling out government papers alone in so small and new a state as South Australia, though this might be done in the distant future. (In Britain the Public Record Office handled government archives and the British Museum private papers.) Material was to be sifted by "experienced men, guided by the advice of an expert", by which, it turned out, he meant himself. He

railed against the tendency for wealthy manuscript libraries, such as the Mitchell in Sydney — part of the Public Library of New South Wales — to outbid the Public Library at auctions of South Australian documents, and he foreshadowed exchange agreements.[13]

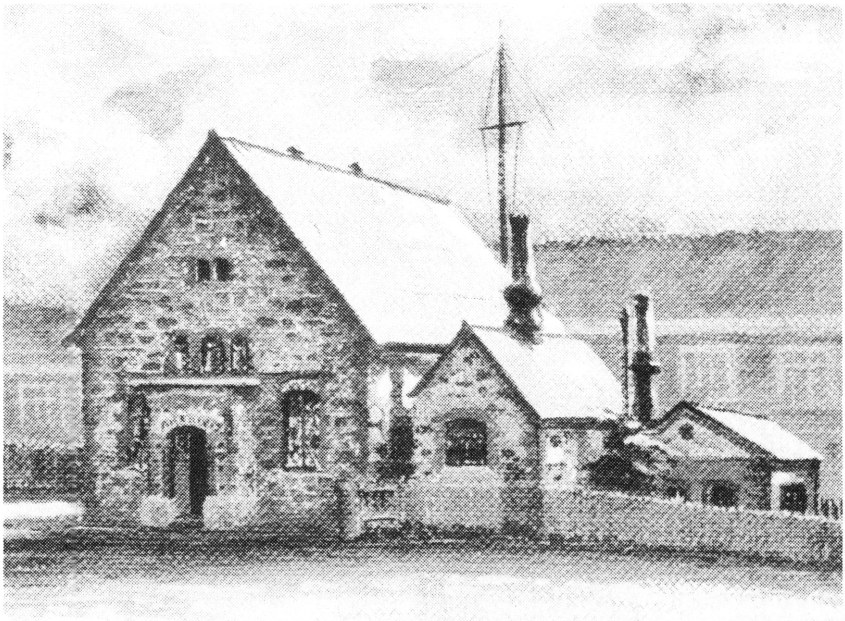
He described the Antwerp building and system in great detail, down to document storage in either cardboard boxes or brown paper covers, in chronological order on steel shelves. There was even a discussion of the relative merits of gauze and tissue paper in repairing documents, and the virtues of vacuum cleaners as against feather dusters in cleaning them.[14]

In a section entitled "A Practicable Scheme for South Australia" he laid out his proposal. As "we are participators in one of the most terrible and extensive wars ever waged in the history of mankind", he argued, "[i]t would be unreasonable under such conditions, to ask the Government to expend upwards of £15000 on a building and fittings". He therefore proposed that "the old church-like structure, built of stone and occupied by the military in the grounds behind the Art Gallery and University" be used. (In fact this was the old ordnance store built in 1867 and never, despite its appearances, used for religious purposes). Apart from the need for more windows and shelving and a fireproof floor, it was ideal. A library officer could arrange the material, the time lost to the library to be made up by appointing an extra cadet. Later, a "properly trained Keeper of Archives" would be required. The archives would be a department of the library under the library committee of the Board. Only *bona fide* scholars with the permission of the Secretary of the Board were to be given access to the material, and all their notes would be submitted for checking as "there are some irresponsible people who are unable to distinguish between history and scandal"; an odd statement for an historian, whose only guideline ought to have been to be as accurate as possible, scandal or not,[15] to make.

The report ended with an appeal.

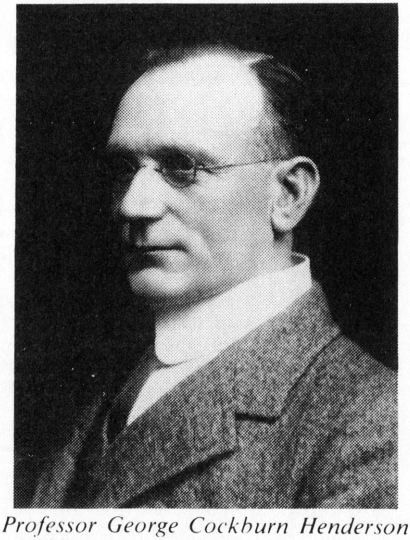
> The truth is that these documents have a value which cannot be measured by money at all. They are the ultimate material on which a study of the country's history is based, and if they are lost they cannot be replaced. To safeguard them and collect them in some central place in the State is a duty which we owe to the world. Even now many students visit here for the purpose of studying our history and institutions, and there will be many more in the future. We ought to be able to place before them such material as we have in the most convenient way. They do that for us; we should do it for them. This in itself is a duty which would more than justify the establishment of a Department of Historical Records in Adelaide, apart altogether from the claims of our own students who are beginning to display a keen interest in the history of their own State, the Commonwealth, and the Empire.[16]

Hence Henderson's vision was for an archives primarily for the use of historians, rather than government bureaucrats or the general public.



The Archives, South Australia
by A. Hay, 1931. [Oil on canvas]
(Courtesy South Australian Archives)

G.H. Pitt in the 1930s.
(Courtesy South Australian Archives)



Professor George Cockburn Henderson
c. 1920 (Courtesy South Australian Archives)

Cabinet approved of Henderson's plan early in 1916, though staff shortages and the wartime use of the building by the army postponed full action until after the Armistice.[17]

In the meantime more material was acquired. Miss Gouger in London donated her father's diaries for 1836 and 1837, Sir Henry Ayer's diaries were received, and B.T. Finniss' papers bought for £75 — all in 1914.[18] Earlier the Boucaut papers and some Sturt and McDouall Stuart diaries had come in.[19] George Pitt, who had been in charge of the Library Catalogue and had been a Henderson history student while he studied for his part-time BA during the war, was sent to Sydney late in 1917 to compile a list of documents relating to South Australia held in the Mitchell Library. Subsequently these were photographed at a cost of £55.[20]

Also in 1917 the library embarked on a programme of publishing Tinline theses, when it was resolved, at Henderson's instigation, to publish a monograph a year on a South Australian historical subject with money from the Morgan Thomas bequest. The first was Wilfrid Oldham's *Land Policy in South Australia, 1830-42* at a cost of £50. Only two more were published before the series was stopped for financial reasons in 1925.[21]

On 1 February 1919 Pitt was appointed archivist and senior cataloguer, and Miss Mabel Hardy BA, another of Henderson's students, assistant archivist. Pitt was to spend half his time in the archives, the other half in the library proper. In June 1919 it was reported that the building was being converted — which meant giving it a fireproof, cement floor and some shelving. The archives opened for business in October 1920.[22]

Access was very strictly controlled. Readers had to have a letter from either the General Secretary of the Board or the Chancellor of the University to say that they were *bona fide* scholars, and even then all their notes were to be vetted by the Secretary and extracts could not be published without his consent.[23] Needless to say, the annual number of visitors was in the tens rather than hundreds.

Pitt recalls that he was 29 when he was appointed, but that a young man was needed for the physical work of crawling into cellars and attics, manhandling bundles and boxes of papers. Clad in blue dungarees, driving a hired dray, he must have been a picturesque sight as he brought the first consignment of early Chief Secretary's papers to the archives in 1920.[24]

Another feature was the collection of photographs of important people and buildings. First suggested in 1914 by the Library's Chief Clerk, Hately Marshall, whose hobby was photographing old buildings, this became part of Pitt's regular work. He would ride his bicycle around Adelaide taking snapshots of old buildings, especially those about to be demolished. A truly impressive collection has resulted.[25]

In 1925 the South Australian parliament passed Australia's first

archives act, based on similar legislation in Britain and the United States. It required government departments to notify the archives a month before of any intention to destroy papers. In that time the archivists were empowered to inspect and, if they wished, take possession of any of the records. A novel feature of the South Australian act was that it enabled government papers which were in private hands to be repossessed for the archives. These powers were important and necessary, though many departments still destroyed material without giving notification, and the archives staff was so small that it could not hope to police it properly.[26]

Pitt's methods of processing material were distinctly unorthodox for an archivist — he simply transferred the techniques of the librarian and historian over to archival work. This may well have been due also to Henderson's influence and the Board's policy of restricted access to the papers. He and Miss Hardy (and later Miss Threadgill) spent many hours meticulously cross-indexing and listing the early governors' despatches and other correspondence. Though these indexes were excellent, and of great use to Henderson's students and visiting scholars, such as Archibald Grenfell Price (who wrote and researched *The Foundation and Settlement of South Australia* in these years), their compilation distracted the archivists from gathering extra material and put them behind in preparing general series lists to that which they had. Sir Mark Oliphant, who worked briefly in the library as a cadet in 1919-20, remembers how Miss Hardy would decipher old documents with the aid of a glass-topped box filled with ammonium sulphide fumes to enhance the faded ink. Another practice Pitt developed was the writing of the research note. These were properly documented answers to questions put to the archives which would then be filed for future reference. Valuable hours were taken up finding answers to such questions as — Where exactly did Hindmarsh land at Holdfast Bay? Where was the site of the Old Port? Who grew the first crop of wheat? Hundreds of these were prepared right up to the 1960s. Nowadays it is thought better, as it was then by orthodox archivists overseas, to tell the inquirer where he might look for the answer rather than do his work for him. Pitt, dedicated and efficient as he was, was not the "trained Keeper of Archives" that Henderson had envisaged, rather he was a librarian and an historian *manqué*. Yet he remained archivist until the end of the second world war and his practices were followed until the 1960s.[27]

Henderson's archives, then, had the limitation that they were designed really as an historical records department of a library, with their contents selected only for historical purposes. Since his day archives have developed more diverse functions: namely to systematically control the government's records so as to make them accessible for any purpose, be it the legal verification of an old boundary by a public servant or lawyer, a precedent established by a fifty year old decision, or the curiosity of the general citizenry about the ship their ancestors arrived in, or the old house in which

they lived. These functions were not fully recognised until after the second world war, though Pitt had thoroughly organised the shipping and immigration lists for public use in the 1930s.

All this aside, however, Henderson's achievement was a magnificent one: to have virtually single-handedly established Australia's first state archives a generation before the other states. It was only his drive that convinced the Board to do the project thoroughly. It has been said that it was the tightly-knit, historically-conscious pioneering families of Adelaide that made this possible. But this is not strictly true; Henderson set to work, secured government papers, and then eventually some of the old families donated or sold their collections to the archives.[29] A measure of Henderson's contribution is that when, in 1923, he retired home to New South Wales through ill-health, the archives lost their champion and fell on poor days. The publications programme stopped. In 1931, when Miss Threadgill left, Pitt soldiered on alone for six years through the depression with only a few volunteers to help. The archives did not recover until the 1950s.[30] Nevertheless, it was a proud beginning.

FOOTNOTES

1. NSW and the Commonwealth had nominal archives before the First World War, but no organised archives. Tasmania appointed a part-time archivist in 1921, and Western Australia an archives board in 1923, but neither had proper premises, a trained full-time archivist, or an act of parliament to control them until the 1940s. NSW, Victoria and Queensland followed in the 1950s. For a summary see J. Balnaves and P. Biskup, *Australian Libraries* (Sydney, 1966), Ch 9. For the first Tasmanian archivist, see *Hobart Mercury*, 18 July 1942.
2. [Library] Bd Mins, 14 Oct 1867, GRG 19/355/4, South Australian Archives.
3. Bd Mins, 18 April 1890, GRG 19/355/11.
4. Library Committee Mins, 10 Jan and 14 Feb 1899, GRG 19/362/2. Bd Mins, 19 Oct 1900, GRG 19/355/13. *Register*, 4 May 1906.
5. Bd Mins, 21 Sept 1900, 15 Nov 1901, 20 Nov 1903, 19 Feb 1904, GRG 19/355/13 and 14. For details see B.S. Baldwin. "The Public Library of South Australia's Oral History Project, 1903-1908", *Archives and Manuscrips*, Vol 6 No 7, 1976, pp 292-302.
6. Marjory R. Casson, *George Cockburn Henderson: A Memoir* Adelaide, 1964.
7. Ibid, p 21.
8. Bd Mins, 17 Nov 1911, 17 May 1912, GRG 19/355/16.
9. Bd Mins, 21 Nov 1913, GRG 19/355/16.
10. G. C. Henderson, "Report on the Collection, Storage and Preservation of Archives in Europe", *South Australian Parliamentary Papers*, No 46 of 1915.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid. Bd Mins, 20 Aug 1915, GRG 19/355/17.
13. G. C. Henderson, op cit.
14. Ibid. The South Australian Archives acquired a vacuum cleaner in 1923.

15. Ibid.
16. Ibid.
17. *Annual Report*. 1917, GRG 19/370.
18. Bd Mins, 20 Feb, 20 March, 17 April 1914, GRG 19/355/16.
19. Bd Mins 19 Feb, 18 March 1904, 8 Feb 1904, GRG 19/355/14.
20. Bd Mins, 21 Dec 1917, 15 Feb, 21 June 1918, GRG 19/355/17.
21. Bd Mins, 15 June, 17 Aug 1917, GRG 19/355/17. The cost of the third was £192. Pitt's "History of the South Australian Financial Crisis of 1841" was due to be published in 1925: it eventually appeared in *South Australiana* Vol XI, No 2, 1972.
22. Bd Mins, 15 Nov 1918. *Advertiser,* 25 June 1919. G. H. Pitt, *The South Australian Archives* Adelaide, 1952, p 4.
23. Bd Mins, 21 June 1912 and 18 June 1920, GRG 19/355/16 and 18. Pitt, *South Australian Archives*, p 4.
24. G. H. Pitt, "An Archivist looks back", *South Australiana*, Vol VI, No 1 1967, pp 7-8.
25. Bd Mins, 20 Feb 1914, GRG 19/355/16. Pitt, *South Australian Archives*, p. 9.
26. Act No 1683 of 1925. Pitt, *South Australian Archives*, pp 6-7.
27. Pitt, "An Archivist looks back", pp 3-14, gives a good description of these activities; G. Fischer, "Archival Development in South Australia", *Australian Library Journal* Vol 18 No 3 April, 1969, pp 69-79, is an informed archivist's criticism of them. Also Sir Mark Oliphant to the author, 20 Jan 1983. Pitt the historian published a number of historical articles in his own right, a chapter in the Royal Geographical Society of Australasia (SA Branch), *Centenary History of South Australia* Adelaide, 1936, and a book *The Press in South Australia,* Adelaide, 1946.
28. Fischer, "Archival Development", op cit.
29. Ibid, p 69.
30. Pitt, "An Archivist looks back", op cit pp 11-12.