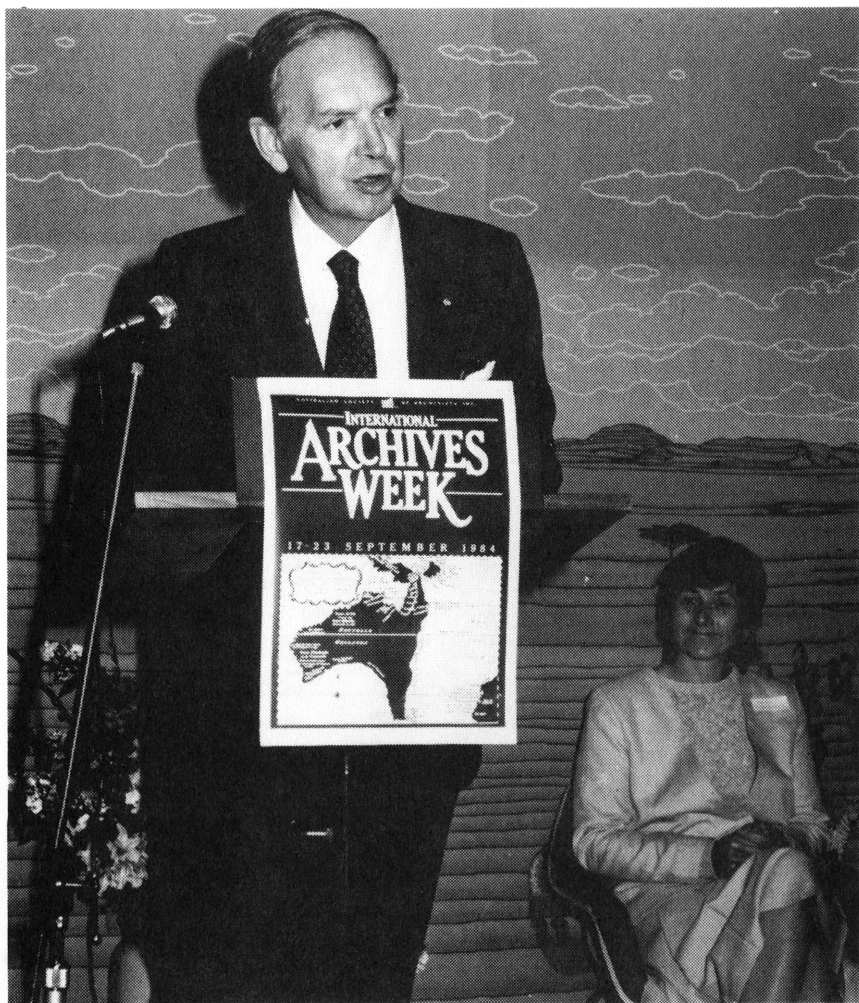


International Archives Week

September 17-24, 1984

In Sydney . . .



The Governor-General, Sir Ninian Stephen, opens the exhibition at the State Archives of New South Wales. Looking on is the President of the Australian Society of Archivists Incorporated, Baiba Berzins.

ADDRESS BY HIS EXCELLENCY THE RIGHT HONOURABLE SIR NINIAN STEPHEN, GOVERNOR-GENERAL OF THE COMMONWEALTH OF AUSTRALIA, ON THE OCCASION OF THE OPENING OF INTERNATIONAL ARCHIVES WEEK IN AUSTRALIA AND EXHIBITION "ARCHIVES: WHAT'S THE USE", AT SYDNEY ON MONDAY, 17 SEPTEMBER 1984

"Archives: What's the Use?" is the provocative question which this Exhibition asks. It reveals, I think, excessive, although very becoming, modesty on the part of archivists. I would myself have suggested a minor amendment, so that it might read "*Without Archives, What's the Use?*". Without archives there would be little verifiable past and mankind would be left with no more than the fleeting present and the unknowable future; yet it is in the past that all the accumulations of human wisdom lie, all the past triumphs and defeats which mankind has experienced and in the light of which lessons can be learned.

If we had no archives, no lasting records of the past, what we do in the passing moment of the present would not only be untutored by experience of the past, it would be dominated by a feeling of futility, by the knowledge that nothing was of lasting worth because, as individual human memory failed, knowledge would likewise die. Which is why it seems to me that the accumulation of archives is what gives much of the meaning to life and much of the significance to civilisation.

I suppose tht we each of us tend to view the world in the light of personal experience. Mine has been in the law, in a legal system with ancient common law origins, a system utterly reliant upon archives in the shape of law reports, recording past disputes and the evolving principles on the basis of which they were resolved by judges in years gone by. Without this specialised form of archival material the law as we know it could not exist.

But of course in this the law is only typical of world society as a whole. All our institutions, languages and cultures are products of influences that stretch back through history. The development of civilisations has depended upon each generation in its turn absorbing and enlarging upon the expanding knowledge of those that have preceded it.

Modern man consciously seeks out the wisdom of other ages — either through contemporary interpretations of what was said and done in the past or by direct recourse to original records that have survived. What transfigured Europe of the Renaissance was the realisation that inspiration might lie in the philosophy and ideas of ancient Rome and Greece, and this in turn prompted a search back through the chaos of the Dark Ages to original sources. Much had been lost during the millenium following the fall of Rome but it was the archivists of Byzantium who over the centuries had preserved enough from classical days to make possible the flowering of the Renaissance.

And down to present day, constant re-examination of the past has continued, involving newly uncovered primary source material or drawing fresh interpretations from existing material. The bane of all historians is that records almost inevitably prove to be to some degree incomplete and are frequently ambiguous about human motives. Yet at the same time there is the challenge which historians relish and which gives them scope for diversity of interpretation.

I suppose that one simple answer to the question “What is the use of Archives?” is that, so long as we have any desire at all for accuracy in the writing of history or any affection for the records which provide tangible links with our past, we need to preserve records for the future. It would be an impoverished future which was denied access to the records of its past.

The fact is, of course, that now, as never before, Australians are eager to learn more of the past, especially their own family's past. Genealogy has become a popular pastime for many, few municipal districts lack their local histories and as we approach our bicentennial year we all become more acutely conscious of the nation's past. So the work of archivists comes more and more to the fore.

Not everything can be retained nor should it be. I believe the estimate is that governments preserve only 5-10% of their records as archives. The selection of records for preservation is therefore, perhaps more aptly described as a selection of records for destruction. Separating the archival wheat from the bureaucratic chaff is obviously a matter of skilled assessment and fine judgement.

Archivists as a profession do not have a high public profile, nor do they seek one for themselves; but for their vital work of preservation they do seek public awareness and understanding. International Archives Week and in particular this Exhibition in Sydney will help draw public attention to the records we have of our nation's past, to the valuable work of those who preserve them and make them available and, above all, to the need for continued preservation under expert, professional guidance.

I take great pleasure in declaring open this Archives Exhibition and, too, International Archives Week in Australia.

... and in Perth



The Western Australian Minister for Arts, Mr Ron Davies (on the right) opened an exhibition at Shenton House, University of Western Australia. Also viewing the exhibition are (from left) Dr A. Ellis, Margaret Medcalf, State Archivist and Robert Sharman, State Librarian.