

The Guide to Collections of Manuscripts relating to Australia: A Progress Report and Future Prospects

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The National Library of Australia commenced compilation of the Union list *Guide to Collections of Manuscripts relating to Australia* in 1964. Twelve instalments, together with indexes, have so far been produced and cumulated in three volumes identified as Series A, B and C. It is disappointing, however, to announce that within its present staffing framework and against the constraints imposed by staff ceilings, the National Library has begun seriously but with reluctance to reconsider the commitment it is able to make to continued production of the *Guide*. From the late 1970s, the Library has faced continuing criticism from the library and archival community for delays in producing the *Guide*. The criticism has been brought into focus at two successive biennial meetings of the Australian Society of Archivists and, more recently, at the LAA/NZLA Conference in Brisbane in August, 1984. A general impression appears to be held that publication of the *Guide* has ceased. There can be little surprise that this view is held since no instalment of the *Guide* has been produced during the past five years.

In one sense the situation is not quite so grim and discouraging as the foregoing paragraph suggests since the National Library at present has four instalments ready for publication. In the period since 1979, the number of entries awaiting publication has accumulated to the extent that it has seemed preferable to issue four instalments at one time, that is one complete volume containing 1200 entries in place of the customary one instalment. This complete volume will be issued as Series D. A major departure from previous practice is that the *Guide* will be produced in microfiche format and will incorporate the entire sixteen instalments compiled since its inception together with a consolidated index to all four

volumes. We believe this changed format and improved index will improve the acceptability of the *Guide* to a greater number of overseas repositories and greatly improve access to the contents of the *Guide* by local users in Australia.

Each series and the index will be identified as a discrete group of fiches to facilitate filing and identification. The obvious advantage that the former loose-leaf arrangement had (i.e. the ready insertion of revised entries) will be reasonably paralleled by the production of a new set of fiches each time sufficient entries in a certain instalment are revised. The greatest number of fiches involved in accomodating an instalment will be six or seven.

When instalment 17 and later instalments are compiled, it is envisaged that each will be issued with an index which will cumulate after four instalments in the customary way. The Library's present plan is that this microfilm edition of the *Guide* will be available in July 1985. Appropriate announcements will be made by the Library by means of its *For Information Sheet* and through *Archives and Manuscripts*, and *Incite* the newsletter of the Library Association of Australia.

Production of the consolidated index for Series A-D has, for a variety of reasons, presented difficulties not the least of which has been created by inadequate ceiling cover in the Australian Studies Branch of the National Library and within the Library as a whole. Editorial work associated with compilation of the *Guide* has always been carried out within the Manuscript Section of the Library and has always been balanced against the daily demands of a working archives: collection development, processing and the provision of service. Traditionally the Library has communicated with contributors by mail or telephone though early in the history of the *Guide* a meeting of contributors developed the working guidelines which continue to operate. In 1982, the National Library proposed to a meeting of librarians and archivists held in Canberra that a small advisory editorial panel might be established. While agreement was reached in support of this proposal and a Committee appointed, no meeting of this group has been convened, largely because of the continuing difficulties which the Library has experienced in finalising production of Series D together with the consolidated index. For the record, however, it is important to note that members of the editorial group were consulted about the proposal to produce the *Guide* in the microfiche format.

The National Library recognises with regret that the service it has offered to the library and archival community, and to the wider community of scholars, in producing the *Guide* has declined to the point where questions must be asked about its future direction. Should the Library continue to produce the *Guide* on its own, should the task be shared by a consortium of libraries and/or archival repositories or should the function be absorbed by the Australian Archives, assuming that plans for a National Register of Archives is to proceed as a major responsibility of that institution?

With these questions in mind, the National Library arranged that a discussion paper on the *Guide* should be presented at the National Archival Forum which was held at the Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University in November 1984. It will be recalled that this Forum was brought together to consider the establishment of a formal consultative machinery to cater for the needs of archival agencies and related bodies in Australia in the same general way in which the library community has been served by the Australian Advisory Council on Bibliographical Services. In the paper presented to this gathering, the National Library essayed the principal difficulties which have slowed production of the *Guide*. The paper also noted that the question of the future of the *Guide* must assume a greater significance in the light of the proclamation during 1984 of the *Archives Act 1983* which provides *inter alia* for the Australian Archives to '... maintain a register to be known as the Australian National Register of Archives'. Although the precise form and content of this Register has not been defined, the *Archives Act 1983* foreshadows the possibility that it may contain particulars of current Commonwealth records, material in State archives, including private archives and other archival resources relating to Australia. In developing the Register the Australian Archives is encouraged by its Act to seek the co-operation of the owners and custodians of material in State archives and other archives. Such a Register if developed to its full potential, would clearly subsume the *Guide* in its present form.

In fact, however, no clear indication was provided to the National Forum by the Australian Archives concerning its long-term plans for the National Register. The Register is currently only in the early developmental phase and it is clear that the Archives still has some considerable distance to go before it is in a position to assume responsibility for a wider listing of archival holdings in Australian collections. In any case the Archives will, as a matter of course, be concerned to give its first priority to official Commonwealth records. In the short-term it is obviously desirable that the National Library should maintain its commitment to production of the *Guide* though the Library will, increasingly, be looking to the archival community for advice and direction concerning the union list of holdings.

It is important, in the National Library's view, that a national archival consultative body, if established, should seek to develop a greater degree of institutional awareness of the issues surrounding the *Guide* as we know it at present and the proposed National Register. It is essential that the consultative body in whatever form it begins to operate will develop a point of view on the *Guide* and on a National Register, and it is desirable that Australian repositories are given at some date a clear understanding of the longer-term aspirations of the Australian Archives in relation to a wider listing of material, both official and private, held in various repositories. In the interim period, however, the National Library accepts the consensus

expressed by the A.N.U. meeting that it should continue to take responsibility for the production of the *Guide to Collections* basically in the form we know it at present. Indeed — and it is encouraging to report this — the meeting placed on record a motion calling for the National Library to be provided with sufficient resources to continue work on the *Guide* until such time as the Australian Archives can include non-government records in the proposed National Register.

Until the longer-term future of the *Guide* is decided, the National Library is pleased to solicit contributions. Repositories are warmly encouraged to continue with the preparation of entries and to submit these for publication in future instalments of the *Guide*. Entries should be addressed to the following:

Chief Manuscripts Librarian
National Library of Australia
Parkes Place
CANBERRA, A.C.T. 2601.

A number of entries are already in hand and it is intended that these should form the basis of the first instalment of a projected Series E, preparation of which will commence with the finalisation of all outstanding work on Series D and the production of the consolidated index to the existing Series.

The long saga of the difficulties involved with production of the *Guide to Collections* says much about the greater difficulties which beset libraries and archives in carrying out their work on the community's behalf. In the lead-up to the Australian Bicentennial celebrations in 1988, it is to be regretted that no schemes have been developed to improve the lot of those agencies which have the responsibility to collect, preserve and safeguard the corporate memory and which are being called upon to produce the documentation which will give the appropriate historical dimension to celebrations which will mark two centuries of European settlement in Australia.