

# Thirty Years of Archives and Manuscripts

**Fools rush in ...**

**H.J. Gibbney and A. Horton**



Allan Horton



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The archival profession in Australia owes a great deal to the late Dr Ted Schellenberg, sometime archivist of the United States. Indeed, while an Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia was formally constituted in 1951, the seminars in which he participated in Canberra during July 1954 may well be regarded as the point from which all real development of an archival profession in Australia should be dated. Gibbney, who managed the Sydney branch of the Commonwealth National Library's Archives Division and Horton, who had been appointed to take charge of the state archives of New South Wales were already on professionally friendly terms and were prone to vanish from time to time into obscure corners of what is now the State Library building for cups of tea and long discussions of archival problems. When the Schellenberg seminars were announced, they agreed that, in view of the really abysmal state of their knowledge of things archival, it would be a good idea to participate as actively as possible in the hope of learning something. As it turned out Horton had no choice for, given the protocol conscious nature of the Commonwealth, discussion of every topic on the

agenda was opened by the delegation from the senior state, New South Wales.

The seminars were held in what later became the reading room of the Australian Archives building at Barton in Canberra, a long rather dismal room in a decidedly dismal building composed chiefly of recycled service Nissen huts. The meetings were generally chaired by Ian Maclean of the Archives Division who spaced his comments with intermittent but ineffectual attempts to light his pipe, with Schellénberg sitting monumentally alongside him ready to intervene whenever it seemed necessary. The word monumentally is used advisedly because Schellenberg was a very large man indeed with a long face which was usually about as wooden as that of the traditional 'cigar store Indian'. On the rare occasions when he smiled, the whole scene changed and you became aware that he really was quite an unusual man. Mollie Lukis, who had been in charge of the Western Australian state archives, which were also within a state Library, for some ten years and who had met Schellenberg when he visited WA in May, described him thus:

Personally, I found him great fun when I got to know him which I managed to do quite quickly. He has a very good sense of humour, will pull your leg if you let him and one can say almost anything to him. He is very quick and shrewd at summing up a situation in any particular department and I was amazed to find out how much he had noticed in somewhere he did not spend much time or appear to take much interest.<sup>1</sup>

The participants in the seminar were a mixed bunch. Maclean, in the intense mid-thirties, chaired most of the sessions with the aid of his large curved pipe. Gibbney, in his early thirties talked, probably far too much, on the theory that one learns from making mistakes. Horton, who was 25 and believed himself to be the tyro of the bunch, had his role as opening bat which he exploited to the full.

Mollie Lukis, who was the doyenne of the group, was admired by all for her very pleasant personality and because she had practised the profession with more or less success for the longest period. Sharman and Eldershaw, the Tasmanian team, arrived rather late and proved to be an intriguing combination of the large, fair and robust and the small, dark and crippled. Both spoke little but obviously had a good deal of experience to contribute. Pat Ingham, who had just commenced work in the state archives of Victoria, was very reserved and unsure of herself. John McLellan, an older man from South Australia, never quite fitted into the group and frequently seemed rather at sea, perhaps because of his responsibilities to that date related to small early collections rather than the massive record groups with which the others had to wrestle. Others present included Keith Penney and Stuart Broadhead from the Commonwealth, Keith Mackenzie, who was just opening an Adelaide office for the Commonwealth as clerk-in-charge, and Dorothy Crozier who had recently begun work in Fiji.

Although the published proceedings of the seminar seem perhaps unduly pretentious in the light of the fairly elementary discussion recorded, the seminars were a remarkable success mainly because they stimulated a rapport among the participants much of which still exists thirty years later. They also represented the first occasion on which members of the group had met together. All of those present were more or less resentful of the complete subjugation to the library profession which was then the general thing and before the group broke up, an agreement was made, principally through Schellenberg's influence, that the archivists of Australia would launch two co-operative projects. The first, a guide to the pre-federation archives of Australia was really a disaster. The second was the launching of a professional journal.

Although everybody agreed at the time that the pre-federation guide was a good idea, nobody had really given sufficient thought to what was entailed. Maclean spent a good deal of time in discussing central editing by Mr Laurie Fitzhardinge and Professor Robert Parker of the Australian National University, both of whom happily agreed to participate. Unfortunately, that was about the end of it. People who worked in state offices staffed by one or two people had primary and urgent responsibilities in reference and disposal work. This really precluded any attention to the older records and almost nothing was actually done. The total end result of the scheme was two good inventories from Tasmania and one which was much less satisfactory from Western Australia. Queensland had no archivist until much later. Victoria lost Pat Ingham to matrimony shortly after and her successor had not been inspired. Horton had such a massive record administration job on his hands in New South Wales that any work on 19th century records was out of the question. His aim was to gain simple series control over material already in custody. His focus was on the state rather than the national level. This strategy was to lead ultimately to quite a good level of inventory control over some of the most important pre-Federation records. In South Australia, McLellan continued to be drowned in the continuous flood of reference work generated by the publicity which had always been a feature of his institution's policy.

The journal had modest beginnings.

Gibney and Horton, who remained in close touch with each other, volunteered to undertake its management and started work soon after their return to Sydney. The first issue, which appeared at the beginning of October 1954 under the resounding title *Bulletin for Australian Archivists* was very much an 'in house' production. Having been instructed by Maclean to swot up the literature on a particular subject for the seminars, Gibney was easily able to knock out a learned article entitled 'A Discussion of some of the problems raised by the Miscellany series' which at least sounded like a professional introduction to the venture, while Horton contributed some of his current office worries in 'Is record culling desirable?'. The issue was filled out by an article from Bob Sharman in

Tasmania on 'Criteria for second selection in Tasmania' and a plug by Dr Alan Birch, the economic historian from Sydney University, for his new Business Archives Council. The odd remaining pages were filled up with an attempt to start a professional bibliography.

Gibbney apparently provided the 9/6d which was required to fund the whole issue<sup>2</sup>. The stencils were probably cut by his very efficient typist June Pople in their sleazy office on the third floor of the now demolished Ocean House in Martin Place, and the copies were probably made on somebody's duplicating machine by underground influence. They were probably posted to those on the very limited circulation list as official mail. The response was enthusiastic. The first letter to arrive was written by Ian Maclean on 7 October<sup>3</sup>. He thought it a 'bloody good show' and 'just the shot'. He promised a contribution, 'in a little time', on all the appraisal and selection aspects, approved of the name, pointed out the absence of numbering and dating (which Gibbney had simply forgotten) and insisted that the names of the editors should appear. He saw some possibility that the *Bulletin* might eventually secure official funding but suggested a request for donations in the meantime and enclosed his own contribution of £1.

M.W. Standish, the recently appointed archivist of New Zealand to whom a copy had been sent, had 'read it with great interest', offered a subscription without being asked, sought another for a colleague, F.H. Rogers, and agreed happily to write for the next issue<sup>4</sup>. Gibbney had apparently expressed some doubts about the form to Mollie Lukis, who reassured him that it was quite satisfactory. 'It is the content, after all, which matters to us at present.' She was unable to accept the idea which had been launched, of a rotating management because duplicating in Perth was always a problem but insisted that there had to be a proper financial arrangement so that the burden did not fall on any one individual or group. Finally, she suggested that if material was needed for the next issue, she might contribute draft regulations on which she had been working<sup>5</sup>. When similar letters had arrived from Victoria, Tasmania and South Australia, the editors were able to sit back with a relaxed expression and tell themselves, 'Well, we've got a journal'.

In September 1954, Sydney University imported Australia's first fully trained professional archivist, trained by and later employed in the General Register Office at Edinburgh. David S. McMillan's arrival was an exciting event for all those in the Australian profession who became aware of it and, as the senior professional in Sydney, Gibbney wrote him a formal note of welcome, arranged to meet him at a meeting of the Sydney University Historical Society and later arranged to have lunch with him and Horton. Probably late in the year, the Commonwealth Bank appointed its first archivist, Jack Kirkwood. He was promptly seized as a professional colleague and was able to bring the first trace of financial sense to the management of the *Bulletin*<sup>6</sup>.

For Gibbney, the next few months were a whirl of violent activity in which he managed the first archival surveys of the Australian Broadcasting Commission, both in Sydney and Melbourne, was instructed to transfer himself from Sydney to Canberra, got married and prepared for a visit to Papua New Guinea early in 1955. The second issue of the *Bulletin*, which appeared in March 1955, was probably due mainly to Horton. It included McMillan on Public Records in Scotland, Eldershaw on accessions procedure in Tasmania and Standing from New Zealand with 'What the research worker requires from an inventory'. The only evidence of its reception in the archives is a letter from Mollie Lukis in April<sup>7</sup>. She congratulated the editors, was specially interested in the Eldershaw article but had mixed feelings about a suggestion that the infant might be exposed to the big wide world in a more pretentious form. She wanted to see it established on a sound basis before trying to do anything too ambitious and was worried about the likelihood of it failing altogether if much more was added to it.

Gibbney returned to Canberra in February 1955 and in March, sailed for Port Moresby in the *S.S. Bulolo*. In his absence the fate of the *Bulletin for Australian Archivists* was decided at a meeting of the Archives Section during the Conference of the Library Association of Australia. Gibbney has located a surviving set in the papers of L.F. Fitzhardinge in the Archives of Business and Labour at the Australian National University. The first issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*, the journal of the archives section of the Library Association of Australia Vol. I No. 1 November 1955 edited by Phyllis Mander-Jones and Allan Horton included a roll of members and was transferred to the new Australian Society of Archivists when it was formed.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. Lukis to Gibbney, 13 May 1954, NLA MSs.
2. Kirkwood to Gibbney, 22 February 1955.
3. Maclean to Gibbney, 7 October 1954.
4. Standish to Horton, 29 October 1954.
5. Lukis to Gibbney, 4 November 1954.
6. Kirkwood to Gibbney, 22 February 1955.
7. Lukis to Horton, 29 April 1955.