

... where angels fear to tread

Jim Gibbney

When I went to New Guinea for the archival survey of 1955, I took a new wife with me and, after our return in April, we moved to Canberra. Before I left Canberra in 1952, I had speculatively placed my name on the government housing list (a practice now forbidden) and, after returning from New Guinea, we only had a month of hostel life before moving into our new home. I earned my modest salary as

the only senior archivist in the archives division of the Commonwealth National Library. The division was housed in a remarkable temporary building consisting of a number of brick offices, attached, like the vertical stroke of a letter E, to three recycled service Nissen huts. Known sometimes as 'the tunnels', it was neither a beautiful nor a particularly comfortable building but it was an effective repository and we were able to take in and process a lot of records. It was demolished during the building of the National Gallery as part of the site improvements.

The only member of staff with more than five years experience was the chief archives officer, Ian Maclean. As a senior man with three years experience, I was given the task of training the three graduates referred to on page 22 of *Archives and Manuscripts* number 1. As all of them held academic qualifications higher than my own, it was an assignment calculated to distract any young editor. Ken Thompson left the profession soon afterwards. Ian Diamond and Keith Penny both went on to distinguished professional careers. Frank Strahan, now archivist of Melbourne University, was not mentioned in the journal note because he was only with the group briefly.

Re-reading those early issues of the journal after probably 25 years, I really must confess that I don't think that I did the job particularly well and, since I have only quite hazy memories of the period, I can't offer any very clear explanation. The friendships which I had made during the Schellenberg seminars were still quite strong and I was corresponding regularly with a number of people in state institutions. Clearly, much of the matter in the early issues came to me in letters from Alan Horton, Mollie Lukis and Bob Sharman. Being emotionally committed to the cause of an independent archival profession, free from domination by librarians, I was disappointed when Horton made a pragmatic decision to return to the



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library profession and we eventually lost contact. In the cooler light of advancing years, I believe that he probably made the right decision.

The visit of Pam Cocks of the New Zealand National Archives, referred to on page eight of number 2 remains in my memory, probably because we were all intensely curious about the situation in the rest of the world and particularly in a country where the archival profession was independent. I remember the lady herself only as being large and rather talkative. The review article on Schellenberg's *Modern Archives* in number 3 is something of a mystery. To me the article does not look like either my own work or Maclean's but I can't think of anybody else who would have referred in that knowledgeable way to Brenneke's *Archivkunde*. The lack of a signature which would provide historical proof seems to be a good reason for censuring the editor. The long article by Maclean in the same issue is almost certainly an early version of something which he was engaged in dreaming up for the training course for departmental registrars referred to in number 5. The article in number 6 about German New Guinea archives reflects my own excitement and subsequent conversations with Miss Jacobs about some German archives which had been discovered in one of the National Library's stores.

The absence of any volume numbering on number 4 is probably due to the fact that I had to rely on a series of faceless and more or less incompetent typists and was always far too polite to insist on the correction of an error. On the other hand, it might have been due, either to my own continuing incompetence as a proof reader or to some forgotten office crisis. By 1957, the archives division was entering a long traumatic period in which morale was low and quarrels were frequent. Maclean's departure for Europe and the course for departmental registrars reported in number 5 marked the beginning of a period in which my own problems and responsibilities increased rapidly. Being distracted at the same time by the usual difficulties associated with rearing a young family, I was only too glad to hand the whole thing over to Bob Sharman.

As a professional historian, I have always deplored the word 'pioneer' but I suppose I would have to be described as a pioneer in that I actually got *Archives and Manuscripts* started. Its subsequent long career and increasing standards have never ceased to amaze me. I claim no credit.