

Ten Years of the Australian Society of Archivists

In Retrospect

Michael Saclier

Oh Lord! She wants a retrospective piece. What on earth can I remember after ten, indeed twelve years. It may even be more than that. Pause while I go and grab the file of *Archives and Manuscripts*. Back again — no, it was, in fact almost exactly twelve years (at the time of writing) since I received a circular from Robert Sharman — then editor of *Archives and Manuscripts* — laying down the gauntlet to the profession to either start providing the necessary articles to fill the journal or to find another editor.

In response to this I wrote a letter to the editor which was published in the August 1973 issue of the journal. In essence it called for the formation of a professional association of archivists in Australia to replace the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia which had done little for many years except (and misunderstand me not, it was a very large exception) to publish *Archives and Manuscripts*.

The timing was opportune. The LAA conference was to be held in Perth in September. At the meeting of the Archives Section — or more accurately, at an informal gathering following that meeting, a steering committee was set up to investigate the feasibility of forming an association of archivists. That committee consisted of myself as convenor, Gerald Fischer, Pat Quinn, John Cross and Christopher Hurley. With the help of corresponding members in all State capitals we were able to explore the options and eventually call the meeting in Canberra in 1975 which adopted the first set of Rules and saw the ASA on its way. In September of that year the LAA conference in Melbourne saw the Archives Section meeting recommend to the LAA Council that it be wound up and that *Archives and Manuscripts* be handed over to the newly formed ASA.

Looking back on that two year period, it was clearly a time of ferment in matters relating to archives. It was clearly the right time to form a Society — that much was evident once the first steps were taken. It might also be

remembered that other things were happening too. The historians (to oversimplify outrageously) got out of ANZAAS and set up the Australian Historical Association. The heritage bandwagon was beginning to roll and the conservation industry was beginning to get its act together. A few days before the LAA conference in Perth in 1973 a seminar on conservation was held which resulted in the formation of the ICCM. And some of us in Perth for these meetings had to hurry back to attend the meetings held in conjunction with the visit of Dr Kaye Lamb to report on the Australian Archives.

Professional training also developed during this period. The old archival options in the Diploma of Librarianship at the University of NSW were expanded to form the first Diploma Archives Administration course and, although the transformation may have been a little shaky at first it continued to evolve — for which let us be truly thankful. A little later the Canberra College of Advanced Education began the process of introducing its courses in materials conservation.

All-in-all that period from 1973 to 1975 may be seen as a very important period for archives and archivists in Australia. The ensuing decade had its share of gains and losses. There was the agonising slowness of the *Archives Act* to come into being, although the physical circumstances of the Australian Archives improved by leaps and bounds. There were the ups and downs of the ASA itself.

In that respect, perhaps the most ironical aspect of the whole process of starting the Society and watching it grow was the fact that, contrary to the experience in Great Britain, where the Society of Archivists was begun as a society for local government archivists which was (in sense and much to the chagrin of some) 'taken over' by the Public Record Office, the greatest difficulty was experienced in involving the Australian Archives people in the infant Society. I gather that this problem has even now not been overcome entirely — only a relatively small percentage of those eligible for professional membership within the Australian Archives do in fact belong to the Society.

Nevertheless, the Society has grown, and without doubt it represents a major part in the professional life of its members and influences many outside its ranks, willy nilly. And, despite the wrong-headedness of those with the clerk mentality (a little gratuitous tail twisting can be excused, I hope, since those referred to won't read it anyway) the major benefit which we hoped for in instigating the Society — the fostering and development of a professional identity amongst archivists — is no doubt a reality.

My friend John Cross has a turn of phrase which is legendary. I well remember the first meeting of the Steering Committee at the Bank of NSW (at which, because Pat Quinn was a lady, the tea ladies produced sponge cake, but that is a red herring) when John defined a profession as a group of people banded together for personal gain and able to maintain a monopoly

by preventing others from practising their trade. Archivists, unlike doctors and lawyers, can't do that, but looking back over the intervening decade, I can maintain with conviction that archivists today are professionally more self-aware, more sophisticated and better informed than they were. There is much more interchange between archivists and between archives. In short I believe that there has been an improvement in the profession and its environment which is greater than can be explained by simple developmental inflation. A substantial part of that increase in real value can, I believe, be laid at the door of the ASA. For that reason alone I am very proud to have been associated with its beginnings.

Finally, I am conscious of the fact that this piece will appear in an issue of *Archives and Manuscripts* which is to commemorate not only the tenth year of the ASA but also the thirtieth year of publication of the journal. I would like to take this opportunity to say a personal but public word of thanks to all those people who have, over the past thirty years, laboured to produce *Archives and Manuscripts*.

Thank you editors—Jim Gibbney ('retired!' In Canberra), Allan Horton (one issue while Jim was away), Bob Sharman (ten years on from his retirement after sixteen years as editor, still The Man in the west), Andrew Lemon (the Society's first editor), Baiba Berzins, John Thompson, Don Brech, and Nancy Lutton. To these who, despite apathy, the vicissitudes of the post, the iniquities of printers, and all the rest, have nurtured Australia's archival journal for my benefit and that of all my colleagues, thanks. Thank you too, to the nameless ones who addressed envelopes and sealed them and carted them to the post office. Sometimes there were few enough of you indeed, but you too deserve our thanks.

Well done. Happy Birthday.

Thoughts About the Next Decade

Baiba Berzins

Michael Saclier and I were both History Honours students at Sydney University in 1964. We little thought that, in 20 years' time, we would both be contributing our thoughts about the past and future of a Society (non-existent, then) for a profession which, in those days, was hidden in subterranean rooms, Nissen huts, or similarly sub-standard accommodation.

Michael's path into the profession was much more direct than mine: he did an Honours thesis on Australian history and went straight into archives administration after leaving the hallowed institution on the hill above Broadway. He knew what most Australians, including me, did not: that there *was* such a profession. It took me about ten years of being a typist, researcher, post-graduate student and university tutor not only to realise