

The Canberra Conference On Commonwealth And State Archives — 1949

Mollie Lukis*

When asked to write about Phyllis Mander-Jones as archivist I felt someone who had had closer contact with her in New South Wales would do this more adequately, but I did suggest I might contribute a short account of the occasion of our first meeting. It was a significant occasion in the history of the development of archival work in Australia and it was also an occasion when Phyllis took an active part in the proceedings.

In July 1948 Mr (later Sir) Paul Hasluck, then working as Official War Historian, proposed to the Commonwealth Archives Committee, of which he was a member, that a recommendation be made to the Prime Minister that State Premiers be approached suggesting that a Conference should be called of Commonwealth and State authorities concerned with archives to discuss archival matters of mutual interest.

In September 1948 the Prime Minister wrote to each State Premier as suggested, the Premiers agreed to the proposal and it was decided that the Conference should be held in conjunction with an already planned meeting of Commonwealth and State Librarians in Canberra on 20 and 21 June 1949. A tentative agenda, to which the States were invited to contribute, was drawn up by the Commonwealth Archives Committee and it was proposed that each State and the Commonwealth should circulate in advance a report on the present organisation of its archival system and the authority under which it was operating.

When the meeting was convened on 20 June, under the chairmanship of Dr C.E.W. Bean, Chairman of the Commonwealth Archives Committee, all States were represented by their State Librarians and the Commonwealth by the National Librarian. Also attending were the archivists of South Australia, Victoria and Western Australia, with the Mitchell Librarian Miss Mander-Jones and the archives officers from the National Library and the Australian War Memorial. New South Wales, Queensland and Tasmania at that time had made no formal appointment of a state archivist. The Director of the Australian War Memorial and two Trustees of the Public Library of New South Wales were also present.

* Mollie Lukis, former Western Australian State Archivist and Librarian, Battye Library.

Items on the agenda were discussed briefly and then referred to a Working Committee consisting of Dr Bean as chairman, with Messrs I. Maclean and W.E.E. Perry representing the Commonwealth, Miss P. Mander-Jones — New South Wales, Miss R. McGowan — Victoria, Mr J. McLellan — South Australia, and Miss M. Lukis — Western Australia. This Working Committee met in two sessions, on the afternoon of 20 June and the morning of 21 June, managing to cover all the items on the agenda. Phyllis Mander-Jones, as one of the most experienced people present, made an important contribution to the discussions and I remember — being very new in the field myself — being most impressed and somewhat in awe of her. I was even more impressed, when the whole Conference resumed, to see her take on, where she disagreed with their views, some of the leading librarians of the day. Though always tactful and strictly correct in her attitude, she did not hesitate to make her opinion known.

Some of the Working Committee's recommendations were adopted after brief discussion — others were more contentious and were either adopted in part only or changed considerably. Difficulties arose particularly in connection with proposals for archival training and the suggested formation of a records association which through membership of the then newly formed International Council on Archives could link Australian archivists with their colleagues overseas. Both of these matters impinged on the interests of the Australian Institute of Librarians (about to be re-constituted as the Library Association of Australia) which were strongly supported by the majority of Conference member. Miss Mander-Jones, however, supported the views of the Working Committee and outlined the difficulties in archival training in Australia. She believed that to become efficient archivists Australians should study abroad — in the United States of America rather than Great Britain — because the Americans, while retaining the historical outlook, placed more emphasis on administrative requirements than did the British at that time. As she had recently returned from overseas, she reported at length on the Conference sponsored by UNESCO which she attended in Paris at which the International Council on Archives was formed. She pointed out the advantages of forming an archival association in Australia to include all workers among archives, such as records officers in government departments. Such an association could appoint delegates to represent Australia at meetings of the International Council on Archives, could disseminate information on archival matters which would be of great assistance to those in the field throughout the country and could lead to work in Australian archives being carried out with a greater number of interested people.

The majority of Conference members did not support her suggestion as the constitution of the proposed Library Association of Australia provided sections for special librarians which could include archivists and it was resolved that a records association could be constituted as a section of the new library association.

It was a number of years before the archival profession finally gained independence, but one resolution which did much to set it on its way came from the Conference. The motion, passed unanimously, was;

That the Commonwealth Government be asked to include in its proposals to the U.S. Government for the use of Fullbright funds under Lend-Lease in Australia one invitation for a visit to Australia by a prominent U.S. authority on archival administration and training, his services to be available to the Commonwealth or State Governments for advice on such aspects of archival administration and training as they desire, and possibly to give short courses of training whilst here.¹

As a result, Dr T.R.Schellenberg, Assistant Archivist of the United States of America, came to Australia in 1954. He conducted seminars on Archives Management and Record Management in Canberra which were attended by representatives of the Commonwealth and most States and also visited the States. Apart from its impact on the archival profession, his visit, in many cases, brought the importance of archives management to the attention, for the first time, of administrators and the community at large.

Although she was no longer actively connected with State Archives in New South Wales, no-one, I am sure, would have appreciated more the repercussions of this visit than did Phyllis Mander-Jones.

FOOTNOTES

1. Report of Conference on Commonwealth and State Archives, Parliament House Canberra, ACT, 20-21 June 1949. p.18. Duplicated typescript. J.S. Battye Library of West Australian History, unprocessed, R108.