

# John Love and the Public Record Office of South Australia

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*The establishment on 1 October 1985 of a non-library attached Public Record Office of South Australia, and the thinking behind the forthcoming new archives legislation in that state, are seen in the light of John Love's term of office from 1969 to 1985 and the persistent succession of carefully reasoned reports and submissions, which he referred to as his 'prognostications'.*

From today, October 1st (1985), the Public Records Office is constituted a separate division of the Department of Local Government.<sup>1</sup>

So read, in part, a memorandum from the controlling Department to which the office for central (as well as local) public records is rather curiously assigned.

Since the Principal Archivist departed for another Department, three days after this achievement to devote himself to research connected with South Australia's forthcoming sesquicentenary, it is doubly appropriate to sum up at this point the reshaping of the state archives, for which the credit is his.

When John Love wrote the entry on the South Australian Archives for the 1983 edition of the *Australian Encyclopaedia* he jokingly remarked that the Grolier Society had chosen an inconvenient time to revise it 'because we are in the process of revision ourselves'.<sup>2</sup> Succinct as always, he summed up the position in two paragraphs:

The South Australian Archives was established in 1920. An act of 1925 (embodied, with modifications, in the Libraries Act 1982) prohibited the destruction of Government records without the approval of the Libraries Board of South Australia, and empowered the Board to take records into its custody. The legislation also provided for the recovery of Government documents in the hands of unauthorised persons.

In 1982 plans were in hand for complete overhaul of the archives legislation, separation of Government archives from the State Library of South Australia and the establishment within the State Library of a specialist South Australian collection encompassing published works and business, society and personal records.<sup>3</sup>

Cloaked in the brief second paragraph are nearly a decade and a half of astute administration and planning by the Principal Archivist. The forthcoming legislation (which, like the Commonwealth Archives Act of 1983 might still have a protracted journey to the statute book) and the establishment of a Public Record Office independent of the State Library (which is now a fact) are John Love's achievements. They crown his term of office, from 1969 to 1985, with a distinction that stands up well alongside that of his dedicated predecessors — G.H.Pitt, 1919-46; J.McLellan, 1946-60; G.L.Fischer, 1960-68.

The wheel has in a sense come full circle, for the South Australian Archives began in 1920 as a Department more or less equal to the Public Library, the Museum and the Art Gallery. In 1961 a forceful Principal Librarian took it more directly under the wing of the Library. The practice became accepted that reports to the Libraries Board should be channelled through him. From October 1985 this has been reversed. The Public Record Office reports directly to, for the moment, the Libraries Board, eventually to a Council or Trustees that may be established by the new Act.

While the Archives was part of the State Library John Love's aptitude for efficient administration led to his energies being directed to wider fields than the Archives itself. For two and a half years, between November 1976 and July 1979, he held the position of Assistant State Librarian, acting also for considerable periods as State Librarian. He is the State Librarian's nominee on the South Australian Geographical Names Board.

His first prognostication — a word he uses — for the Archives' future took the form of a fifteen-page report to the Committee of Enquiry into the Libraries Department in December 1969.<sup>4</sup> In this he mapped out the direction in which he was to lead the Archives. Paying tribute to the achievements in records management of his predecessor, G.L. Fischer, 'who has sought to build up good relations with other departments, aiming at mutual assistance,' he put forward the arguments for comprehensive disposal schedules and an intermediate records centre. From his experience on secondment to the British Public Record Office in the previous year he explained also the need for the Archives to begin a programme of conservation, initially with at least one craftsman of its own. (In 1980, in comments on the South Australian Museum Study, he lent his support to the concept, since realised, of a joint conservation centre to serve the Archives, Library, Art Gallery, Museum and History Trust.<sup>5</sup>) He called for the reorganisation of the Archives into 'sections specialising in records management, permanent archives and non-government records, and the

ultimate separation of the government archives from the Libraries Department.'

'The South Australian Archives,' he wrote, 'began as a more or less autonomous unit under the Public Library, Museum and Art Gallery Board. It has since become a section of the State Library. The other archives institutions in Australia began as sections of libraries. The action of the Commonwealth and New South Wales governments in establishing separate archives offices therefore seems to be a new departure, but is in fact an alignment with general overseas practice. There are many libraries with collections of private manuscripts, but for a library to administer government records is exceptional.' He required a 'reorganisation of the State Archives as a separate institution in order to enable it to do justice to its administrative duties'.

Characteristically, he was careful not to be too precipitate, particularly as far as new legislation was concerned: 'It may prove wise to delay the framing of new legislation until some further experience has been gained in records management and related affairs.'

These ideas, with elaborations, were to reappear in a whole series of reports and submissions that he wrote between 1969 and 1981 (in which year the go-ahead was finally given). In a submission to the Committee of Enquiry into the Public Service of South Australia (the Corbett Committee) in 1973 his views had gained force:

It seems to me that the Government ought to assume direct responsibility through a State Archivist who would be answerable to an appropriate Minister for the administration of the State Records Office.<sup>6</sup>

He went on to examine the role of the Libraries Board at the time:

Under the present Act the Government vests control of some of the activities of all departments in a Board which is more or less free to shape its own policies. This rather anomalous situation has occurred because of the general assumption in 1925 that the Board would be solely concerned with the historical value of obsolete records. In the past few years, when the Libraries Board has overruled the Archivist's recommendations as to disposal of public documents, its decisions generally seem to have been based on concern for protecting the rights of individuals — legal rather than historical grounds. There is nothing to say that the Board may not do this, and in fact such decisions indicate the archivist's need for advice on matters in which he is not specially trained. Nevertheless the Libraries Board is not the most suitable body to oversee the disposal of Government records.

In 1975 the Principal Archivist took the occasion, in 'Notes for submission to Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries', to provide statistics on the increasing use of the Archives and the need for additional staff to undertake more active acquisition and produce more detailed finding aids. He stated the need also for the services of an Education

Officer, with the combined aptitudes of archivist and teacher, 'to make some of the information available in the records available to schools'.<sup>7</sup> He was successful in securing the part time services of such an officer in 1980.

A submission he made in 1978 to the Library Services Planning Committee made five recommendations:

1. 'Active participation by the Archives in records management within the Public Service ...'
2. The removal of the responsibility for the administration of the Archives away from the Library 'to a department whose functions are most closely related to the records management objectives of the Archives and which has close administrative ties with all departments of the Public Service'.
3. New legislation '... particularly in relation to records management'.
4. Recognition of the professional qualifications of archivists as distinct from those of librarians.
5. Establishment of an intermediate repository.<sup>8</sup>

The key submission was prepared early in 1980. It arose out of an informal conversation between David Watts, then a member of the Archives staff, and the Premier of South Australia, the Hon. David Tonkin, in the course of which the Premier invited the Archives to submit as soon as possible a statement of needs and objectives for his perusal. John Love set to work to redraft in as telling a form as possible the management objectives which the State Librarian and the minister concerned were already familiar with from his earlier reports. Staff discussions were held and contributions from members of the staff were taken into account, the Principal Archivist emphasising that it was a corporate effort. He had the full support of the staff. He summarised the recommendations as follows:

1. The provision of adequate storage and other facilities for the management, control and safe-keeping of both the semi-current records of government agencies and of archives that constitute the permanent record of the State's history.
2. The implementation of a comprehensive records management programme either under the control of, or in close co-operation with, the existing State Archives, recognising the relatedness of the two functions.
3. The ranking of the State Archives in an administrative position which affirms its role in both the management of the public records and the provision of archival service to the public, and enables the Archives to perform its responsibilities adequately.
4. The formulation of legislation appropriate to the recognition by government of its responsibilities to public records and of the role of the Archives in implementing these responsibilities.<sup>9</sup>

The draft was forwarded through the usual channels, with supporting comments from the Minister, and came before the Premier early in May 1980. He indicated his support and asked for a proposal to be prepared for Cabinet. At this stage John prepared a detailed programme, with costs, for a records management programme in the State public service that would produce cost savings both in terms of office floor space and in terms of increased efficiency through better records control.<sup>10</sup>

The Cabinet discussion paper, drafted departmentally in consultation with the Principal Archivist, went forward early in 1981. After it had received favourable consideration from Cabinet, departmental approval was given in November 1981 for the establishment of 'a specialist State Records function within the Department of Local Government but separate from the State Library and embracing a Records Management function.'<sup>11</sup> The Cabinet paper also asked that 'a consultant be engaged to prepare a report on the appropriate legislative framework for archival services and related records management functions'. In the event, this all-important task fell to John Love himself.

John, with characteristic punctiliousness, also personally devised and costed the optimum shelving arrangement for the new storage area in the Government Printing Building at Netley capable of holding between eight and nine thousand metres of records. Before arranging a feasibility study on the use of the premises and planning their refurbishing as a suitable repository he had already personally inspected and rejected a large number of warehouse properties.

During 1982-83 John prepared a detailed proposal for new legislation, which was approved by Cabinet and forwarded to the Parliamentary Counsel for drafting. The change of Government following the 1982 election made it necessary to submit the proposal to the new Cabinet, and this delayed the drafting.<sup>12</sup>

The draft Bill is not yet open for public comment. Some indications of John's intentions are, however, available from earlier statements. In a memorandum to the State Librarian in 1973 he wrote,

I think legislation should be kept as simple as possible. If work can be done effectively without a law, it is better not to have one.<sup>13</sup>

He has also been heard to say, 'Looking through other people's Acts there are an awful lot of things that don't really need to be there'.<sup>14</sup>

An implied comment on the proper emphasis of archives legislation appears in the early 'Report for the Committee of Inquiry into the Libraries Department, 1969':

The legislation of 1925 controlling the disposal of public records seems to have been interpreted as an instrument for the benefit of posterity rather than for the convenience of the offices creating the records.<sup>15</sup>



Public Record Office of South Australia.  
Section of the Netley repository.

In December 1983 John was asked to comment on the report of the South Australian Interdepartmental Working Party on Freedom of Information and its relation to the proposed archives legislation. In the course of a detailed commentary he acknowledged a preference for the Victorian Freedom of Information Act rather than the Commonwealth one as a model for South Australia, and remarked in passing that it was desirable for state acts to be similar in essentials, particularly, of course, as they affected shared documents, though he saw advantages in some variation in minor matters.<sup>16</sup>

In drafting his proposals John has been acutely aware that South Australia was the innovative state in archives legislation. He saw that in the successive archives acts there had been something of the 'copy-cat syndrome' referred to by Chris Hurley in his paper to the 1983 Annual Conference of the Society of American Archivists in Minneapolis.<sup>17</sup> John commented that Australian archives legislation began in South Australia and appeared with local variations in Tasmania, Queensland, New South Wales and Western Australia. The Victorian Act, he recognised, owed less to the South Australian model though some of the basic elements recurred in it.<sup>18</sup>

In archives legislation South Australia has long since been overtaken by the other states and the Commonwealth, but it may be anticipated that the forthcoming Act bearing John Love's stamp will restore the balance.

Nothing in this summary should be taken to imply that other people have not also played distinctive roles in the way the move towards a Public Record Office in South Australia has been engineered. No attempt has been made to chronicle the wider context. The time is not yet ripe for a complete behind-the-scenes account of recent events. The aim has been simply to place on record an aspect of the work of South Australia's last Principal Archivist.

The future of non-government records in South Australia will also not be without something of his impress. Concurrently with his work on the planning of the Public Record Office John Love has served on the Implementation and In-House Committees of the newly formed Mortlock Library of South Australia.

#### FOOTNOTES

1. It was subsequently agreed that the form would be 'Public Record Office' (not 'Records Office').
2. Public Record Office of South Australia (PROSA) GRG 56/82/15. Letter of 30 July 1982.
3. *Australian Encyclopaedia*, 1983, v., p.111.
4. 'Report for the Committee of Enquiry into the Libraries Department,' Dec. 1969. GRG 56/82/1.

5. 'Comments on South Australian Museum Study First Interim Report.' 12 Mar. 1980. GRG 56/82/1.
6. 'Committee of Enquiry into the Public Service: submission on archives in South Australia. By J.H. Love.' Oct. 1973.
7. 'Notes for submission to Committee of Inquiry into Public Libraries.' 29 Apr. 1975. GRG 56/82/1.
8. 'The South Australian Archives: a submission to the Library Services Planning Committee' [1978]. GRG 56/82/1.
9. 'Government records and archives in South Australia' [Mar. 1980] GRG 56/82/2.
10. 'Information for Cabinet submission on records management' [May 1980]. GRG 56/82/2.
11. Principal Archivist's file. GRG 56/82/2.
12. J.H. Love. Memorandum to Acting State Librarian. 28 Sep. 1983. GRG 56/82/5.
13. J.H. Love. Memorandum to State Librarian. 31 Oct. 1973. GRG 56/82/1.
14. Staff meeting notes kept by B.S. Baldwin. 4 May 1982.
15. Op. cit. GRG 56/82/1.
16. PROSA Op cit. GRG 56/82/15.
17. 'An archives report in Lamb's clothing: developing archival goals without National Archives leadership.' By C.J. Hurley.
18. Letter to C.J. Hurley, 20 Sep. 1983. GRG 56/82/15.