Sci-Tech Meeting Report

By Kathleen Oakes

A conference on the Archives of Science and Technology in Australia was held on 19-21 September 1985 at the University of New South Wales. Those presenting papers and those participating represented a variety of professions — archivists, librarians, museum curators, historians, scientists and journalists. The conference was unique in its attempt to bring together representatives of those responsible for caring for our scientific heritage, as well as the creators and users of the records of science and technology.

A major stimulus to discussion was provided by Helen Samuels, the Institute Archivist and Head, Special Collections at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, who was a visiting Fellow in the School of Librarianship at UNSW. Helen presented two papers at the conference. In her first paper she described the activities of the Joint Committee on Archives of Science and Technology (JCAST) which, over a three year period sought to identify the records which underpin the work of scientists and technology specialists. Helen also presented an overview of science and technology archives in the USA. Recent developments included the emergence of the Federal government as the leading sponsor of research and development, the establishment of college and university archives programs, and the creation of history and archives centres by various scientific disciplines.

In her second paper Helen argued that the archivist must understand the variety and role of all surviving evidence, not just archival, but also artefacts and published material. Research and development in science and technology is a process involving separate but connected activities. Within each activity there are essential 'records' which together document the administration, actual process and dissemination of research and development in science and technology. The aim in documenting science and technology is to achieve a full coverage of relevant activities rather than preserving any particular type of documentation.

Three major issues arose from the conference, the first issue was the problem of documenting a particular theme or a subject. Archivists have to be selectors as much as helpers. Increasingly, research in science and

technology involves teams of scientists working on long term projects or on particular aspects of a project. Scientists move between institutions and move between the public and private sector. Documentation of research and development in science and technology thus crosses institutional, even international boundaries, posing great problems for archivists accustomed to appraising within a limited sphere of operations. Helen Samuels gave the example of the U.S. Apollo Moon Shot Project. Research for Apollo was carried out at universities, in private companies and at the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA) itself. In Australia most research and development in science and technology is carried out in universities or at the Commonwealth Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (CSIRO). However, recent government policy with its emphasis on industry restructuring closer links between universities and industry and alternative (i.e. non-government) financial sources for universities will create a greater movement of scientists and collaboration in projects between the public and private sector. To document such research activity requires close collaboration between institutions which have shared the work and the development of documentation strategies for those who wish to collect such documentation. This phenomenon, Helen Samuels contends, requires a new approach to the identification and preservation of archives, one which distributes the responsibilities for documentation among the participating partners. Her proposed solution which she calls a 'documentation strategy', sparked lively discussion.

The second issue was the problem of the different objectives of the agencies which collect historical material. This issue was highlighted during a vigorous debate between representatives of the Archives Office of NSW and the NSW Museum of Applied Arts and Sciences on who are the proper custodians and appraisers of archives documenting museum objects? The debate arose over whether a museum curator should collect archives to aid understanding of a scientific instrument or for display. Although appraising records as objects upon their relationship to an object is appropriate to the objectives of a museum and the demands of its clientele, archivists, who appraise on the basis of overall activity, would be concerned that collections could be split, i.e. that important parts of the archival material not specific to the particular scientific instrument might be discarded or that the 'eyes' would be picked out of a collection for display. However, the proper documentation of science and technology is more complex. If instruments, specimens and publications are an integral part of research and development activity in science and technology, can archivists afford to ignore them? Obviously we can't all be collecting everything and, once again, collaboration between collecting institutions is the key to ensuring that relevant material is preserved, that material unwanted by one institution is offered to another who may find it more useful and that the whereabouts of scattered, but related, material becomes known.

The third issue was, predictably, the lack of funding for archives of science and technology. However, it was pointed out that the lack of attention may be due to a lack of visibility. Archivists need to document and communicate the value of their work through contributing to scientific and technical conferences and publications, as well as archival journals. Pressing forward on the need for visibility and action, on the morning after the conference, about a dozen conference participants met again to discuss further action. Colin Smith, Archivist, C.S.I.R.O. provided a checklist on suggestions and ideas which had been offered throughout the conference, and these were discussed and allotted to the responsibility of the following groups: The Joint Committee on the Archives of Science, The Schools of History and Philosophy of Science within universities, The Australian Society of Archivists and the various scientific professional societies. The responsibilities were assigned as follows:

AUSTRALIAN SOCIETY OF ARCHIVISTS (ASA)

1. Lobby the Commonwealth government to accept its responsibilities for the care of its sci-tech archives.
2. Strengthen ties with other professional associations which manage records and information such as the Library Association of Australia (LAA) and the Records Management Association of Australia (RMAA) to present a 'united message' to firms and agencies in sci-tech work.
3. Provide information and guidelines for sci-tech organisations and firms on how to set up an archives programme and/or how to establish or work with a repository.
4. Take action to obtain regulations/taxation incentives to encourage sci-tech industries and agencies to keep archives.
5. Prepare a study of private and public funding sources available for archival projects.

JOINT COMMITTEE ON THE ARCHIVES OF SCIENCE (JCAS)

1. Study Commonwealth and State legislation to identify responsibilities for science and technology archives. Draw these responsibilities to the attention of relevant authorities and lobby for increased funding for archival programmes.
2. Encourage Commonwealth government bodies with scientific and technical functions to report their records to the National Records Retention being compiled by Australian Archives.
3. With ASA, establish the costs and benefits of retaining industrial records.
4. Organise further presentations/meetings on the archives of science and technology, involving the Australian Society of Archivists, the

Museums Association of Australia, the Royal Australian Historical Society, among others.

5. Alert tertiary institutions, such as the School of Librarianship, UNSW, which offer courses in archives administration, to science/technology sites for potential student projects.
6. Work to develop the potential of the Australian Archives of Science Project (ASAP), headquartered in the Department of History and Philosophy of Science (HPS) at the University of Melbourne.
7. Investigate the establishment of substantial centres for receiving and maintaining sci-tech data for further research.
8. Report activities and promote involvement of relevant sci-tech authorities and professional associations.

PROFESSIONAL SOCIETIES AND ASSOCIATIONS OF SCIENCE AND TECHNOLOGY

1. Raise consciousness of members of professional societies concerning the value of archives and the necessity for making provisions for retention of material in well-equipped repositories.
2. Work with archivists to make decisions about retention of scientific and technical data, records and publications.
3. Establish closer links with those who care for (archivists) and use (historians, fellow scientists) sci-tech data and records.

SCHOOLS OF HISTORY AND PHILOSOPHY OF SCIENCE (HPS)

1. Develop definitions for what aspects of Australian science and technology are in need of documentation.
2. Develop closer ties with archival programmes.
3. Provide advice and help in appraisal decisions, contribute information on historical methodology to debate regarding appraisal.

AND LAST, BUT MOST IMPORTANTLY, INDIVIDUALS INTERESTED IN SCI-TECH ARCHIVES

1. Lobby for improved funding for existing repositories and for the establishment of new archival programmes.
2. Promote an awareness of sci-tech records within your own institution and in the wider community.
3. Develop co-operative documentation strategies with other archives in your collecting area.
4. Preach to the unconverted. Give a paper or write an article about sci-tech archives for a non-archival group or journal.