THE PUBLIC RECORD OFFICE.

Janet D. Hine.

(This paper was delivered by Miss Hine at the last Association Conference.)

I am very happy to talk to you tonight about the Public Record Office in London.

Introduction.

There is no doubt that we are greatly indebted to this institution, for its example and for the way it has preserved quantities of the source material of Australian history. But in any case I feel a personal sense of gratitude to it because, I must guiltily admit, I have spent some of the pleasantest and strangest hours of my life there. All this in spite of being quite literally allergic to it, or at least to its dust. Perhaps that added to the strangeness.

The Joint Copying Project.

From 1954 to 1957 I was in London, seconded to the office of the Agent General for New South Wales, to do work for the various departments of the Public Library of New South Wales. As I shall mention again later, I had several enquiries to make of the Public Record Office on behalf of the Archives Department, and I also used it to settle some comparatively small and self-contained queries sent from home and others rising out of the interests of the Agent General's office. But by far the longest and most consistent association I had with it was in connexion with the Joint Copying Project. This, as the present audience will doubtless know, is an arrangement whereby the Commonwealth National Library and the Mitchell Library, in co-operation with the other State libraries of Australia, are having original overseas material of Australian and Pacific interest searched and copied for the use of students in this country. My job was to maintain liaison with the London officers of the Commonwealth National Library (and incidentally with the people carrying out phases of the Project on the Continent), and to do the Mitchell Library's share of searching for relevant material in England. I did not have much to do with getting the documents copied nor with the distribution of the resulting microfilms, but I did help a little in these activities.

You may be interested to know that this searching for the Joint Copying Project took me to the British Museum, the Natural History Museum, the India Office Library, the Foreign Office Library, and to many smaller institutions, and societies and individuals. However, not unnaturally, it was the Public Record

Office that kept me busiest. The two great series of papers I was most concerned with were those of the Colonial Office and the Admiralty. The very names may suffice to conjure up for you, on the one hand, the vast mass of valuable instructions, despatches, reports and enclosures exchanged by our early Governors and Lieutenant-Governors with their superiors in England; and, on the other hand, the records of the many voyages undertaken by His and Her Majesty's Ships to our part of the world, ranging from plans and preparations to the multifarious captains', masters' and ships' logs, journals and musters.

So, for months and years, on and off, I went along the Strand from the New South Wales Government Offices, into Fleet Street and up Chancery Lane to the Public Record Office. I used to go either every morning or on alternate mornings, and I worked until I had got through all the material I had asked to have produced for that day or until I was too tired to go on. I found two or three hours at a stretch quite long enough. In the afternoons I typed out descriptions of the papers examined and recommendations about what should be copied.

The Search Rooms.

Usually I worked in what is known as the Round Room. I was never quite sure at the time what distinguished its clientele from that of the Long Room, but it appears that the Round Room, which used to be referred to more officially as the Literary Search Room, is for people like me who had (and will continue to have, since it lasts forever) a Student's Ticket. The Long Room is the Legal Room, and it is for fee-paying legal searchers, that is, those using the post-1842 records of the Courts for professional purposes, and for people working by special permit on after-date departmental records, these being the ones not yet officially open for public inspection. It also takes the overflow from the Round Room and that is how I discovered it: after an absence of a few weeks I had failed to notice the time of opening had been changed from ten to nine-thirty in the morning and consequently missed a seat in the Round Room. I was careful to learn my lesson because, as befits the less mercenary refuge, the Round Room is much cosier and more convenient than the other. One can choose a seat just the right distance from the fire in winter time, and one can make sure of one of the less wilful of the adjustable individual reading lamps. One is also handy to all the reference books that line the walls. My main need was for the older gazetteers and biographical dictionaries and, of course, for the printed and typed indexes to the papers I was working on. Also in the Round Room is a collection, as comprehensive as possible, of all the public records belonging to the Office that have been published officially or unofficially.

For completeness I should add that there is another search room, the South Room, which I did not penetrate, set aside for literary searches involving extra space or other special conditions.

Actually the Public Record Office's problem of accommodating the public is quite acute. Space designed for a hundred readers has naturally not been found adequate for an attendance that has reached a hundred and fifty in a day.

Searchers and Searching.

The other students were fascinating. They were clearly of all ages, all nationalities and all degrees of eminence. Some were very new and wary, and others were so much at home that it was hard to distinguish them from the staff. Important introductions were effected, and one sometimes heard the flat slow French of the Assistant Keepers. There were wild genealogists and other types of eccentric familiar to me from Library experience, but perhaps one would have to go to the Public Record Office to find a small boy reading quietly aloud to a learned and apparently blind clergyman. As at the British Museum it was often advisable to anticipate hitches in the smooth supply of one's proper work by going provided with small queries for the reference books to settle and consultation problems for the indexes. If I paused to look round me it would be to find myself surrounded by deliveries of pipe rolls and monstrosities in Mediaeval Latin and Elizabethan English, and long rolls of parchment that had to be read standing as they depended from special racks. All this made me feel rather inferior, with my indubitably modern English ships' logs and so on, which usually went back no further than the 19th century, and at the very earliest to Dampier at the end of the 17th. The only time I managed to rustle up some vellum it was merely the vehicle of official copies of Acts of the New South Wales Governor and Council. Some of these were even printed, for of course public records are not necessarily manuscript or typescript. The Public Record Office has some fine files of early Australian newspapers, no doubt sent as enclosures to Governors' despatches. So far as being able to read the writing went, I sometimes felt no better off than my erudite companions because, although the earlier documents I went through were usually clear enough, by the end of the period I was interested in, the 1850s, the handwriting had become as frightful as it is now.

Part of the pleasure I derived from the Public Record Office came from being safely installed in a world into which none of the worries and demands of my other work could intrude. It was almost like the solitude and singlemindedness of answering an examination paper: one has the comfort of knowing one cannot bother about anything but the matter in hand, and one can go ahead oblivious. But one can think about the irrelevant diversions afterwards, and I have come to the conclusion that some of the delight in the experience was the result of a carefully cultivated ignorance on my part. I have never had any time for history, though of course prepared to do my utmost to help historians, so it was natural to formulate a theory of searching which insists that one should approach such a job with as few preconceived ideas as possible and with as little as possible

of the bias of the historian. It is important to keep in mind that one is gathering material for historians to use and it would be quite wrong to impose an order that would reflect an attitude towards it at this stage. Putting my principles into practice meant, since my low opinion of history is only equalled by my ignorance of it, a special thrill in meeting, say, the Boston Tea Party and the Crimean War before they earned these names, and in appreciating that incidents as distant as these are to be assumed relevant to Australia until proved otherwise.

Librarianly Reactions.

But of course there were other sources of enjoyment. Not only was it a new and exhilarating experience to be a librarian, so to speak, on the other side of the counter, being waited on hand and foot so far as fetching and carrying went, and, notwithstanding the pressure, being able to study things myself instead of just watching others do it with mild envy. I was also a librarian ready to be critical in an archivist stronghold. I shall not go too far into what I found to criticise, but I shall give a couple of examples which should show that matters were not as simple as I thought at first.

There was, for instance, the illogicality and obscurity of the confusion of what a librarian would think of as form and subject classification, uncorrected by references, in the various schedules and indexes I used. The reason why nothing more should be said about this is that, as my subsequent reading seems to indicate, archivists the world over go in for the same messy-mindedness. No doubt they have their justification but they need not be surprised that librarians sometimes wish they would take an intensive course in the subject cataloguing of books and acquire, among other things, a proper respect for intelligent cross-referencing.

Secondly, there was the singular unhelpfulness of the Assistant Keepers sitting at their high desks in the Round Room. Their politely defeatist attitude, as I came to realise later, was certainly not peculiar to the Public Record Office either. I encountered it in several other institutions in London, and when I say I encountered it I must immediately explain that this unhelpfulness was hardly ever directed at me, since I was usually helping myself, but that I was obliged to hear other enquirers receiving it from time to time. I learnt to appreciate it as part of the not entirely bad English policy of having subject specialists among their professional officers, frequently engaged on their own projects and theses, and unqualified to help other people. It did not surprise me recently to see that one of my old supervising friends from the Round Room has written a well-received book on smuggling. Having made this point of criticism I must go on to say, in the first place, that behind the scenes, when one is properly and officially introduced, the Assistant Keepers are both as kind and as helpful as one could possibly expect.

Moreover, whereas in some sections of the British Museum I was horrified to hear legitimate and even learned enquirers being discouraged and given misleading information, by the attendants who protect the professional staff from the public, in the Public Record Office the attendants, who take one's requests for documents and deliver them in due course, appeared to be well supervised and careful to confine themselves to their proper sphere, within which they could be very helpful indeed and well worth cultivating.

The history of the public's access to the Public Record Office is an interesting one, a further justification for the staff's lacking the eager helpfulness of the reference librarian. Before 1851 the system of fees was in full operation, and the indexes to the records were the personal property of the custodians. Then, as the result of a petition including the signatures of Carlyle, Charles Dickens, Harrison Ainsworth and Macauley, new rules were produced. I quote from the Guide (pp.48-9): "Under these, persons desiring permission to work for literary purposes might be authorized ... to see without charge both Indexes and original Records and to copy or make extracts in pencil from such as he might 'think advisable': though it was pointed out that they must not expect too much assistance." This shows, by the way, how I came to be among the ranks of the 'literary' searchers. The following quotation from the rules of 1851 puts the public where I found it, thoroughly in its place: "It will not be possible for the Officers to assist any literary enquirers beyond the production of the documents, and giving a general explanation, if needed, of their character and nature. No applicant ought to present himself who is not sufficiently acquainted with the hand-writing, abbreviations, and language of ancient documents." (op.cit. p.49).

Procedure.

Meanwhile, the ritual of entering the Public Record Office and being issued with documents has been made very easy. One signs an attendance book on arrival, without being obliged to produce one's Student's Ticket. One sends for documents by filling in a simple application form, a separate one for each document. There is a rule about having only three items out at a time but exceptions are made if one is clearly working too quickly for the rule: I sometimes had ten or so volumes delivered together with as many more on the way. And one can have documents kept out or ask for them in advance, just naming the day, and this means a great deal of time saved. I was particularly interested to discover that although the application forms are handed back to the student when the documents are returned, nevertheless their content is analysed (or at least was: I hope the practice continues) in order to show what is and what is not being used. According to the Guide (p.53), "Since 1932 Applications have been not only registered but indexed and this reveals the fact that (though a comparatively few Classes are high favourites) out of

the present [1949] total of 2,719 'open' Classes in the Office only 19 per cent. have in fact remained entirely unconsulted by members of the Public during the last sixteen years." I have often wished we had more of that sort of analysis here, if only so that we could develop rational policies about which sort of material should be placed handiest.

Functions, Scope and History.

The Public Record Office has a repair department, of course, active in experiment, and a photographic department whose comparatively recent development has some bearing on the Office's publishing programme. So far over a thousand printed volumes have been published but, in view of increased printing costs unaccompanied by compensating increases in sales, it seems unlikely that this scale will be maintained. Photography is providing a partial substitute.

The Joint Copying Project has its own microfilming equipment on the premises. This is in the tradition begun when the Canadian Government installed a photostat machine during the First World War, and continued by the Library of Congress when it had a second machine put in in 1928 and a microphotographic camera about ten years later in conjunction with University Microfilms. The operation of all these machines has been entrusted to members of the Public Record Office staff (1).

There are several other aspects of the Public Record Office that I have no time to describe. It would be possible, for instance, to fit it in to the general archives picture of Great Britain by mentioning the county and other local record offices, many of them quite recent establishments and growing in number, and such organisations as the Historical Manuscripts Commission, under whose direction the National Register of Archives is being compiled. The British Records Association, the Society of Archivists and the Business Archives Council are further evidence of the flourishing state of interest in archives.

It would also be possible to describe the contents of the Public Record Office's collection in detail. I hope some suggestion of the sort of material it goes in for has emerged from what I have said already, but I can sum up here by stating that it makes accessible the records of the Courts of Law and what has been selected as worth

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(1) Incidentally, the idea behind the Joint Copying Project also belongs to a venerable tradition, older than the Public Record Office itself: in 1763 the French Government sent a party of eight persons to England to copy all the documents relating to French history deposited in the Tower of London.

preserving from the archival produce of the various departments of the central government of Great Britain. It took over its collections from a number of conserving bodies but its own effective history goes back only to 1838 when it was established by an Act of Parliament (1). A fair impression of its subsequent development may be gained from the further Acts and Orders in Council that have directed its policy in the meantime.

The Public Records Act of 1958.

Something should be said about the most recent of these Acts, the Public Records Act of 1958. This is based firmly on the recommendations of the Report of the Committee on Departmental Records, published in 1954 and usually known as the Grigg Report. As you may imagine, the years between the appearance of this report and the passing of the Act were particularly interesting, and I consider I was very lucky to be in London during most of this period, making enquiries about records methods, disposal schedules and so forth for the Archives Department of the Public Library of New South Wales. It was a time of much soul-searching and fundamental re-thinking, with the disadvantage that the prevailing state of flux sometimes made people hesitant about explaining methods likely to be changed soon or not tried. Although some of the recommendations of the Grigg Report had been put into operation almost before they were framed and others came into force between 1954 and 1958, the year of the Act, there was some anxiety that full implementation should be ensured by the passage of the recommendations into an Act as soon as possible, while interest and enthusiasm were high. As it is, the Act reflects the new attitude and seems to sum up the Public Record Office's present notion of its function very well. There are certain administrative changes and some useful clarifications, but the feature I find most striking is the way more responsibility is to be placed in the hands of the records officers of government departments. The idea behind this is probably to prevent the uncontrolled accumulation of records at the earliest possible stage, but another most important result is the far-reaching attempt to improve the quality of records officers and of registry methods. Close contact is being maintained with the Organisation and Methods department of the Treasury in devising systems that will not only be appropriate to the different departments and at the same time consistent with one another, but will also, necessarily, be better worth carrying over into the archival sequence of documents selected to be kept permanently.

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(1) The Public Record Office Act, 1838.

In brief, the change which should bring about these improvements is from having the selection of material for preservation made by a joint committee composed of Inspecting Officers of the Public Record Office and representatives of the Ministry concerned, to having two reviews, the first being made by the Ministry's own staff, on the basis of current departmental use, not more than five years after the creation of each document. The second review, of what is left, is to be made jointly with the Public Record Office Inspecting Officers, introducing now the additional criterion of the possible needs of future historical and other students. The Act requires the transfer to the Public Record Office of public records selected for permanent preservation before thirty years have elapsed since their creation, and provides that as a general rule they shall be open to public inspection fifty years after their creation. All this will need a high degree of co-operation from government departments. There are some, for example, who hitherto have been reluctant to close files, and one notorious file is mentioned that had run on for 150 years. Even the delay of fifty years before allowing public inspection will continue to produce anomalies. While in London I searched some captured German Foreign Ministry papers ranging from about 1880 to the beginning of the 1939-45 War, and it was necessary to keep in mind that items among them that one would think of as more strictly within the province of the British Foreign Office had better be copied along with the rest because the British side of the story would not be available for many years, if at all.

Departmental Archives and the Hayes Repository.

In the course of my investigations for the Archives Department I was able to sample some of the stages records go through in their progress from active departmental use to the final keeping of the Public Record Office. I visited the Ministry of Supply Archives at Broxbourne, not far from London, where the less current records of that Ministry are stored. Apart from being looked after, these files can be returned to headquarters, or "produced" as they say, when sent for, and at the same time selected series, when their turn came, were being continuously gone through and "weeded" according to the old disposal schedules, to determine what should be destroyed and what retained. When I was there, one of the Inspecting Officers of the Public Record Office was giving the weeding personnel a simple talk about applying criteria.

It should be emphasised that departmental records do not ever belong to the Public Record Office the way the legal records do. With the exception of certain State Papers which are in the same category as legal records, they must always be approached through the department in which they originated or its successor. In 1949 the departmental records formed approximately sixty per cent. of the bulk of documents in the Office and probably the proportion is even greater now. (1) They have had absolute parity

(1) By the way, the estimated number of documents in the Public Record Office was then over fifty million.

of treatment with the legal records, the technical considerations affecting their storage, repair, listing, production and so forth being exactly the same. But when it comes to the material being currently transferred, it seems that the Public Record Office staff does no searching among them and, when they are open to the public, the Office simply allows the authorised enquirer to refer to any indexes there may be or, in their absence, to the lists the departments have prepared. In these circumstances it may be seen how important the current filing methods of departments are going to be to the students of posterity.

After records have left the registries and archives of their own departments they proceed to the so-called "Limbo" Repository at Hayes, also quite near London. This is under the general control and management of the Public Record Office but any department may be allocated space there, for material likely to be referred to only occasionally and for its own staff to work on it. What impressed me most about the Hayes Repository were the enormous bulk of material stored in these erstwhile ordnance factory buildings and the numerous ingenious methods devised to cope with storage problems on such a scale, from security, protection from damp, dust and fire, to accessibility and the convenience of people at work on the records. The main activities there are "preparing" (which amounts to tidying up the files on their arrival and putting them in uniform boxes), "producing" and "returning". There is an hourly producing van to London, but of course the real speed of the production depends on the time it has taken to trace and extricate the required documents, and the records of the various departments vary in this respect according to the quality of their indexes and the complexity of the records themselves.

The Museum.

My last few words will be about the Museum of the Public Record Office. It seems worth describing specially, because if any of you should be in London without much time or any proper business in the search rooms of the Office you may nevertheless be interested to include this small exhibition, which is open to all, among the art galleries and museums that must be seen at all costs.

It has been in existence since 1902, and it was thoroughly renovated between 1954 and 1956, when specially designed floor and wall cases with interior lighting were installed. The general impression is very bright and friendly and, naturally, the exhibits chosen from the wealth at its disposal are first class. The collection incorporates certain monuments, memorial tablets and heraldic glass from the former Chapel of the Rolls on the site of which it now stands, all extensively cleaned and restored where necessary.

But it is the documents on show that are the real attraction. The best known exhibit in the Museum is the Domesday Book, which is kept in a special case. There are also on view two notable exemplars of the Magna Carta, and other historic documents like the famous "scrap of paper". To quote from the catalogue (p.4): "The floor cases contain a selection of documents comprising specimens of the great series of Chancery rolls extending from 1199 to the present day; royal and other seals and charters; Exchequer and Legal records; records of Parliament; documents concerning former repositories and keepers of the Public Records; documents of naval and military interest; treaties; and documents concerning distinguished figures in the Arts, Sciences and Literature." It is not surprising, when one considers it, to find here mansucripts of people like Francis Bacon, Sir Christopher Wren, Sir Isaac Newton and Matthew Arnold, but it is more of a shock to see, also caught up in the government archives, letters from others like Ben Jonson, James Boswell, Sir Walter Scott and Charles Darwin. There is even a unique copy of a poem by Shelley.

Another large series of exhibits is arranged chronologically, so that one is given a most educational conspectus of handwriting and writing materials through the centuries. It is useful to have things like pipe rolls, charters, warrants, indentures and treaties identified and made actual.

There is a special case of royal autographs, from the Black Prince (1370) to date, and others devoted to the United States and the British Commonwealth. The latter includes, for our sake, a rather curious choice: items connected with the New Zealand Company in 1841, Norfolk Island in 1840 and riots at Ballarat in 1854. But of course this special exhibit does not exhaust the local interest in the Museum: I noticed elsewhere a letter from Lieutenant James Cook about the forthcoming voyage of the ENDEAVOUR (8 July 1768) and despatches from Lieutenant William Bligh relating to the mutiny on the BOUNTY (15 October 1789).

The physical and bibliographical aspects of the preservation of archives are not neglected. One case contains examples of old covers and bindings, and another "Specimens of decayed documents, skeletons of rats and a starling found among the records". Some examples of repaired parchment and paper documents are also shown.

The museum is considered to have an educational function. It is open to the inspection of parties at special hours, with an Assistant Keeper assigned to conduct them, and topical displays are presented on special occasions.

Conclusion.

The time has now come for me to conclude. In preparing this talk I have had to bear in mind that I am only a librarian and that excessive detail about the few aspects of the Public Record Office that necessarily engaged my attention would be out of place. Even so, because of my previous and subsequent inexperience I may have taken things out of context and let them get out of focus. This is the usual risk one runs in attempting to be both general and impressionistic. My object has been to try to give you some idea of what it felt like to be in contact with the Public Record Office for a short time, and I hope some of you will feel inspired to give yourselves the same treat.

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