

ARCHIVES AND HISTORIANS

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“Blessed is the man who is able to find it without heart sickness and weariness because of the obstacles placed in his way by red-tape officials and fearful administrators.”¹

This was written in 1912 before the advent of archival institutions in Australia by George Cockburn Henderson, Professor of History and English in the University of Adelaide from 1902 to 1924 and later Research Professor in the University of Sydney. He was also probably the most influential supporter of the establishment of the South Australian Archives Department in 1919. I am indebted to my colleague, Gerald Fischer, a former Archivist of this University, for that quotation which he included with others in an exquisite small pamphlet entitled *Henderson on History and Archives* which he compiled, printed and published in 1983.

The quotation was selected because it no doubt still strikes a chord with most historians both in relation to the joy in finding sought after records and in their experiences with the custodians of records.

One of the reasons that I sought an opportunity to participate in this Conference is that my experience suggests that today, many historians identify the “red-tape officials and fearful administrators who place obstacles in their way” with Archivists. Experiences that have led to this less than ideal latter perception would be, I trust, avoidable if a higher level of mutual understanding existed between historians and archivists.

This introduction leads naturally to a consideration of the historian’s initial contact with an archival institution. It is likely to be on the way to the Search Room. I say “on-the-way-to”, because it’s unlikely that you will be able to walk straight into the Search Room; the red-tape is likely to commence from your first contact at a reception point.

An explanatory aside is required straight away. Much of what I say will be expressed as sweeping generalisations because archival institutions in

Australia are so diverse in terms of their age, size, and resources, that each of these factors will affect their methods differently. All but the large, long-established archives will be operating very much under two standards, namely the ideal way and the reality which is forced upon them. The researcher will be seeing the reality which will be pragmatic response to the circumstances guided by the ideal that the archivist is struggling toward, supplemented by a few rules which have been established largely through experience. The foundation of the response you receive, whatever it may be, will no doubt include the following underlying principles and realities.

The archivist will be concerned, above all else, with the permanent preservation of both the physical entities within his or her care and with the evidence inherent in the physical relationship or order of individual items and documents. The archivist is aware that both of these characteristics are, in virtually 100% of cases, unique, and that future researchers should be able to rely with confidence on their having been preserved.

The justification for this concern was so aptly stated by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, the father of archives administration in the English speaking world, when he said in 1944 "The perfect Archive is *ex hypothesi* an evidence which cannot lie to us: we may through laziness or other imperfection of our own misinterpret its statements or implications, but itself it makes no attempt to convince us of fact or error, to persuade or dissuade: it just tells us. That is, it does so *always provided that it has come to us in exactly the state in which its original creators left it*. There, then, is the supreme and most difficult task of the Archivist—to hand on the documents as nearly as possible in the state in which he received them, without adding or taking away, physically or morally, anything: to preserve unviolated, without the possibility of a suspicion of violation, every element in them, every quality they possessed when they came to him while at the same time permitting and facilitating handling and use."²

The implications of this duty of care are that all researchers will be expected to establish their *bona fides* both theoretically in the first instance, in terms of a justification of their need to be there (that is, could they reasonably obtain the information they seek from existing secondary or published primary sources) and practically, at the stage of researching the material in terms of their physical treatment of and respect for the archives they consult. It is clear that the greatest aids to preservation are an ideal storage environment and minimal use.

The historian, having experienced an initial brief investigation of his or her research topic and identity, and having completed applications to be granted access to the archives and or a search ticket (which may require a supervisor's written support) and an entry in the visitors' book, will at last be granted access to the Search Room.

Whether all of this “red tape” is necessary or not will probably be considered highly debatable by researchers (as evidenced by the suggestion in the recent Review of Public Records in Victoria that different classes of researchers be identified to enable them to receive different treatment); but is considered by archivists to be far less open for debate. That such a debate could be instructive and helpful for both parties is acknowledged and provides the first hint in this paper of a topic which could be pursued by historians and archivists, together. It is the type of subject that I understand the History Institute of Victoria has addressed but my plea is that we consider it together.

It is in the Search Room that the researchers will again be confronted with what might appear to be obstacles placed in their way. They discover that they may not yet have direct access to the archives but must first master the aids provided to assist them in finding the material relevant to their topics. The archivist is often the best finding aid available and may well provide a highly desirable initial research interview in which she or he will ask the researcher to explain in considerable detail the nature of the research being undertaken. The archivist is then able to direct researchers to the most relevant finding aids and instruct them in their use.

There is an irony in this often quite heavy reliance on the archivist and it arises from the seeming contradiction between on the one hand, the archivist being duty bound to preserve the evidence, the information in context, so that researchers can, and ideally must, make their own review and selection of available material in order that their investigation and interpretation of events is as rigorous as possible; and on the other hand, the dearth and complexity of the finding aids, virtually forcing the researcher to rely on the archivist. The archivist is generally aware of this irony and strives to overcome it both in dealings with the researcher and in the decisions made on what type of finding aids will be produced.

The nature of archives: that they are voluminous; that they represent information and evidence in context; and that they are frequently an aggregation of a number of series, interrelated in a complex fashion to create an organic body of materials involving one or more original creators, imposes a number of constraints on the preparation of finding aids.

Archives are generally incapable of being catalogued as published material is, because their volume would overwhelm the cataloguer if they were to be catalogued at item level (without us considering what constitutes an item), because more often than not items have no titles, and authors may not be able to be discerned, and of course they are not published. More importantly, the cataloguing process tends to treat items as discrete entities with little room for noting the linkages between items which is a strong feature of archives.

Instead the archivist pursues a functional or organisational or contextual

approach in preparing finding aids by identifying each series of records, (a series being a group of record items which if controlled by numbers or symbols are in the same sequence of numbers or symbols, or if not so controlled, the items are of a similar physical shape and informational context which arose from the same accumulating process³ and describing it in terms of the individual or part of the organisation that created it.

The most commonly found finding aid in archival institutions will therefore be *lists of series* of records created by a single individual or organisation or part of an organisation performing a discrete function. It is clear that such finding aids are not particularly "user-friendly" but they generally provide the starting point from which more user oriented aids are developed.

The types of aids which are generally prepared include firstly *lists of items* which make up an individual series, where the title of each item is the only guide to the content of that item, which could in turn, consist of hundreds of individual documents. Secondly, *guides* to the archives of a particular record creator which include a description and history of that record creator, combined with a list of series often annotated with brief or detailed notes on each of the series, and sometimes including lists of items. Then an *index to record creators* may be provided. (It is helpful to note that archivists refer to the creator of records by using one or more of the terms group, organisation, agency, or context unit, and that each of these terms can mean different things to different archival institutions). A fourth type of finding aid is the specific *subject guide*, listing and describing the archives relating to that subject and held by the particular archival institution. *Subject indexes* are sometimes proposed as a by-product of the reference service process and many exist amongst the archives themselves and will be listed in the series lists. The indexes to record creator and to subjects-studied-by-earlier-visitors-to-the-archives will probably be the finding aids which come closest to the dictionary catalogue of any library, but there is no guarantee that every archival institution will have had the resources to prepare them. Perhaps the ideal finding aid would be the *functional index* consisting of functions or activities carried out by the creators of records as the key terms in the index. These terms would refer the researchers to the specific guides listing the records of the individuals and organisations that created the records sought. A seventh type of aid that may be found is an *index based on record format* which could include an index to plans, or diaries, or files, or indexes, or photographs, or audio tape recordings and so on. Obviously the computer provides the archivist with almost limitless possibilities in the preparation of finding aids and many archivists in Australia are responding as quickly to this challenge as they are able.

This lengthy aside on finding aids has aimed to describe the sequential or evolutionary nature of their preparation, the complexities arising from

the need to document context and to accommodate the vagaries of different record formats, and to show how the historian can obtain the most from the archives by approaching them from their origins in purposeful activity. Above all, the archivist feels bound to provide the researcher with the means by which he or she can properly interpret the records examined by being aware of the purpose and procedures pursued in bringing those records into existence.

Because historians are one of the major users or potential users of archives and particularly students, are invariably working within a limited time frame, the archivist imagines that they, the historians, have a vested interest in improving the quality of finding aids. The archivist knows the deficiencies in this area before she or he hears the complaints of the frustrated searchers. There is room for historians and archivists to work together in a positive way to attract much needed resources to this task. The Australian Bicentennial Historic Record Search, in commencing the laudable task of locating and recording the existence of historical resource material held in private hands is going to reveal the tip of that iceberg but there are still untold quantities of unprocessed, let alone inadequately described, archives within Australia's archival institutions even now, merely waiting for the day when the archivist can get to them. The creators of records will provide only so many resources to protect the records of their past—it is for society at large to contribute to the task of making them more accessible whether via sponsorship, government funding or “user pays”—but they need to know why they should do this and we archivists are somewhat surprised that historians as a group have been slow in pursuing assiduously the preservation and description of archives which must be the fundamental resource of their profession.

If we return now to our hypothetical historian in the Search Room, he or she will no doubt be searching these finding aids and jotting down on the form or slips provided, the references to the particular archives sought. These forms or slips are not merely memory joggers to be compared with those used in the bibliographic tools area of a library to assist the reader to find a book on the shelves, but are the specific request for access to particular records and represent the starting point in the process of extracting records from the repository, subjecting them to an access check, then delivering them to the search room for examination.

It is at this stage that the researcher becomes aware of that special characteristic of archives; their unique and confidential nature. These records were created to achieve their creators' objectives and were not intended for public examination. Their creators have, in many instances, imposed conditions on their use. Within the government sphere those conditions are sometimes detailed in the laws relating to the administration of the archives or the record creating agency. In other cases, internal policies have been developed or the creators' instructions provide the guide.

The archivist's ability to continue to take records into custody will often hinge on the conscientiousness with which the record creator's instructions on access are complied with. Again the archivist's duty is dual, to the researcher to make records available, and to the creator to preserve their privacy and retain their confidence. Above all is the archivist's concern to preserve archives. The archivist is more likely to accept and administer a 50 year closure condition on a given group of records to ensure their preservation and *ultimate* use, than to accede to a researcher's request for access. Some archival legislation provides a process for appeal against restrictive access decisions as does freedom of information legislation, and many archival institutions have advisory boards to assist in their administration. It is through the use of these appeal provisions and the political process that change in some access provision may be made, but this will not generally apply to private archives. The issues of access, confidentiality, and privacy are complex and are related to the question of whether there exists a distinction between current affairs and history and to what degree such a distinction might matter. Again, historians and archivists could usefully get together to discuss these issues and benefit from the different perspectives that both possess.

The process of checking archives against access conditions is obviously time consuming and can include the tedious tasks of expunging (which involves copying a document then blocking out sensitive names or facts to enable the researcher to have access to at least some of the information) and the task of enclosing — for want of a better term — which involves the placing of an opaque envelope over that section of an item which is not accessible. The delays for the researcher are understandably frustrating.

It is easy to see from what I have said why the historian might associate archivists with "red-tape official[s]". However, given an awareness of the time consuming processes with which the archivist is involved, it is no doubt clear to the historian that he or she would be wise to involve the archivist in his or her research at the earliest possible stage.

This brings us to the point where the discussions of the Committee to Review Australian Studies in Tertiary Education have been so relevant to both our professions in highlighting the need not only for historical resource management but for enhanced access to archives. It is clear that if budding historians in our tertiary educational institutions were made more aware of the nature of archives and their administration, there would be a better chance of them avoiding some of the frustrations associated with the use of archives. I would invite teaching historians to approach their local archival institutions to seek their assistance in introducing new history students to archives. There is a good chance that we will all benefit from that early contact.

Underlying all of these considerations is the archivist's first priority of preserving archives. For those archival institutions that take material into

custody from their parent organisations (let us refer to these as “domestic” Archives), preserving archives means first identifying the relatively small percentage of the totality of records created that are worthy of permanent preservation. Simply put, archives are those records which have been selected as being worthy of permanent preservation. Jenkinson was somewhat more specific when he said:—

... “A document which may be said to belong to the class of Archives is one which *was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors* . . . Archives were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of Posterity”.⁴

He strongly emphasised the importance of authenticity and believed that the means of preserving this characteristic was to only grant the status of “archives” to those records which had been in the custody of the record creators or their legitimate successors from creation to the time of their transfer into archival custody. It will also be noted from this definition that Jenkinson saw the selection process being performed by the record creators.

In the case of a “domestic” archival institution much of the task of selection is in real terms left to the archivist and this can be seen as consistent with the definition because the archivist is part of the record creating body. However the domestic archivist uses a tool for the selection of archives which is developed jointly by the records creators and the archivist called variously a disposal schedule, disposal authority, or retention schedule. In this document are listed the series of records created and against each series (divided in some cases into disposal classes for different treatment) is entered the period of time the creator judges the records need to be kept for administrative purposes. The archivist will then carry out an appraisal of all of the records listed, involving a detailed examination of the nature, content and history of each series and the way series are related one to another. Then the archivist will consider the evidential and informational value contained in each series of records, bearing in mind the research which has previously been carried out and is currently being undertaken in the fields of study which could conceivably be covered in any way by the holdings of that particular archival institution. At times the archivist may seek the opinion of historians and other experts as to the potential value of material. This appraisal process including the final decision on the fate of each record series is fully documented and the “sentence”, for example “Transfer into archival custody two years after creation for permanent retention” or “Retain in office for two years after creation then destroy”, is entered into the disposal schedule. Some records

are sentenced to a number of years in "purgatory" as intermediate records. That is, they are removed from office storage areas; placed in specialised records storage areas, where they may be stored for periods generally ranging from three years to sometimes more than fifty years, and are then destroyed. It sometimes happens that the lapse of time between being sentenced and destroyed will reveal an unexpected value and the record series will be changed in status from intermediate records to archives.

Archivists are cognisant of the crucial nature of this process knowing that once a record is destroyed it cannot be recovered. Suggestions that microfilm or now, compact disc read-only memories (CD-ROMs) should be used to preserve all of the records in a different format, ignore the fact that these conversion processes are extremely expensive, more so in preparing the records for conversion and subsequent retrieval than in the cost of the processes and materials involved. These suggestions also discount the value of the evidence inherent in the original record, much of which is lost in the conversion process. The archivist is learning to accommodate the special problems arising from the use of microfilm, CD-ROM and other machine readable records which are daily growing in volume and complexity as record creators take advantage of computing technology. Although archivists would not wish it to be so, consideration of storage costs and available resources do enter into the disposal process and result in sampling being used as one technique among several to reduce the volume of records preserved.

There is a role for historians in the process of identifying archives. They may assist archivists with advice, provide information about the existence of records which might be taken into custody and lobby for increased archival resources. The relatively recent debate over the Victorian Local Government Records Disposal Schedule provides an example of historians' participation in this process, but it is hoped that the formation of more effective channels of communication between historians and archivists will result in future debates being less heated and more positive. The *Bulletin* of the Australian Historical Association has been most helpful in the selection process by listing research being undertaken in the field of history.

The process of identifying or selective archives can be different for the "collecting" archival institutions, that is those archives which collect the archives of record creators other than their own parent body. It is rare for a "collecting" archival institution to participate in the detailed participatory disposal scheduling and appraisal process outlined previously. However, in many instances the collecting archivist will be confronted with an homogenous mass of records which may have accumulated without any thought by the creators at all. In dealing with this, the archivist will be guided by the principles of provenance and original order to sort the records into their original records series (if these can be discerned) and then into groups of series of records which reflect the individual functional

areas that created them. It is only when this has been done that decisions can be made about which are archives and which are intermediate records. Obviously the process is lengthy due to the complexity involved and the need to document the process to preserve evidence. If the records being acquired are those of an operating organisation then the collecting archives will no doubt wish to continue to take them into custody as they become non-current. The most important ingredient in establishing such a relationship is the assurance in the mind of the record creators that they can have confidence in the archival institution to respect their wishes.

With the wide spread growth of interest in Australia's past, more and more histories are being commissioned resulting in more historians being given access to these masses of records. In South Australia Peter Donovan, a professional historian, has sought to establish within his enterprise an affiliation with archivists to assist with the arrangement and description of records. This is a trend which archivists would encourage and should enable the historian to complete his or her research more quickly and leave a well ordered body of records which may well act as an example to the client of good records management.

This same interest in Australia's past has no doubt been one of the causes of the establishment of the growing number of archival institutions in Australia in the past 15 years and many historians may take the credit for having contributed to this process.

In recent years, several historians have made a particular and positive impact on archives administration and the development of this profession and although it may well be considered invidious to select some for mention, I call to mind some I have had the pleasure of knowing and working with. Emeritus Professor Bob Neale who, as Director-General of the Australian Archives, saw action in the last long but successful battle in the campaign for Commonwealth Government archives legislation; Andrew Lemon, former archivist and first editor of *Archives and Manuscripts* for the newly formed Society of Archivists from 1975 to 1979; Professor Roger Joyce who was a regular participating, friendly presence at many Society activities, and Dr. Brian Dickey of Flinders University who has acted as unofficial secretary of the Friends of the Public Records of South Australia, a small group seeking to boost the early years of the Public Records Office of South Australia following its separation from the State Library of South Australia.

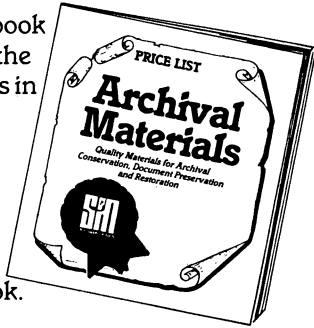
These contracts and those that I look forward to making later today when meeting with the A.H.A. working party on archival resources all strengthen my confidence in the development of an on-going symbiotic relationship between historians and archivists that may not always be unruffled but will flourish if based on effective communication leading to mutual understanding.

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