



“ . . . in the Agora ”

I wish to address some of the issues implied under Sect.8 of the ASA Draft Corporate Plan respecting “remuneration commensurate with professional qualifications”.

Having been in the workforce since 1959, I had forgotten the early struggle for existence until quite recently when I was forced to address the issues—firstly, as inaugural president of the thriving Professional Historians Association NSW, Inc (established 1985) and secondly, as a geriatric member of the University of New South Wales Diploma in Information Management—Archives Administration, Class of 1987.

Everyone agrees that salaries, particularly for the younger members of the archival profession, are too low but it seems that no-one has any clear idea of what to do about it.

I do not accept the view that the ASA is powerless because it has no statutory responsibilities and does not yet perform validating functions via examination or accreditation. The ASA does have classes of membership and therefore it already has a mechanism for evaluating its members—rudimentary though this may be. What it does not yet seem able to do, however, is quantify and evaluate records administration tasks in ways that business managers can readily grasp and be willing to pay for.

What are the realities for new graduates or rather, new post-graduate diplomates? It is easy to forget that at UNSW a good first degree is a pre-requisite to admission to the archives course. Nor should we overlook the fact that every year this particular course attracts highly qualified and experienced people looking for new avenues for their talents.

The Department of Employment and Industrial Relations advises an hourly rate of \$15 for *any* new graduate with post-graduate qualifications. Few new archivists attain these dizzy heights. Assuming a constant 35-hour working week and allowing 4 weeks unpaid holiday, a simple calculation shows that \$15 per hour amounts to \$25,200 p.a. Such a figure would be quickly eroded if a job lasted only a few months, or the next job or jobs paid less. Less? On such low payment inexperienced archivists cannot possibly indemnify themselves against sickness, workers compensation, annual leave, superannuation and other perquisites of institutional tenure. These are thought on average to cost employers 15–20% in addition to each employee salary.

I challenge any employer with family to survive in modest comfort even on a tenured \$26,000 p.a. in Sydney. Let us look at a hypothetical break-down of circumstances for the newly qualified archivist who generally attracts a salary of \$22,000 gross p.a. Yes: there are the advantages of protected working conditions, holidays and so on; but look at what happens to this \$22,000 in the light of the following simple sums (the figures are my own and fallible but the logic is fair). \$22,000 less tax and medicare levy (roughly one-third) leaves \$14,667. I calculate basic expenses in Sydney for one person sharing expenses with at least one other at \$80 minimum for low quality housing plus another \$80 for very modest living. \$160 per week by 52 weeks equals \$8,320 and that leaves \$6,347 or \$122 per week of the original \$423. It does not take much imagination to realise how painful the business of getting established now is.

The PHA has similar aspirations to the ASA, although being State oriented, it seems fated to remain a tiny association. But freelance historians are even more vulnerable to the vagaries of the market place than are archivists. The PHA quickly got out a schedule of recommended fees for Historical Consultancy. Although the skills required by archivists are by no means the same as those for historians, all are driven by common needs for food and shelter. Employers are accustomed to bargaining with a huge range of potential employees and all PHA members have found the existence of Association guidelines invaluable when negotiating contracts. More important perhaps: employers perceive these guidelines—which have no standing in law—in exactly the same way as any other professional code. Better than that—they welcome them.

It is, I believe, a mistake for the ASA to devote too much energy to the very restricted franchise of senior professionals entitled to appear on the ASA Register of Consultants. Consultants are atypical. Most archivists work in an institutional setting as paid employees and it is at the institutional level that the corruption of living standards begins.

Ann Mitchell

Just a year ago some members of ASA were saying rather unkind things about the Historic Records Search. I myself departed from my earlier qualified support, to express considerable misgivings about a program which would advertise the nature, whereabouts and value of material without apparently making any very convincing effort to ensure its safety and security. Somebody referred to the proposed Bicentennial publication of information about material brought to light as a "guidebook for collectors" (and at least one proponent of HRS asked, in genuine bewilderment, "What was wrong with that?") I likened it to publishing precise locations of rock art sites for the benefit of vandals—which was perhaps rather extreme.

I don't wish to revive the bad feelings of that time. Archivists, I think, were justly annoyed at the way they had been ignored in the planning of this archival activity, and grieved to see a *fait accompli* that might have been better had they had more influence. However, we may have been guilty, at the same time, of a somewhat too negative stance. Certainly, the policy of the present ASA leadership, and of the Australian Science Archives Project, of seeking to get maximum mileage out of HRS and to steer it as far as possible in a useful direction, is to be applauded. The news (ASA Bulletin April 1988), that HRS may lead on to the creation of an Australian Historic Records Commission, is immensely encouraging—and could provide precisely the sort of follow-through which has been lacking.

I have turned up, however, a bit of evidence which rather tends to support my earlier complaint, and think it is worth passing on.

Readers may remember that HRS was likened at times to the Historical Manuscripts Commission (though the respective ethos could hardly be more different!) and that the point was made—regarding the safety of materials in private hands—that an English great house was perhaps a rather more credible and reliable custodian of family papers than your average Australian family with a few of great-grandpa's memorabilia in a cake-tin. I am therefore interested to learn that

"During the war, the fear that valuable material would be destroyed by enemy action or by paper salvage drives, led to an inquiry into the state of 400 collections on which the Historical Manuscripts Commission had reported. Of these 400 groups, six had been completely destroyed (only one by enemy action), over 40 could not be traced, and 34 had been broken up for sale."*

* Hyam, G.M. 'The National Manuscript Inventory' *Archivaria* No 9 (Winter 1979-1980). The author sources the information to HMC *The National Register of Archives* (leaflet) HMSO, 2nd edition, 1947, p. 5.

The HMC had been in existence, at the time of this discovery, for some 75 years, and one might guess that the 400 collections had been on its register for an average of about 50 years. Thus, it would appear from this evidence that some 20% of registered collections in private hands may be expected to be destroyed or lost over 50 years.

Whether this was because of, or despite, the act of public registration, one cannot, of course, say. Nor can one aver with any certainty that 400 collections in central official professional custody would have a better survival rate—though one would certainly hope so. One can, however, at least draw the conclusion that we ought to be concerned, as archivists, to render material *safe*, retrievable and available—and to keep our priorities in that order.

Colin Smith

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