



*"... in the Agora"*

**Edited by David Roberts**

**An Archivist is an Archivist**

Thoughts on an Image

The good thing about Australian archivists is that they exist at all, and are a flourishing species.

The problem with Australian archivists is their lack of identity—the absence of a corporate image, if you like.

The public at large does not possess the picture of an 'Australian Archivist' within its collective psyche, and until such an image is promulgated our profession will continue to struggle for recognition and acceptance. The public needs hooks upon which it can grasp in trying to understand any new phenomenon, and 'Archivist' is a new, unknown phenomenon to many Australians.

Everybody knows what a librarian is; similarly with professions such as teachers, historians, doctors, and perhaps even records managers, there is no ambiguity about the roles played. Whilst the public image of those professions may be traditional and outmoded—even erroneous—the images nevertheless exist, and are commonly used by both the public and the professions themselves for political leverage and general publicity.

However the archivist, at least in Australia, has no distinctive 'image' which has been presented to the community. Whilst the history fraternity have their Manning Clarkes and Donald Hornes; the family historians have their Nick Vine Halls and Janet Reakes; the doctors their Bruce Shepherds; and the conservationists their Bob Browns; the archives profession has no such figurehead.

A large percentage of the general public would see archivists as librarians, or members of that species, mainly because many of the major archival collections in Australia are located in libraries, and often administered by librarians. Regional archival collections are usually found in the 'Local Studies' section of the local library. In explaining what we, as archivists, do, many of us are forced to use the librarian as a frame of reference, and cloak our explanation in those terms. Further complicating the issue, the public would have difficulty in making the connection between the librarian/archivist to be found in an institution such as the Mitchell Library, and the white collared, bureaucratic archivist/administrative assistant/clerk working for a government instrumentality or business such as the Australian Archives, BHP, or Westpac.

Archival institutions and archivists are relatively new phenomena to Australia, which in turn is a young country (200 years old) in terms of white settlement. Australian archival records are predominantly 'white', with little or no Aboriginal content—the bulk of Australia's Aboriginal heritage being contained in the land, or as part of an artistic or oral tradition—and we are therefore dealing with a comparatively brief time span when compared to the archival heritage of areas such as China, Great Britain and Europe.

Being part of the post war baby boom, our profession has 'grown up' in an age of increasing bureaucracy, diversity, and uncertainty. The traditional archivist role model as espoused in Britain and Europe (herein called 'the Jenkinson archivist'), catering to a large population of historians, and caring for centuries of records, has largely been pushed aside in Australia in preference to the modern archivist-records manager (termed 'the Schellenberg archivist') called for to service bureaucracies.

Australian archivists had no tradition to call upon when making the choice between the two role-models. In 1945 Australian historians were few in number, and the money for developing archival institutions lay with government or big business. We merely followed the strongest lead, which happened be coming from America. After all, we had many parallels with the U.S. as a young democracy, and would eventually cast aside our British heritage as they had done.

A type of schizophrenia has now resulted amongst the profession in Australia. We have, for example, the 'Jenkinson archivist', craving for

access to significant *historical* records, and hoping to assist in public access to this material, yet often forced to work as a paper shuffler—a glorified clerk—in the role of records manager, with minimum access to the general public, and only a minor part of the work considered of an historical nature.

Vice versa also occurs, where an individual, the 'Schellenberg archivist', wishes to pursue a career in records administration, wherein the main priority is the dispersal of current information. He/she is eventually lumbered with records whose disposal schedule (if one exists) loudly proclaims 'retain permanently'! Who cares about historical values when storage space means money in the business world and times are tough?

The lure of the dollar, usually more substantial in the records administration area, has also forced many archivists to pursue a career in this field, much to their long term pleasure or regret.

As Colin Smith's recent article in *Archives and Manuscripts* revealed, there are many problems with the archival scene in general in Australia. If archivists themselves have doubts as to the direction they and their profession should be taking, then they cannot expect those outside the profession to produce solutions. We need to develop a clear view of our role, and from this basis create/mould a public image. Perhaps this will naturally occur as the profession grows in numbers and forms its own traditions; perhaps it will continue to drive apart.

When I walked out of the UNSW Roundhouse with my Archives Administration diploma in 1987 I was ready to take on the world, and fight the good fight in the name of the archival profession. However I was also full of doubts—what was I? An archivist; records manager; librarian; information manager; administrative clerk; researcher? All of these, or none?

I soon realized that the answer lay in whatever area I was to be initially employed, and that along that road I would travel, however unwillingly. Opportunities could arise in a number of fields, and economic circumstances force us to take the best on offer. My subsequent experience working in both a modern archives and a records centre affirmed my fears in that there were indeed major, important differences between archivists, librarians, records managers, museum curators, information managers, and the like. Whilst the Archives Administration diploma prepared me for work in each of these areas, I knew deep down I wanted to be an archivist (whatever that was, for the definition was now blurred in my mind), and perhaps one day the community would see me as such. And when asked the question—"What do you do for a living?", on answering "I am an archivist" I would be met with a knowing look.

Ah, we can only dream!

Whilst it is easy to identify this lack of image for the Australian archivist, offering solutions to the problem (and many would consider the lack of identity an advantage) is not a simple matter. An image could be both a help and a hindrance. It could be based upon the example of a single individual—a figurehead—or be part of a corporate plan issued by the ASA. It could evolve or be forcefully created.

I would therefore call on the Australian Society of Archivists to consider the development and fostering of a 'public image' for the Australian Archivist. Unless such a simple, concise, image is forthcoming, and the public at large, politicians, and the media know *exactly* what an archivist is and does, we will be fighting a losing battle to get our message across and attain the resources we need to maintain this country's archival heritage.

Michael Organ  
Archivist?

### Waste Paper and Other Stories

Recycling of materials is currently one of the more fashionable trends created by the growing concern for the environment. In Sydney, local Councils are now demanding that households sort their garbage. Born-again greeny Senator Graham Richardson has announced an investigation into use of recycled papers and unbleached paper for Commonwealth government use. The call has since been taken up by both the Council of the City of Sydney and the Council of the City of South Sydney.

In fact, the pulping plants in Sydney have not been able to service the demand for recycling. Their yards are now full of piles of rotting newspapers and this has killed the commercial demand for low grade (mixed) wastepaper for pulping. Once small archives like that of the Sydney City Council would be paid for records sent for destruction by pulping. Now pulping firms are placing demands on us to sort the paper which they will grudgingly remove free of charge. Computer print-out is the only waste paper they will pay for now.

As Robert Lawrie's letter to the *Sydney Morning Herald* in August this year noted, archivists have been recycling paper for decades before the likes of Graham Richardson discovered the environment. We have also been fighting a rear-guard action in the issue of permanent paper for permanent value records. The issues are about to come together and, I suggest, necessitate archivists' intervening not just in the debate but also in the workplace.

The proposal to use recycled papers immediately confronts us with the need to advise on the suitability of such papers for general use. In the past, archivists have attempted to persuade management to use archival

quality papers for permanent records, with varying success. Now, on the contrary, we need to point out the pitfalls of recycled papers.

Jan Lyall's article in *Incite*, (19 June 1989) expresses concern that ". . . environmental considerations could now result in a reversion to the production of poor-quality papers" (p. 11). She points out that the pulping processes shortens the fibres, weakening the recycled product significantly. I would add that the de-inking processes are unlikely to add to the paper's longevity, but have not seen any comment on the acid levels of recycled paper. At best we can say that the life-span of recycled paper is unknown and must assume that they will not endure as well as standard papers.

This adds to the existing problems with the papers already widely used. The tendency of facsimile transmissions to fade is already well-documented, and many offices have adopted procedures to photocopy fax messages to address the problem. It has been observed in my workplace that the (no doubt expensive) bond quality paper used in the wordprocessor printers shows obvious acid deterioration after only a couple of years. It is suspected that the self-inking carbon paper interleaved with the paper is the culprit, but some investigation is necessary before we can assert this with confidence. Self-inking carbon papers are generally used for forms of temporary value but this is not always the case. In the Sydney City Council, they are used for building and development applications, long-term retention records. If the forms are highly acidic, not only will they deteriorate, but will also affect the other papers attached to them.

Computer printout itself is often recycled paper. While 90% of it is required for short-term retention, some has to be retained for 6 years for audit purposes. By the end of the third or fourth years the paper is often quite fragile. In these cases, as in-house archivists, we can offer advice on what paper should be used for various purposes. It makes sense to use recycled paper for records easily identified as of temporary value. For other records, where it is not possible to identify the retention value in advance, the advice to use archival quality paper should be tendered. The profession as a whole needs to address the question of guidelines on paper use.

However, recycling does not only involve advice on what use should be made of recycled or permanent papers. We need also to be aware of which papers can be recycled easily, the more so if the pulping firms are in a position to refuse to take waste paper. For example, use of laser printers should be confined to permanent records. The image laser printers produce is burned into the paper, it cannot be "de-inked". Laser printed papers if pulped are only suitable for use as core in cardboards. Self-inking carbons cannot be pulped for high-grade recycled papers either, so both these papers have to be separated from high-grade papers for recycling. In future, we may even be asked to remove papers from file covers, because the covers themselves may not be acceptable. This makes

it all the more important for archivists, particularly those with records management responsibilities, to intervene now so as not to store up problems for the future.

Because of the political context of environmental concern, we cannot afford to appear negative about the recycling issue. The “wait and see” view expressed by the ASA Council at its August meeting about use of recycled and unbleached papers verges on a negative response. If, as archivists we want to argue for use of archival quality papers for permanent records, we must embrace the gestures towards the environment embodied in the demands for recycling. It would be far better to seek co-operation with the Australian Council of Archives to fund research into the durability of recycled papers, the properties of self-inking carbon papers, the general quality of commonly available papers. Certainly this strikes me as a more appropriate use of the ACA’s funds than funding a prize essay competition. Given the interest of the paper manufacturers in this, it is even something for which we may be able to get corporate sponsorship.

In the interim, it is a matter for individual archivists who are in a position to offer advice on management to give guidelines on what recycled paper can be used for, and what it cannot. In the medium term, the Society should issue a leaflet providing advice on papers, usage, longevity and suppliers—which can be based on the guidelines individual archivists produce in their work situations. If we simply wait on events on an issue like this one, which concerns our interests so directly, we shall be seen as irrelevant or obstructionist. On the contrary it should be viewed as an opportunity to grasp, to establish that archivists have something authoritative to say, which is based on our peculiar expertise and experience.

Anne Picot  
 Archives Services  
 Council of the City of Sydney