

DOCUMENTING MODERN SOCIETY

His Excellency the Honourable Bill Hayden

Address by His Excellency the Honourable Bill Hayden, Governor-General of the Commonwealth of Australia to open the conference of the Australian Society of Archivists, Sydney, 13 June 1991, and subsequently described by David Bearman (in Archives and Museum Informatics, Vol. 5 No. 2, p. 11) as 'as astonishingly perceptive opening address on the implications of information technologies on archives'.

Thank you for the welcome. It is a pleasure for me to be with you today and to officially open this conference for the Australian Society of Archivists.

I say that for two reasons. In the first place, after some thirty years of public life, I have probably contributed more than my fair share to the mountain of paperwork and official records that you have to sift through and decide what are worth preserving for posterity. And in the second place, both as an administrator in government and from time to time in my own researches, I am well aware of the high professional skills you bring to this task.

I am conscious of the fine judgements that have to be made on precisely *what* material should be archived to maintain the public record, and for how long. There are questions of access; of legal and ethical issues; retrieval and management systems; and of course the constant problem of conservation for both the written word and electronic data.

It is equally true that we have come increasingly to realise that the whole story of any event is not always to be found in the official record. I speak not just of politics, with which I have been most familiar, but the documentation of any corporate body, business, association or social movement.

Truth and perspective can also be found in the remembrances of the men and women who took part — fallible and transient as human recollection may be. Hence the growing interest over recent decades in what has been called 'oral history', and the implications it has for you

as archivists to help collect, preserve and maintain what might be described as our collective memory.

Now, I know that the theme of this conference is 'documenting modern society' — the contemporary rather than the historic — and I'd like to touch shortly on a few of the important issues you will be discussing this week.

But in thanking you for the invitation today — and in welcoming to Australia the distinguished overseas visitors who are present — I take this opportunity to commend the Society and the profession generally for the significant work you do. The present very quickly becomes the past, and without an understanding of what went before, so much of what happens today can seem almost unintelligible.

In the fifth volume of his monumental work, the late Professor Manning Clark wrote that 'men make their own history more wisely when they know what that history has been about'.

It is a sentence, I think, that might stand as a memorial not only to *his* great contribution to the Australian search for historical wisdom, but as a testament to the invaluable role that archivists have played in that understanding.

It should be said that the issues you have to confront when it comes to documenting contemporary society seem vastly more complex than those faced by previous generations. For one thing, I suppose, society itself seems infinitely more complex and globally interdependent than it did in the past. For another thing, I suspect that the *amount* of documentation and recordkeeping required of the citizen by the bureaucracies in this journey from birth certificate to death notice has become ever more demanding — not to say intrusive.

Of course, it is important not to let one's historical judgement become clouded by personal irritation. I remember being told at the wonderful 'civilization' exhibition last year of ancient treasures from the British Museum, that there are tens of thousands of Mesopotamian clay tablets, with their cuniform inscriptions, lying around in museum basements still waiting to be read. Indeed, the Commissioner for Taxation was heard to remark that the most interesting thing he saw at the exhibition was a Sumerian list of fields and their barley yields dating from the year 2039 BC.

The interests of the bureaucracy remain much the same. Only the technology differs — and each improvement seems to lead to an exponential increase in the amount of recordkeeping required. Not that I expect my own files to be still hanging around after four thousand years!

But I saw a comment made by Glenda Acland to your 'Keeping Data' seminar last year that with the development of electronic and computerised technology 'there is some strong evidence to suggest that

the paper flow in offices has increased rather than decreased'. And I gather that the sheer quantity of material being produced today is such that governments now preserve only five to ten per cent of their records as archives.

It is true that the bulk of the material is kept for only a limited time — perhaps less than ten years. But other records need to be kept for more than sixty years and some dealing with issues of great significance to the community have to be maintained permanently.

The responsibility that rests on your profession is an onerous one: to select, manage and preserve records that have not merely administrative importance but also great cultural and social significance — so that future generations seeking to understand *our* society may, in Professor Clark's words, wisely 'know what that history has been about'.

I know that David Bearman, of Archives and Museum Informatics, will be delivering a keynote paper on the major issues a little later this morning, and of course the topics will be discussed in greater detail during your workshops and conference sessions, but let me mention briefly some of them.

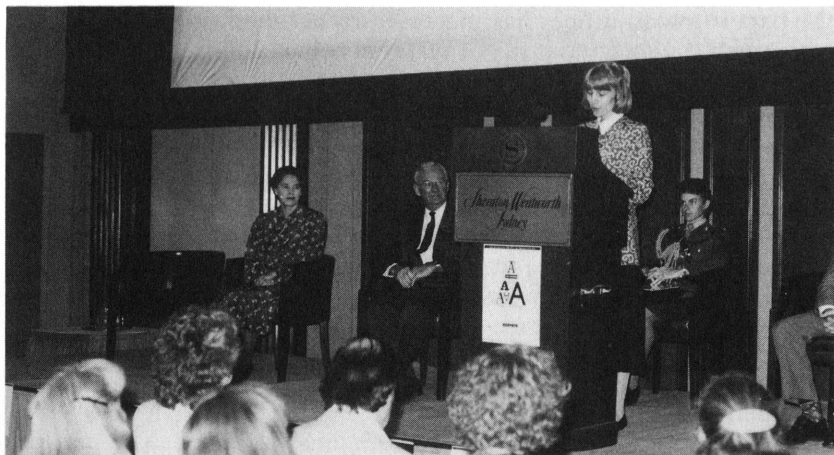
I have already referred to computer and electronic data systems, and it seems to me that the development — and constant refinement — of information technology over the past three or four decades has presented the professional archivist with some of your most challenging contemporary problems.

In a paper to the 'Keeping Data' seminar last year, Frank Upward remarked that the development of electronic recordkeeping had brought 'a new complexity to the environment of the records manager and the administrator'. Complexities such as the sheer amount of material being produced and associated questions of duplication, of how much of it should be kept, in what form, and from what point in the 'lifecycle' of a document?

I know that one of the important issues exercising the profession at present is the question of 'front-end' appraisal: that is to say, how can archivists become involved in the development of business and administrative computer systems *from the beginning*, so that archival concerns — such as the long term retention of valuable data — can be built in?

Do you, in fact, need to have systems analysis training as part of your professional courses? There are also many questions involving the *preservation* of electronic records. To begin with, they are themselves the product of constantly changing technologies. Consider how far computers have evolved over less than a generation.

The National Museum of Australia has in its collection part of the early computer system installed at the Defence Department in



ASA Vice President Anne-Marie Schwirtlich, Annual Conference, June 1991.
(Photographer: Tim Robinson)

Canberra. It consists of banks of cabinets, occupying several rooms, which perform functions that in these days of the microchip are undertaken by equipment that virtually can sit on a desk.

Unless archivists are also to preserve the technology on which these electronic records can be retrieved, the material may need to be transferred to new mass media storage every few years as the current systems go out of date.

This, of course, implies substantial extra costs and duplication of effort. Can we afford it? Allied to this question is the problem of the inherent instability — or impermanence — of much electronic data.

Is it better to retain as much material as possible as 'hard copy' — thus bypassing the technology altogether — or will industry come to your assistance by producing a cheap, stable and permanent storage and retrieval system that will remain current?

Incidentally, the problems of impermanence are not confined to electronic records. You will all be aware of the many difficulties associated with much of the *paper* currently being manufactured. The quality varies enormously.

Despite the high motives of those urging us to use recycled paper whenever possible, the fact is that the Australian Archives suggest it is significantly less durable than papers produced from bleached chemical pulp, and should not be used for records to be kept for more than ten years or records such as maps and plans that are handled frequently. Even some of the higher quality papers have their problems. I recall reading that many modern books are likely to begin disintegrating within a century.

Given the cost of restoring paper-based materials and overcoming the problems of acidity, it is not surprising that part of this conference will be spent discussing the merits of using permanent paper for those records that are to be held over the long term.

The information revolution, of course, has produced many other issues that you will be considering.

There is the question of uniform descriptive standards, and their importance if archives and their users are to gain the full benefit of computerisation including the ready exchange of information between institutions. There is the issue of what services archivists will be required to provide in the electronic search room of the future — that is, if you are to do more than merely hand over a tape or disk? Will you, for example, perform analyses of data on behalf of users? Or will computerised finding aids be developed that are so 'user-friendly' and sophisticated that the role of the reference archivist will become somewhat superseded? Will you be able to serve remote users through electronic data interchange? And on the subject of access and equity, how can electronic archives be made available in a useful form that does not impose a level of cost — and therefore disadvantage — on those less able to pay?

Ladies and gentlemen, the issues arising from the rapid evolution of information technology form a major theme of your conference. But for the archivist interested in documenting modern society, it is also important to consider current developments in the types of *subjects* for which records now are being kept.

Not so long ago the term 'archives' seemed confined to those records of official government and corporate transactions that, in spirit at least, are not so different from the tens of thousands of clay tablets preserving details of ancient Mesopotamian barley fields, and so on.

But of recent years, your interests have become far more widespread to include major aspects of social history — in much the same way as we now collect oral history — and without which an understanding of any society is necessarily incomplete.

Looking at your program, for example, I see that you will be discussing the documentation of the performing arts — in particular dance, opera and drama. Unless comprehensive archives are maintained, these essentially transitory arts will disappear with the performance.

There are issues involved with the archives of religion; of science, medicine and health care; of photographs, film and sound; of the contemporary environmental and conservation movement.

And of particular interest, there is the proposal to document fully the AIDS crisis — the first time in any pandemic that it has been possible to comprehensively record the progress and response to a major

disease at all levels — from government to the smallest community groups, as your literature points out.

As I remarked at the beginning of this speech, truth and perspective of any society are not always to be found in the official record of governments and institutions.

None of us would deny their importance. But for a proper understanding of the human community — to discover the wisdom of which Manning Clark wrote — it is essential to look beyond them to the beliefs, the practices and habits of daily life, and the forms of artistic and scientific expression with which men and women respond to the world around them.

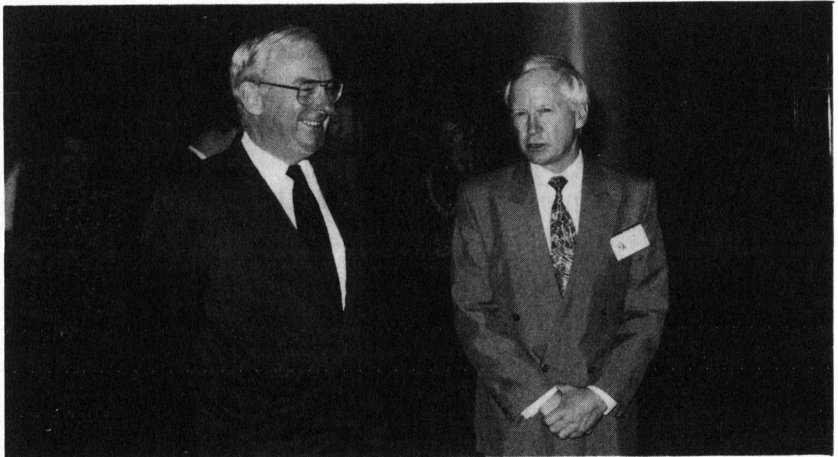
It is true for any historian of the past, and it will be no less true for anyone seeking to chronicle the condition of the present.

It is your role in this as archivists — selecting, preserving and maintaining the contemporary record — that your profession finds its true vocation and importance to us all.

I therefore thank you for having invited me here today, and for giving me the opportunity to express my own indebtedness — and that of the Australian people — to you.

I trust that your workshops and conference sessions over the coming days will be fruitful in a professional and personal sense. Looking at your program I have no doubt that the occasion will be as rewarding as the members of the Australian Society of Archivists could hope.

In so saying it is my great pleasure to officially declare open this conference 'Documenting Modern Society'. Thank you.



His Excellency the Hon. Bill Hayden and ASA President Chris Coggin, Annual Conference, June 1991. (Photographer: Tim Robinson)