AROUND THE WORLD'S ARCHIVES IN 180 DAYS

Gregory Pemberton

In a speech (reproduced here in slightly shortened form) to a user's forum at the Australian Archives ACT Office on 13 September 1991, the historian Dr Gregory Pemberton shared observations and comparisons concerning seven overseas archives. His opinions ranged over user facilities, access rules, opening hours, finding aids, the role of national archives organisations, and the documentation of international relations. He ends with praise and advice for Australia's national archives.

I am here to speak today on my recent trip around the world's archives in 180 days — to speak of my experiences and observations, limited in this public forum to the purely archival dimension of my odyssey of research for a biography of Dr John Wear Burton. But first I should add a few qualifications to the typically overstated title I have given to my talk. The 'world's archives' really means only seven national archives. I know there are many others but I was interested primarily with those main overseas archives which are used (or not used but should be used) by historians, normally diplomatic historians, who wish to explore Australia's political relations with the outside world and, conversely, the outside world's attitudes to Australia and certain Australians. I know non-diplomatic Australian historians (for example, Asianists) are fully familiar with the overseas archives relevant to their studies and do not need me to tell them what is available. I address my comments here primarily to those who deal generally in mainstream Australian political history at the national level.

Traditionally Australian historians, if they ventured overseas at all, have beaten a path straight to the Public Record Office, Kew, and back home. The more adventurous have visited Washington. In my case I visited these two plus five others. These were the archives, which for reasons set out below, I assessed as the most important of those open for public research. But even this is a modest total. It is vitally important that we do not automatically limit our research even to these seven archives. The only limit, which a researcher who wishes to

explore these aspects of Australian history should accept, are those imposed by the perennials, time and money. Even language should not be regarded as an insuperable barrier. For it is not. I found little trouble in deciphering the general content of Dutch records, with the aid of a dictionary, although I do not speak a word of Dutch.

The important point here is the need to trawl as widely as practicable in overseas archives in order to build up the widest, and therefore, most accurate, picture of Australia and Australians. It is particularly important to break down the monopoly of the London-Washington axis. Inevitably, if you rely on the achives of these two countries, your conclusions will be skewed towards a London and/or Washington view. Diplomatic historians in Australia have generally been a conservative lot and they have always easily found plenty of support in the archives of these countries to reinforce their preconceived prejudices over the sensible and not-so-sensible policies followed by different Australian governments. I am attracted to Denis Winter's idea of 'dethroning' the PRO (and, also, to a lesser extent, the National Archives, Washington) from its dominant place in much of Australian history writing. This is particularly important in my case where I expected my subject, John Burton, to be recorded in generally negative terms in the archives of London and Washington. But I knew there was another side to the story. Any story of Australian nationalism told from London's perspective is a legitimate but limited way of viewing our past.

For, one of the points I have been trying to explore in researching my biography of John Burton, is what were Asian attitudes to Australia and to Burton himself, or at least to the policies he advocated as Secretary of the Department of External Affairs from 1947 to 1950. You cannot do this properly if you rely on Australian or, worse, British records alone. Preliminary research suggested to me that Burton's policies, unpopular in the colonial capitals of London, The Hague and Paris and, to some extent, in Washington, struck responsive chords in Asia. Yet, not all the world's nations have open archives, particularly those in Asia and Africa. Indeed, we are one of the lucky few. But that should not stop us trying to access such records. I have recently written to the Vietnamese government seeking any records they have on Australia in the 1940s. I cannot visit there and cannot read Vietnamese but the Vietnamese authorities in Australia have promised to help. Such avenues should always be explored. (I intend similarly to approach the Indonesian and other relevant governments.) The Vietnamese did caution, however, that they had had some minor problem with recordkeeping in the thirty years after independence in 1945 — it was called the Vietnam War — which made preservation of records a slightly larger problem than perhaps you experience here at the Australian Archives; or, perhaps not? As well as pursuing such

avenues as these, I chose as my archival window into Asia, the National Archives of India. Written in English and operating in principle under a thirty-year rule of access, these records seemed to offer the most convenient way to tap into Asian attitudes. This was particularly so for my study because India gained independence early (in 1947), played a leading role among the newly-independent nations and was a major target of Burton's efforts to win for Australia good relations in Asia.

The question I have raised about availability of archival records is central to the task of historians. I would like to make some brief comments before I begin my tour about why archival materials are so important and therefore why historians must work hard to access them. Archives contain the memory of the society or, at least, a part — a very important part — of that memory. National archives contain the records and hence the memory of the state. And the state is usually the most important part of society — at least in terms of power. I know that there are other important parts of society whose memories do not exist in official archives. Ordinary citizens often do not feature in official archives yet their story must also be told. Indeed, we know that women, being a group denied appropriate access to the state, are under-represented in official archival records. We must be mindful of the need to search private records, individual or institutional, to assess properly women's role in our society. For similar as well as additional reasons, Aboriginal people are under-represented in official archival records. Indeed, some of their most valuable archives are in fact literally the memories of their society — verbal rather than written. Yet, even when dealing with these and other groups we come back to the central question of power, particularly of the state, which has impacted greatly upon these people's histories despite, in fact because of, their relative exclusion from state power.

For power is a two-edged thing. We need power to organise, enhance and regulate our lives but we, the people, must always, in a democratic society seek to control power and control it as equitably as is possible. One of the most important ways we do this is through our access to the mind or the memory of the state — through our national archives. On a more prosaic level, the recordkeeping practices of our national archives often sets the standard for other archival collections in our community. The archivists here today therefore bear a very great social responsibility in addition to their official duties . . .

Well . . . we can begin our journey — retracing my journey through the labyrinths of some of the world's great archives in search of some knowledge and truth. My quest was to seek the truth about a prominent Australian, Dr John Wear Burton, the son of the former head of the Methodist Church and Missionary Society of Australasia, who was Dr Evatt's protégé. A man who was in the Christian Student Movement at University and thought of becoming a Methodist Missionary like his

father. Yet, also a man, of whose influence on Australia's foreign policy, a conservative Parliamentarian said 'was almost wholly evil'. A man who was compared by some other conservative Parliamentarians to Alger Hiss, the American adviser to President Roosevelt who was accused of being a Communist spy. Burton's policies as head of our External Affairs department were loathed by the European powers but welcomed by Asian nationalists. Was he then a dangerous subversive, a treacherous spy, a dizzy idealist or a principled fighter for justice. I had my own views firmly established but I hoped to find out other parts of the world viewed him, if at all. I was not disappointed . . .

I arrived in New Delhi, where I stayed with a good friend who is one of our younger diplomats. Each day I would hail a trishaw, taxis being too expensive, and negotiate the fare on the ten minute journey to the National Archives which is located in a grand building built of the same red stone that is used in many of the great public buildings of New Delhi. It is situated on the main avenue Janpath, just where it interects with that other great avenue, the Rajpath. One has to write in advance to the Indian authorities seeking access, accompanied by letters from one university or embassy. But if your letter is lost in the Indian bureaucracy, as was mine — they'll take you at your word that you have written although I did have copies of my letter from my university.

The search room is a small, chapel-like building in an inner courtyard. The search room has two levels running around the walls with the centre open from floor to ceiling where pigeons perch in the rafters. The pew-like seats continue the appearance of a church. You can request thirty-five items a day (hours were 8.30 a.m. to 8.30 p.m.); photocopying at 1 rupee a copy is a bargain but one can only copy 10% of any document. The file indexes, printed in booklets, were excellent but nearly all the records absent, being still in the responsible ministry. This situation is less for secrecy reasons than for the fact that no-one has requested these records previously. Foreign relations is not a big field for Indian historians and few foreigners have been there for that purpose. Another potential source, the papers of Pandit Nehru in the Nehru library, are only open to 1947. Nevertheless, I identified what I wanted to see and with arrangements for special access through the Australian High Commission being possible, I should in the near future see all that I want to see.

I had little joy finding records on Burton's father who greatly upset Britain's colonial office in 1910 for his public attack on their indentured labour system for the Indians working on Fiji's sugar plantations. I did confirm, however, in the Indian records available, that Dr Burton was seen, along with Evatt, as being responsible for Australia becoming the 'white champion' of Asian nationalism. In the future I hope to find out more, particularly about what Nehru felt

about this precocious 33-year-old who almost upstaged him at his own conference in New Delhi at the height of the Indonesia conflict in 1949.

From New Delhi I flew on to Europe and to that famed city — Paris. Paris is Paris and the French are, well, French. Paris is famed for its fashion and style — I have never heard it famed for its archives. Indeed, one archival story I picked up on my travels goes like this. In the French national archives there was an archivist who could never accept the events of 1789. She was a staunch royalist. Each day documents would be brought to her for clearance. As she examined them she would fix her steely gaze on the letter head 'Republic de France' and with neat deft strokes of her scissors — cleanly remove the offending words — along with, of course, whatever other words were written on the back of the document. By the time she had been removed to the asylum of St Anne, she had managed to vandalise a large part of the French national records. I make no further comment on this practice — but really — we researchers here do know by counting the letters in such gaps where the document originally said 'Joint Intelligence Committee Far East', 'CIA' or 'MI5'.

The records of the French foreign ministry, the ones with which I was mainly concerned, are still all located in the ministry, in the Quai d'Orsay. This is in some ways exciting in that one gets to enter that famed ministry in order to research. But beware. This is France. Write to the ministry well in advance, like I did. Turn up at the gate, walk past machine gun-carrying guards, give them a further letter from your university, passport photos for your pass and hand over your passport. Then, be told by the doorman, who refuses to speak his French slowly — that you must come back in a week or so to pick up your pass. You then argue in bad French and make unintelligible phonecalls around the ministry until they agree to let you in that day. Ah! but not until 1 p.m., when the search room opens. It closes promptly at 6 p.m. and is only open four days a week. Sometimes, such as when I returned a month or so later, it is inexplicably closed for a week or so.

In a tiny gloomy room you sit packed together with fifty or so stylish French researchers. You can order only three files a day — by computer, 24 hours in advance — so the first day, after possibly a week's wait, is wasted. You can only copy a limited number, about 200, before you are required to order expensive microfilm. The files are very well organised and presented — too well — to researchers this is a warning — well presented records make researchers suspicious. The French foreign affairs records (which are only central office records as embassy records do not seem to be available) are all in new files of exactly 300 folios. There are about fifty or so files directly on Australia for the open period, 1944 to 1955. Particularly interesting are the exchanges between the French and Dutch over Australia's stand on Indonesia. I discovered that Burton and his department had sent

shivers up the French spine because, seeing Australia's action in taking the Indonesian dispute to the UN Security Council, they feared Burton would do the same over Indochina.

I returned to Paris later only to be told that the search room was closed for two weeks. No reason was given why. So, I headed by train to The Netherlands and The Hague. I was very hopeful because the work of the late Margaret George suggested that I would find much on Burton because of his strong stand over Indonesia. I was not disappointed. The Dutch archives are, if not the Rolls Royce of the world's national archives, are certainly the Porsche. The convenience is unbelievable. Having arrived at the impeccably clean and modern Hague rail station, you find the archives building a two minute walk from the station. It is a modern building with wonderful facilities, including computer requesting of records. It is open 9.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. Tuesday to Saturday and closed Monday mornings. The helpful staff all speak English and are pleased to help — even to the point of taking you in among the stacks to locate obscure records. As is usual around the world, many records are still in the foreign ministry. But in this liberal country this is no problem.

The ministry is only a three minute walk outside the door, past very friendly security guards. The special research room there is run by friendly and helpful staff. If a record is located in another part of the bureaucracy — they will fetch it for you. The original file indexes are available and are user-friendly. The Netherlands records are run in principle on a 30-year rule but there is little problem with going beyond this period. Photocopying is the standard international price of around 30 cents Australian. The records on Australia are extensive, preserved with their integrity unblemished in their original form and contain a wealth of information, particularly on Australia's attitude to Indonesia and New Guinea, but also on many other related topics. French and British intelligence records on Asia, unavailable in their own countries, are freely open here. I discovered the Dutch official hostility to Burton, including the gossip in Dutch intelligence circles (initiated by Australia's Naval Intelligence then to British intelligence), that he was regarded as 'the strongman from Moscow'. When a cable arrived in The Hague announcing Burton's resignation, the Dutch foreign minister scrawled across it, with feeling: 'Good news! Another lunatic is out of politics.'

After my pleasant and rewarding stay in The Netherlands, I travelled to London, my faith in Britain's leadership in the field of records availability severely shaken by my Dutch experience. For I knew from previous visits what to expect in the PRO. The PRO at Kew is a bleak modern building in a pretty setting down on the Thames to the west of central London. Open 9.30 a.m. to 5.00 p.m. Monday to Friday only, it is well organised and well-used. Computer requesting of records is

available and the indexes are easy to use. But appearances are deceptive. As with many things in Britain, the citizen's rights are not always the most important consideration. British official records are carefully culled, with large quantities of material held back in the departments or destroyed. Files lists are similarly culled. To my best knowledge, there is no legal or administrative means by which the citizen can contest such decisions. Nevertheless, the staff are helpful and because of Britain's former great global power, these records are extensive and central to any research about Australia, and indeed, much of the world.

If researching a British-born family, as I was, you can go to the old PRO building in Chancery Lane, London, where you will find other Australians (mostly not professional scholars) tracing their forebears using the excellent records of official censuses which, from 1841, recorded all subjects by name. I was able to trace Burton's forebears to an illegitimate birth in the eigthteenth century which has greatly amused the family.

Back at Kew, one must keep in mind that apart from the yawning gaps in the records, which you can only fill-in by going to other more liberal archives, such as the Dutch or the Australian, there is the problem of seeing the world through English and not Australian, or any other, eyes. British records tell us that Dr Burton 'had all the faults of his master Evatt, with none of his good points'; that, whenever he entered the scene, 'the sky darkened'; and, that the 'tentacles' of his department were spreading out throughout Australia upsetting more loyal Australian government departments. They also tell you that his father was greatly resented for his attack on Fiji's indentured labour system. Many of our older historians have helped perpetuate a British view of Australia, in Australia, by relying exclusively and uncritically on the PRO. We must therefore cast our net wider than Kew — thereby 'dethroning' the PRO. Finally, at 32p (70-80 cents) a photocopy, do not expect to live lavishly in London. For this reason alone, I welcome the Joint Commonwealth Copying project at the National Library.

I next flew to Washington where I have also visited before on several occasions. The National Archives is in an impressive original building on Pennsylvania Avenue in the middle of downtown Washington. Funnily enough, given America's predilection for all things modern, it's archives now seems rather quaint. There are no computer facilities. The reversion to requesting records by decimal number rather than subject has been a step backwards in my view. The generally liberal attitude for which US Archives were renowned previously, is suffering now from a post-post-Vietnam and Watergate syndrome. The use of exemption slips is now very extensive as departments now seem content to force you to appeal against their negative decisions on access. (Such appeals are usually and ultimately successful but that

makes the time spent in the process even more exasperating.) Nevertheless, the records on Asia are excellent and if you are prepared, as in London, to scan the full run of State Department records on bilateral relations with a third country, say Indonesia, you will find the odd nugget on Australia. Indeed, I found some very valuable reports on Burton in this way. While US officials sometimes expressed their concern at Burton's supposed radicalism, there was also an appreciation which conservative British officials could not share, that he was sincere in his support for Indonesian independence. He was also trusted more than Evatt. Nevertheless, other US officials claimed he was 'a fellow traveller at the least'. US Defense Department records are in the same building and are also available. CIA and FBI records have to be requested under FOI legislation. Finally, the opening in recent years of US Embassy (including Canberra) records has made available a huge collection of priceless records.

The search room is open 8.30 to 10.00 p.m. Monday to Friday and until 6.00 p.m. Saturdays. Archives staff are friendly and courteous but the searches and scrutiny by armed guards on entering the building and the search rooms can create a somewhat intimidating atmosphere. It is disconcerting for the sensitive researcher to be approached by a large, armed guard in the search room and be told: 'Only one box on the table at the time, Sir!' Immediate compliance invariably follows. The self-copying service recently introduced has reduced copying costs from 25 cents (US) to 10 cents. But I think it is an unwise practice to allow researchers the opportunity to disturb the order of the documents — especially because of the American practice of keeping all folios loose.

The overnight bus trip to Ottawa from Washington is not a pleasant one but it is cheap. Ottawa is a relatively small town, a little like Canberra or Adelaide. At the northern end of the old part of town runs Wellington Street containing the Parliament and the Archives. Both sit on the cliff overlooking the Ottawa River to the north. The cafeteria and searchroom of the Canadian Archives has a superb view. The search room is open 24 hours once you have obtained a pass. You request records in office hours, by computer, and can store them in lockers in the searchroom overnight. The indexes are excellent and the records are maintained in their original files. Many of the records relating directly to Australia have not been opened because no one has requested them previously. However, the helpful archivists in the Ministry of Foreign Affairs across the road completed a keyword search for 'Australia' on their database and identified all relevant records. They helpfully gave me special priority for records clearance over a number of days and provided me with very interesting nuggets. I will be sending them a further comprehensive list of files on Australia from this search list which they will clear for me in readiness for my next trip.

The Canadian records provide an interesting insight into Australia which is neither quite American nor British. Australia and Canada competed for the role as spokesperson for the middle powers in the these post-war years and some rivalry is evident. Burton was certainly noted both in terms of being a 'straight' shooter and for his role in formulating (with H. C. Coombs and others) Australia's first foreign economic policy. Photocopying is 30 cents Canadian per copy and will be forwarded to you on receipt of payment.

The External Affairs records of New Zealand are currently being moved from a small building in Wellington to a larger and more modern repository. Like other Commonwealth countries the Department of External Affairs was initially run from within the Prime Minister's Department and the records are still in PM's files although you request them by an External Affairs number allocated to them by archives. (A bad practice I feel as I encountered some instances where records had been misnumbered.) The archives is only open during normal office hours and photocopying will be forwarded prior to payment: cost is 30 cents New Zealand per page. The New Zealand Archives has not been widely used by international, or even Australian, scholars. The records are, at least for the first decade or so after 1945, mainly British originated material containing very little in the way of local policy papers. Nevertheless, they are valuable because of these British papers and because on occasions there are useful lengthy records of talks between Australian and New Zealand officials. I found that Burton, despite his father's New Zealand background, was regarded with suspicion by the very conservative and pro-imperial New Zealand officials.

On my return home, I have been busy trying to pay my debts from the trip, organise the masses of photocopies I took, and trying to make some sense of the whole venture. A few thoughts about improving Australia's archives occurred to me during and since my travels as I could not help but make comparisons between these archives and our own.

Overall, the Australian Archives rates in the top rank of these overseas archives. In terms of availability of material only the Dutch and possibly the United States are more open with their records. (The US performance in this regard has declined since I first worked there in 1983 while our performance has improved.) The level of staff performance here is also right up there with the best. The outstanding feature of Australia's national archives, however, without any doubt, is the ANGAM database. None of the archives I visited had anything like it — at least nothing like it which was available to the public. ANGAM cannot be treated as the be-all and end-all of record searching. The hard yakka of scanning old file lists must not be abandoned. But in terms of rapid identification of relevant (although open only) records, it is the

most important aid for the researcher since the introduction of photocopying. This brings me to my final points.

The Archives and its staff should regard themselves as a defence force and a police force. A defence force which fights to protect Australia's archival sovereignty against those countries, usually our larger allies, who seek to impose their controls over our records. Some consideration must be taken of these countries' views in terms of protecting documentation and/or information they shared with Australia in confidence. But they should not be allowed to dictate standards to Australia. There have already been some disturbing instances of this with regard to joint activities among the ANZUS and SEATO powers in Southeast Asia. Archives must also be a police force ensuring that government agencies adhere strictly to the Archives Act in relation to records. Most departments accept fully the implications of the Archives Act and comply splendidly with the Act's letter and spirit. I think ASIO's performance, however, needs some close surveillance. A nation's archives institutions may serve one of two roles — guardians of ignorance or guardians of knowledge. I am confident in the future that Australia's archives will certainly serve the latter.

Because the Australian Archives has overall chosen the latter path, we now have a tremendous archival resource in this country which potentially is close to the best in the world. Australia not only offers the foreign and indigenous scholar vast quantities of valuable Australian records, but also records of Britain and the United States, two of this century's greatest powers. With the admirable openness of these records, combined with the unrivalled ANGAM facility, we have a resource of which we should not only be proud, but which could readily be promoted around the world for financial return . . .

I would like to stress that it is by entrepreneurial activities archives can be made to help pay their way. I would strongly oppose the imposition of a user-pays system on researchers in our archives because this merely will cause contraction in the use of the archives. The small number of researchers, on relatively low salaries, are vital to the profile of the archives through their diligent, necessarily obsessive, research. They transmute information, which is in a form either inaccessible or unintelligible to the wider public, into a form which the public can understand, enjoy and act on. Researchers are the bee to the archival flower. Kill the bee and you kill the flower . . .

I think that the most striking difference between the Australian Archives and those of several of the larger countries that I visited, especially the United States, is that the appreciation of the importance of national archives to the nation is reflected in the location of the archives repository. That is, in the centre of the vital buildings of government in the national capital. I know money is short, but our

archives seems like an afterthought of the government, banished, as it is, out here at Mitchell. The Australian Archives should be down there by the lake near its twin, the National Library, and within easy distance of the Parliament, Foreign Affairs, Defence and the other great departments of government. It should also, like the American archives, have a foyer open to public with attractive, thoughtful and even provocative displays which reflect the history of this nation. Tourists to the national capital should have the archives listed as a 'must-see' on their agenda. For those unable to travel this far travelling exhibitions, coordinated perhaps with the Political Museum, could tour the states.

Some of these ideas may not prove viable. I have my own specific ideas as to what can be done and I am sure that once people in the trade start to think about it, they will come up with even better ideas. Whatever comes of my few random words today, I am sure we all agree as the importance of national archives and the need to give them their proper place in the structure of the nation.