Obituary

Sir Paul Hasluck (1905-1993)

A tribute by Colin Smith

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Sir Paul Hasluck[1] opened the ASA's Third Biennial Conference in Melbourne in 1981 — seven years after his retirement from the Governor-Generalship of Australia. He described the views he expressed there as representing a 'narrow and rigid view about archives'. I have the honour of writing this tribute because I was the upstart who agreed with him.

It was a brilliant move to invite Sir Paul — another contribution, perhaps, of the late Penny Fisher. His address remains unsurpassed, in the series of such addresses, for its profundity, perversity, pithiness and paradox. Most of the audience were probably as startled as I was to hear him talking like one of us — and doing it so obviously out of his own mind and experience, rather than from some notes we had provided.

We would not have been so startled had we been more aware of the role he had played in the conception of the Australian Archives; in bringing about the visit to Australia by T.R. Schellenberg; and in the origins of our Society. Sir Paul must surely have been by far the most eminent Australian ever to take a serious and sustained interest in problems of archives policy. Indeed, he was one of the deepest thinkers about records, and their management and uses, ever to serve an Australian government in any capacity.

The fact might have passed unnoticed and largely unexploited, however, were it not that he happened to be living, in 1942, next door to a person who was involved in convening the War Archives Committee. A conversation on the way to work resulted in his appointment to that Committee, where he sat, in the words of Michael

Piggott, 'as a neutral addition . . . on the corner benches between Binns and Bean . . . an unlikely but invaluable find'.[2]

A paper he presented to the Commonwealth Archives Committee, in 1948, is arguably on a par with the Lamb Report — its equal both in vision and promise, and in the extent to which that vision and promise would be denied.[3] It could also be compared to Canada's 'Symons Report', in that it represented a quite surprising promotion of the cause of archives by an eminent academic, and was well ahead of public and professional opinion in calling for a national policy and system.[4]

The paper proposed 'A National Archives System' that would be characterised by 'coordination, cooperation and standardisation'. There was a conference, in 1949, of state and Commonwealth archivists, to discuss it. Many fine-sounding resolutions were carried at the conference, then forgotten. However, a move for an 'Australian records association' led to the creation of the Archives Section of the LAA — the antecedent of the ASA and the first publisher of this journal. And the resolution to call in an 'overseas expert' was implemented in 1954.

Piggott believes that it was a legacy of the Hasluck paper placed in a context where many Australians were looking to the USA, not only that we invited such an expert, but that we invited an American, T.R. Schellenberg — rather than Sir Hilary Jenkinson. If that is so, Hasluck might even be credited with a small but critical part of the action which led to the writing of Schellenberg's handbook on archives administration — a by-product of his visit to Australia.

In fact, Sir Paul might well have written a handbook himself. I shall demonstrate this by weaving together material from two papers — one which he delivered to ANZAAS in 1951, and the one to us in 1981.

As a senior public servant and an historian, he had had the opportunity, he said 'of seeing the records in process of life and growth and of studying them when the reef finally thrust itself above the waters of time and died'. He understood that files should be 'compiled in the day-by-day routine of government business and left undisturbed [thereafter]'. He considered 'that . . . if a new subject emerges and papers have to be separated, . . . the record of what has been done should appear clearly on the files'. 'The whole documentary record should be kept intact and preserved as far as possible in the form in which it was originally created'.

He must have been bemused by that odd idea one still hears, that respect for the organic structure of records is in conflict with the requirements of historians. 'The research worker's assessment of the credibility and the value of a piece of paper', he declared, 'requires the examination of the matrix in which it was embedded at the time it was formed'.

He understood how records mirrored the hierarchy of function and authority, and were linked organically. He recommended to historians *The Federal Guide: A Handbook of the Organization and Functions of Commonwealth Government Departments* — a 'mechanical aid which ... [he] found useful at all times in the search for material'. He described his own 'top-down' method of 'examin[ing], in the first instance, what Cabinet and Parliament did in fact decide and what appeals, were in fact made to the electorate and then ... trac[ing] backwards from those points through the various circumstances and considerations that made the decision what it was'. He regarded it as essential, if one was going to use records for historical research, that one should have 'a clear and comprehensive understanding of the structure of government, methods of administrative working and the main political issues and controversies of the day'.

He also understood the converse of this perception — that 'the value of the files to either the historian or the story-teller is only a consequence of creating archives and not the purpose of doing so'. 'Even as an approach to historical research', he told us in 1981, 'I had my doubts [in 1942] about the principles behind the enthusiastic concern [of the War Archives Committee] about keeping records safe for the historian. History is not well served if documents are created solely for the sake of the historical narrative.

One of the problems of Hasluck's approach can be discerned, I believe, by close consideration of these passages. The statement about why we should *keep* records does not follow from the statements about how and why they should be *created.* He failed to clearly distinguish these functions, and thus tended, like Jenkinson, to confound their purposes. He was led, indeed, like Jenkinson, to the view that archives should be kept in the long term primarily 'for the sake of the future administrator' — which sits oddly with other statements reported here.

But he was certainly unusual in understanding that creating records with an eye to history 'may even come close to what, in other circles, is called 'cooking the books'. His speeches could almost be recycled for inspiration at our forthcoming conference on 'accountability'. He urged — long before the recent scandals about political shredding and 'yellow stickies' — that 'the files need to show the errors and the correction of the errors as well as the final achievement'; and that 'for those who make documents and those who have the custody of them the old Ideal still stands: "Keep the record straight".' He identified 'two crimes against posterity' — 'the abstracting of a paper from a file or the inserting of a paper after the event'.

He expounded quite superbly — and in very similar terms — the problem of what Jenkinson referred to as 'the makers of Archives begin[ning] to be self-conscious — to keep, as it were, an eye on

posterity'. He referred to the danger presented by the person who 'wants history to serve his own reputation' and thus compiles the record with a view to 'writ[ing] the verdict as well as supply[ing] the evidence'. He had misgivings about freedom of information, believing that we 'need to consider the conditions under which it can be ensured that the archival record will be complete and accurate'. He suggested that they included 'some confidentiality and some freedom from scrutiny'.

His devotion to unselfconsciousness in record making was not unqualified, however. He described the telephone as 'the great robber of history', deploring the unselfconsciousness which led to a failure to 'regularly set down for the records any [Ministerial] conversation' — thus leaving the field to 'a store of anecdotes and untrustworthy legend'.

Again, he showed little enthusiasm for the unselfconsciousness of those departments where 'the records can only be described as the crude survivals of a strange and highly individualistic society'. He reconciled his positions quite credibly, however, by emphasising the 'primary administrative purpose' of ensuring that records are 'complete and accurate'.

He took a similar line about the undisciplined accumulation of a great bulk of records by 'unthinking copyists' using modern office aids. 'Both for the administrator and for the historian', he warned, '[the] vast accumulation of paper will be so much useless junk if it is not compiled and handled in such a way that it can be used readily and surely. Considerable improvement in the techniques of compiling the record, registering, indexing and storing it is essential both for good government today and an understandable record tomorrow'.

And he was similarly undisposed to be led to a reductio ad absurdum of unselfconsciousness in the matter of appraisal selection and disposal of records. He did not follow Jenkinson to the conclusion that records disposal should be left entirely to an 'Administration' (creating agency), which should unselfconsciously 'refrain from thinking of itself as a body producing historical evidences'.

He certainly had no time for the laissez faire which Jenkinson's early philosophy seems to invite. He remembered how, when he was working on colonial records in Western Australia in the 1930s, the materials 'were all over the place — some in a back room at the Public Library, some stowed away in cupboards in various offices of the State Government, some in private possession' etcetera. He knew how 'stacks of "dead" files may be . . . moved from room to room or from one corner to another'; how 'in this process, over a number of years, the original lack of orderly arrangement may be turned into utter confusion. Some files may be lost and mislaid'. These observations left him fervently convinced 'that there should be specialist and fully-

trained professional archivists to advise on all questions of disposal of official papers and to apply strict archival principles'.

He failed, however, to come up with any very convincing theoretical justification for such an intrusive departure from laissez faire. He called on the War Archives Committee 'to preserve ... a complete record of administrative action and not a collection of papers of historical interest' — rejecting the tendency to 'pick... out pockets of gold ... for safe-keeping and shovel away the rest of the papers as so much mullock'. He held that 'no ... distinction can be made with certainty on any given occasion' between papers that are 'historical' and papers which are not. He maintained 'that the ideal in archives work is to preserve the complete archives and not attempt to differentiate between what is considered to be important and what is considered to be unimportant'.

He appeared, however, not to consider that this was in conflict with his endorsement of 'a programme [of the embryo Australian Archives] for the disposal of records ... so that while routine and valueless records are periodically destroyed, there is no danger to the valuable series'. He begged the question of how this differed from picking out pockets of gold.

One might comment here that the professional archivists, in whom Sir Paul reposed such faith, remain as confused as he was about the justification of their intervention, and the philosophical basis of that selection for retention, and destruction of the remainder, which we all practice. We seem only to agree in our commonsense view that it is both sensible and unavoidable; and that most of the destruction we perpetrate probably represents no significant long-term loss to history, culture, heritage and research — nor yet to the integrity — for all practical purposes — of what remains.[5]

The ideal of unselfconsciousness seems also to be abandoned in Hasluck's deploring of 'the "practical man" (making records)... who is merely adept at doing and appears incapable of knowing, in any true sense of the term, exactly what he is doing and (what brings greater dismay) who does not even seem to want to know'. And also of the fact that such eminently unselfconscious record-makers produced 'a record which may be complete for the purposes of administration [but] may be inadequate for the purposes of history'.

He accepted such limitation of the record, however, in putting an onus on the historian to 'lift himself above' its narrow perspectives. He suggested 'that the truth which the records contain may be the truth of certain facts observed in certain circumstances at a certain time for a certain purpose', and that the historian had to be alert to this. The historian approached the records in a way that was distinguished from that of the politician and administrator, in that he was 'concerned with knowing the causes and the consequences of... [a] decision in a much

more profound sense'. 'The legal or political grooves which the administrator accepts as facts beyond inquiry, in the same way as a tramcar accepts its rails . . . are themselves an object of the historian's curiosity'.

Extending this point, Hasluck believed that the historian needed 'frequently to refresh his mind by a reconsideration of the idea of history, in order that he may renew his faith that he is neither a copyist nor a precis-writer but one who is engaged in a work of selection, construction and criticism'. He warned that an historian 'among the vast uncharted heap of modern official records' — if not so inspired — was 'doomed to die the death of an intellectual silver-fish flattened between huge files bearing such titles as 'Miscellaneous Representations' and 'Marketing of Egg Pulp'.

One wonders if that warning could be adapted to archivists. It has some relevance to our wrestlings with the dualism of our role as both housekeepers for bureaucracies and cultural resource curators. One might suggest that we should also partake of some of the historian's inspiration, being the intermediaries between the 'practical men' and the visionary interpreters — the mediators of the mundane mysteries of records.

Perhaps we might appropriate the words of Patrick White's Laura Trevelyan, and claim the wilderness of records for archivists — as she claimed the wilderness of Australia for Voss — 'by right of vision'.

Sir Paul Hasluck did not have all the answers about archives. But he asked most of the questions, and left us with some delightful metaphors and some still unmet challenges. I am glad that we made such an acknowledgment of him so early in the life of the ASA, and that Michael Piggott in his thesis cited below has since flushed out so much more information about his contribution to the development of our profession in Australia. And I am glad to have had this opportunity to hold his ideas up for Australian archivists to admire.

But there is also a story of 'the one that got away'. How much more quickly might we have progressed toward our still-unrealised dreams of a national policy and system for archives, and of resources which bear some relation to our task, if this great and powerful friend had become Prime Minister!

ENDNOTES

1. Paul Meernaa Caedwalla Hasluck KG, GCMG, GCVO — a West Australian — joined the Australian foreign service in 1941, and held many important diplomatic positions, including, in 1946, that of Counsellor in charge of the Australian Mission to the United Nations. He was a member of Parliament from 1949 until 1969, and a Minister in the Menzies government for most of that time, his most senior appointment being that of Minister for External Affairs from 1964 to 1969. He then served as Governor-General of Australia from 1969 to 1974.
   Before launching on his political career he had been a Lecturer and Reader in

History at the University of WA. He was the author of two volumes of the official history of Australia in the war of 1939-1945, and of books about public and political issues — especially about policies regarding Papua New Guinea and Australian aborigines. He shared the Ernest Scott Prize for History in 1972. He also wrote poetry and autobiography.
As regards archives, he was involved not only in the matters mentioned above, but also in the first moves to formalise government archival arrangements in Western Australia.

2. The War Archives Committee (1942-) represented the genesis of formal arrangements for archives in the federal government of Australia. It brought together Kenneth Binns, representing the Parliamentary Library, (later the National Library), and C.E.W. Bean (historian of Australia's part in the war of 1914-1918), representing the Australian War Memorial. The Library and the AWM initially shared archival responsibilities. The Australian Archives began as a section within the Library. The initial focus upon records to do with the war was quickly broadened to encompass all records of the federal government.
3. W. K. Lamb, a former Dominion Archivist of Canada, came to Australia in 1973 on the invitation of the Australian government, to 'advise generally' regarding steps necessary for the further development of the 'National Archives system'. His report, presented in September 1973, provided the basis of the Archives Act 1983 and of other reforms to the Australian Archives. However, many of its aspirations remain only partially realised.
4. Professor T. H. B. Symons introduced a chapter on archives into his 1975 report on the promotion of Canadian studies. It fell on less stoney ground than Hasluck's 1948 statement, provoking vigorous debate in the comparatively much-developed Canadian archival community, and starting a chain-reaction of further reports and developments. The comparatively good situation of Canadian archivy today may be partially attributed to Symons' influence.
5. My own rejoinder to Sir Paul's 1981 paper (cited in Other References, below) was largely an attempt to distinguish professional appraisal and sentencing from fossicking for gold. I like to think that my ideas correspond somewhat to those of some leading theorists in this field.

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