

# Archives in New South Wales--the Situation in 1956

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IT WAS in the prosperous year 1887 that the government of New South Wales began to show an interest in the historical records of Australia — an interest, be it noted, not in the preservation of such records but in their contents and transcription. This is significant because in the 1890's began that phase of awakening national consciousness which Australian historians in recent years have sought to investigate and evaluate.<sup>2</sup>

In 1887 the government of Sir Henry Parkes in New South Wales authorized the preparation of "A History of New South Wales From the Records," and owing to the paucity of record material in New South Wales for the vital period of settlement between 1788 and 1800, had employed James Bonwick in London to copy there the important despatches that had passed between the British Government and the Colonial Administration in Australia before 1800. Bonwick, one of the best known Australian historians of the time, was appointed "Archivist to the State of New South Wales." His instinct for finding records and his skill in judging the importance of material were sure; and, in a series of painstakingly thorough surveys of the records in the Home Office, the Admiralty, the Treasury, the Transport Office, the Victualling Office, and the War Department, he uncovered and transcribed a great number of records.

Bonwick's labors were, one might have supposed, the natural prelude to extensive surveys in New South Wales itself and to the establishment of a state archives. Public interest in the past had been stirred, but eventually the situation developed into "one good overcasting another"; for although the ministry continued the policy of encouraging Bonwick in London, it took no steps to make permanent and suitable provision for the maintenance of state records in Australia. These records were in fact scattered through

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<sup>2</sup> Vance Palmer's *The Legend of the '90s* (Melbourne University Press, 1954) is the best-known recent attempt to assess the growing nationalism of this period.

the basements, lofts, and outbuildings of a score of government department buildings and institutions.

In 1891 a board consisting of Geoffrey Eager, Minister for Finance and Trade, with some other public servants, including G. Arnold Wood, Challis professor of history in the University of Sydney, recommended that a selection of state papers should be published to supplement an official "History of New South Wales From the Records." William McMillan, Colonial Treasurer, approved and authorized this work despite the mounting financial difficulties of the government.

The next logical step should have been the establishment of a state archives repository. Precedents were not lacking for such a step even in the "new countries." In 1872, the Canadian Government had appointed an Archivist and set up at Ottawa an archives office where public records were stored. New South Wales was proud of its role as the "Mother Colony" of Australia. The quantity of government records held in Sydney exceeded that held in any other state capital. Why did the New South Wales government fail to establish a state repository in view of the good work already done? After all, in the preface to the *Historical Records of New South Wales*, published in 1893, Alexander Britton wrote, "The importance of preserving and reproducing national records is recognised in most civilised countries, especially in Great Britain."<sup>3</sup>

The immediate reason for failure to set up an archives in New South Wales was the severe financial depression of the early 1890's. The state government was badly hit. The primary industries of wool- and wheat-growing suffered seriously. In addition, the good work that had already been done was felt, in some quarters, to be sufficient. The volumes of "Historical Records," which appeared in 1893, containing printed versions of some of the most important records, provided an excuse for doing nothing further. Needless to say, the great mass of records in Sydney had hardly been looked at, far less surveyed or inventoried. A third and, in the long run, the most complicated reason for neglect of the state records held by the departments was the amazing bequest of David Scott Mitchell. Mitchell was an assiduous collector who had made the accumulation of Australiana his life's work. Published works, government records, private papers — all were grist to his mill; and his collection included not only portions of the state records of

<sup>3</sup> *Historical Records of New South Wales* (New South Wales Government, 1893), p. vi.

New South Wales but official material from other states. The collection, with the sum of £70,000, was offered to the state government on condition that accommodation should be provided for it. In 1899 the government accepted the offer, and in 1910 the Mitchell Library was opened as a branch of the Public Library of New South Wales.<sup>4</sup>

It was natural that such a rich deposit of records should attract more material. In the following years the Mitchell Library became recognized as the chief repository in Australia for historical records. The benefit which it offered to historical research and scholarship can hardly be exaggerated; but at the same time the nature of the library as a branch or department of the Public Library of New South Wales put obstacles in the way of the full development of a state archives repository, and still does so. Having the Mitchell wing, many in New South Wales are inclined to ask, what else is necessary? Its contents, too, make for difficulty. This library contains state records from all over Australia and private, institutional, and business records from the same wide area. Re-organized, it could be the perfect basis for a state archives in the true meaning of the word. The printed material, with a few outstanding exceptions, could form an adjunct library of secondary printed material in such an institution. Combined with the state records accumulated in recent years by the "Archives Department" — another branch of the Public Library of New South Wales — it could form a body of state records unequalled in Australia. As things are, however, the records in the Mitchell Library are organized on library lines.

Since 1910 the noncurrent records of many government departments have been transferred to the Mitchell Library. Circulars have been issued sporadically by the Premiers to departments, instructing them to consult the library authorities before destroying records, but the instruction has not always been followed. Mitchell was essentially a collector, and his approach, combined with the attitude of the professional librarians, at times in the past resulted in preoccupation with the "rare item" to the exclusion of more mundane material in the selection of records (both public and private) for preservation.

In 1953 the New South Wales Public Service Board ruled that each department of the government should appoint a liaison officer (in most cases the departmental librarian) to work in cooperation with other officers of the department and *with the Public Library* in

<sup>4</sup> Bonwick resigned his post as Archivist in 1902. No further appointment was made.

the examination of noncurrent records. In the same year, the Public Service Board set up a committee to report on the archives organization of the state. After it had reported, three archives officers were appointed to the staff of the Public Library. The selection of records for preservation remained, however, the responsibility of officers of the government departments. In 1956 the trustees of the Public Library gave some consideration to a draft archives bill which would, if enacted, constitute the trustees as the archival authority and combine the office of Archivist with that of State Librarian.

In summary, the failure of the government of New South Wales in the 1890's to establish a repository has resulted in the starvation of the archives as a branch of the Public Library. In addition, the existence of the Mitchell Library with its archival material has led to another complication. As far as the state records are concerned, the picture, at the moment, is not promising. Storage facilities, staff, independence of action, and finance are all sadly lacking.

The most progressive developments in New South Wales during the last few years have come in the field of institutional and business archives. Stimulated by a growing realization of the gravity of the problem and by the visit of T. R. Schellenberg to Australia in the early part of 1954, the University of Sydney appointed an Archivist in that year. This university, founded in 1850, is the oldest in Australasia; and the initial surveys of its record accumulations have made manifest to the university authorities the value of organizing them. Investigation of the university archives has revealed many "items" that will warm the collector's heart, as well as a body of records that will facilitate administration in an institution which traditionally relies on precedent.

For the first 50 years of its existence, the university received donations of manuscripts, for during that time there was no other repository in the state. Like the English universities in the 16th and 17th centuries, Sydney University tended to be regarded as the only place where "items" could be safely deposited. Examples of material of this kind that have come to light include the Hargraves Memorandum of 1851 — the first written record of the discovery of paying gold deposits in Australia. This memorandum was found complete with a specimen gold nugget weighing 3 ounces. Archival estrays that have come into the possession of the university include several 17th- and 18th-century English and Scottish manuscripts, among them the original draft of a treaty terminating a Scottish clan war in 1678.

The aim of the new Archives is to function as a small repository that will simultaneously serve the university's administrative needs and assist the research and teaching departments as much as possible. Projects already under way, which such a university archives is well fitted to undertake, include a systematic research into the effects of Australian climates on old and modern records under varied storage conditions. In establishing its archives, Sydney University has given a lead to other institutions and, it may be remarked, to other Australian states, which thus far have lagged behind in this field.

Of developments in the last 2 years, probably the most far-reaching is the establishment of the Business Archives Council of Australia (New South Wales Branch). Sydney has been the commercial capital of Australia since the first settlement was made there in 1788. In the 30 years after the gold rushes in Victoria in the 1850's, Sydney was temporarily eclipsed by Melbourne; but even then its preeminence in shipping was undisputed. The largest business firms in Australia operate from Sydney. Until 1954 little had been done to survey business records or encourage their preservation. With so little effected in coping with state records, the limited staff of the Public Library could not be expected to undertake investigations in the field of business archives.

In 1954 Alan Birch of Sydney University's department of economics, supported by a group of Sydney businessmen, set up the Business Archives Council. The aims of this body are to promote the study of business history and to encourage owners to preserve business documents. From the outset the response has been gratifying. By June of 1956 the Council's membership included over a hundred of the principal business firms, as well as a number of individual members.

In the last 2 years a card index of business records, with details of their location and scope, has been begun. Over 60 surveys of business records have been carried out and inventories have been made. Needless to say, considerable quantities of most valuable material have come to light. This in itself is heartening progress, but even more encouraging is the fact that several of the largest business concerns have set up their own archives and appointed archivists. In 1954 the Commonwealth Bank of Australia took this step, and in 1955 the Bank of New South Wales — the oldest bank in Australia — did likewise. Several other large firms are about to follow suit. A program of publications has been begun, and it is hoped to produce in a few months the first selection of printed records of

outstanding historical importance that have come to light in the course of surveys in Sydney. Businessmen have shown considerable enthusiasm for the work of the Council.

So far, no branches of the Council have been established in other Australian states, but negotiations are proceeding in Melbourne and Brisbane for the establishment of branches in Victoria and Queensland. Several banks in Brisbane have appointed archivists. The chief difficulty in setting up branches is in getting personnel to conduct the surveys, which take time and much labor.

The Council, besides encouraging firms to preserve their older records, is eager to help with problems of record management; and in this way it has made itself useful to a number of business firms that are faced with storage problems. Consultations between the Council and firms (including nonmembers) are frequent, and not a few businesses have for the first time appointed record officers and begun to organize their record systems.

Plans have been made for a summer school in archives to be held at the University of Sydney early in 1957. It is hoped that this will bring together businessmen, record officers, historians, and archivists for the discussion of problems of archival management and of the general situation of archives in the state.

The dangers inherent in local historical societies' collecting records have been made only too plain in Australia, where as elsewhere such societies are too often short-lived. In recent years, however, there have been some interesting developments within New South Wales in local collecting. The Richmond River Historical Society, with its headquarters at Lismore — a society which shows signs of being permanent — is promoting the collection of private records in the northern part of the state. This society has already issued some lists of records and is doing good work in surveying further deposits in the field. It should be mentioned that the Richmond River Society is fortunate in having an enthusiastic research secretary who is able to give much time to the work. Regional movements for the establishment of new states have also been productive of interest in the history and records of the areas concerned. In the New England area meetings of historians, librarians, and local businessmen will be held shortly, with a view to organizing surveys and perhaps collecting records. This work will presumably center in the newly established University of New England at Armidale.

With so little done by the central government of New South Wales, it is gratifying that outlying areas should show such signs

of activity. There can be little doubt that local records, held locally, are a great stimulus to research and an encouragement to the local historian — witness the effect of the establishment of county record offices in England in the last 30 years.

The whole problem of the preservation of records in Australia is, of course, involved with a basic Australian problem, the constitutional problem of the position of the states in relation to the Commonwealth. The financial difficulties of the Australian states are the biggest obstacle to development. At the same time the settlement of wider areas, the increase of population, and the expansion of government and business activity are resulting in the production of a much greater volume of records as the years go by. The need to face the problem of storing valuable old records and important current documents is causing earnest thought in many quarters. With the growth of university enrollment comes a demand for expanded research facilities and greater availability of material. The formation of a National Records Association might be a means of creating an intelligent public opinion on the question. It would certainly give archivists and scholars an opportunity to exchange views and correlate their activities.

Although the outlook for the state records is not promising, the developments in business and institutional archives are heartening. It is to be hoped that there will be effective action by the government of New South Wales in the near future, while Australia generally is enjoying a period of unprecedented prosperity.