

Archival Backgrounds in New South Wales

By ALLAN HORTON ¹

Public Library of New South Wales

SOME time ago in the *American Archivist* David S. MacMillan gave his view of the situation of archives in the State of New South Wales in 1956.² The following article is a documented statement of the historical background of the development of the State's archival organization. It will show that for almost a century the only body consistently interested in the preservation and management of both public and private archives has been the State Library, called the Public Library of New South Wales.

The library was the first institution in the State to preserve the records of Australian history. It had its origins in the Australian Subscription Library, founded in 1826; and by the 1850's it had developed a strong interest in Australiana.³ When well-informed men thought of establishing a record office they naturally expected it to be associated with the State Library. In 1882 J. H. Heaton, journalist, historian, and statesman, had suggested to the Premier, Sir Henry Parkes, the establishment of a record office at the State Library and the appointment "of a group of learned gentlemen . . . to select material for a Record Office from European sources."⁴ In the 1860's David Scott Mitchell had begun collecting Australiana concurrently with the trustees of the library, and in 1898 he officially announced his intention to give his collection to the State as the Mitchell Library, a department of the State Library.⁵

James Bonwick, who had the title of Archivist of New South Wales, went to England in 1884, and in September of that year he was writing to Premier Parkes, proposing that transcripts of material in London be preserved in the State Library.⁶ In 1888

¹ The author is Archivist, Archives Department, Public Library of New South Wales, Sydney, Australia.

² *American Archivist*, 20:49-55 (Jan. 1957).

³ See the printed catalogs of the Public Library of New South Wales.

⁴ Heaton to Parkes, Mar. 28, 1882, in Parkes correspondence, vol. 8, p. 106-109, in the Mitchell Library, Sydney.

⁵ Mitchell Library, *Historical and Descriptive Notes*, p. 3 (Sydney, 1936).

⁶ *Australian Encyclopaedia*, 1:179 (1925); Bonwick to Parkes, Sept. 19, 1884, in Parkes correspondence, vol. A-B, p. 703-706.

G. B. Barton, editor of the first volume of the *History of New South Wales From the Records*, suggested the establishment of a record office to house both departmental archives and transcripts of overseas material.⁷ In 1891 Bonwick similarly proposed the formation of a record office as a depository for all types of historical records of the State, local governments, institutions, churches, and private families. He proposed that it should also include a historical museum and a portrait collection and that an attempt should be made to have old colonists write accounts of their experiences for deposit in it.⁸ And in 1891 R. C. Walker, librarian of the State Library, was appointed chairman of the History Board.

In 1897 F. M. Bladen, the officer of the Government Printing Office who edited the *Historical Records of New South Wales*, was transferred to the staff of the State Library. In 1902 after Bonwick's death the question of a successor to the position of Archivist was referred to the trustees of the State Library. Bladen was nominated, but the work of transcribing the records was virtually ended by a minute of the Minister for Public Instruction: "I think the work should stop. It has already cost some thousands of pounds more than it is worth." Limited transcription did, however, continue.⁹

In 1902 Bladen went to Europe hoping to represent the Commonwealth of Australia at the proposed Congress on Historical Science. He visited archives in Britain, France, Belgium, Holland, Germany, Austria, Spain, Italy, and Portugal and examined the methods of housing, arranging, describing, and printing the records. Reporting to the Commonwealth Prime Minister, he wrote:

... it would appear to be a wise step on the part of the Commonwealth Government to take the transcription of these old records [those in the P. R. O.] in hand without delay, so that, when a Federal Library similar to the Congress Library at Washington is established, there will be ready at hand the authoritative records of the birth and adolescence of these new countries, which no printed or available books afford.

He spoke of these records as "Australian archives" and continued:

I beg to urge that the work of preparing the material for the establishment of a Commonwealth Archives office be undertaken without delay; that a complete investigation be initiated into the Public Record Office and the Departments of State in London, with the view of procuring the transfer of such original papers as the British authorities will consent to hand over to the

⁷ Barton to Garrett, July 26, 1888, in Parkes correspondence, vol. 6, p. 39-41.

⁸ Bonwick to Parkes, Oct. 2, 1891, in Parkes correspondence, vol. 5, p. 44-47.

⁹ Trustees of the Public Library, N. S. W., *Annual Report*, 1902; Trustees Minute Book, Jan. 13, 1897, Feb. 18, 1902, Jan. 16, 1903.

Commonwealth; and securing copies of others which they may be unwilling to part with.¹⁰

In 1914 Professor Henderson, a historian, visited Europe with an honorary commission from the South Australian Government to inquire into the collection, preservation, and classification of archives in Great Britain and on the Continent. He went to archives in England, Belgium, Holland, and Ceylon and corresponded with Doughty in Canada and Jameson in the United States. He was aware of the stricter meaning of the word archives but he recommended that a department of the South Australian State Library called the Department of Historical Records be established, saying, "It is not desirable in a new country such as this to separate archives and historical documents as they are now being separated in the Record Office and the British Museum in London."¹¹ His suggestion of a combined department was followed, but the name adopted was the Archives Department. By now the idea of the association of library and archival material was quite firmly established.

The State Library was the first institution in New South Wales to put forward a practical plan for the preservation of the public archives of the State. In 1911, not long after the founding of the Mitchell Library, the trustees of the State Library proposed to the Government that a separate Archives Office be established. This office was to be controlled by a board selected by the trustees from among their number. They proposed that legislation be passed establishing the office and fixing a salary for the Archivist almost equal to that of the Principal Librarian.¹²

The State Library was the first institution in the State to distinguish clearly between the State archives and other historical records. This clear distinction was not usual for that time in Australia. Dr. Watson, who was then a trustee of the State Library and who later edited *Historical Records of Australia* for the Commonwealth, moved the resolution; and it is possible that he initiated the distinction. Certainly in restricting *Historical Records of Australia* to official papers he made a significant advance over the methods used in the predecessor *Historical Records of New South Wales*. The trustees' proposal for an Archives Office was referred by the Premier to a committee of senior departmental officers, who reported in favor of an Archives Department but against its associa-

¹⁰ *Report on European Archives by Mr. F. M. Bladen, Barrister-at-Law*, p. 1, 3, 5 (Parliament of the Commonwealth of Australia; Archives, 1903).

¹¹ G. C. Henderson, *Report on the Collection, Storage and Preservation of Archives in Europe*, p. 4 and *passim* (1915).

¹² Trustees of the Public Library, N. S. W., Minute Book, June 20, Aug. 15, 1911.

tion with the State Library.¹³ Nothing happened. The Government did not establish a separate institution to care for its records.

The State Library has been the *de facto* archives of the State for the last 50 years. Because the Government did not establish an Archives Office, either within or outside the library structure, the trustees of the library had to keep on acting to save the records. From 1910 the Principal Librarian had the right to inspect "old documents" of all departments before their destruction. This was not a firm foundation on which to build a State Archives. But this right of inspection, the energy of successive Principal and Mitchell Librarians, and the reputation of the Mitchell Library itself as a repository of historical material for Australia and the Pacific area resulted in many, perhaps most, of the State's inactive records coming into its custody. Even with the library in the field, some material was lost. Two departments gave some documents to other States, a third department was in process of destroying all its records up to 1910 when the library intervened, and a fourth is believed to have dumped the records of the Principal Superintendent of Convicts, dating back to 1828, into the harbor of Sydney. Not long ago the library bought from a private person for 50 pounds 2 volumes known once to have been in the office of a fifth department.

It was logical to have the State Archives closely related to the State Library because of the actual situation, where the Mitchell Library, already established as one of the library's departments, contained material that must be used in connection with the records in the Archives. Furthermore, the only people with any experience in handling archival material within the administrative structure of the Government were on the staff of the State Library.

The question of the ideal place of an archives in the administrative structure of a small state is one on which there seems to be no general agreement. There is not even agreement on what the scope of a state archives should be. This is probably due to the different ways in which states have developed and to muddled, unscholarly thinking about what constitutes a state archives. In Australia, and particularly in New South Wales, archivists, some librarians, and a few historians have been particularly aware of archives in the last decade because in these years of rapid postwar development the storage of government records has for the first time become a problem to the departments that created them. It is doubtful

¹³ Report of Principal Librarian, July 16, 1914, in Papers re proposed Archives Act, Public Library, N. S. W.

whether, to all but a few State officials, the problem of official archives is anything but a question of storage; only 5 years ago arrangements were being made to have the public records of New South Wales stored by the Government Stores Department and the Government Real Estate Office. This is not the only example of storage-centered thinking. Although, as Mr. MacMillan says in his article, interest in Canada's public records goes back to 1872, when the Canadian Government first appointed an Archivist, it was reported in 1951 that "completely inactive and inaccessible [Canadian] public records . . . stored by the Department of Public Works at present occupy 350,000 square feet of floor space."¹⁴

Because of this lack of appreciation of the true value of records to government as well as to posterity the New South Wales Archives is admittedly far below the ideal in storage facilities, staff, and finance. And the last should be first. Mr. MacMillan has attributed this lack primarily to the failure of the New South Wales Government to establish a separate archives repository in the 1890's and to the recognition of the State Library as the State's archival repository. If, however, the library had not interested itself in the establishment of an archives and if it had not acted to save records in danger of destruction, it is doubtful whether today there would be even as effective an archives system as the library now provides.

New South Wales was founded as a penal colony, and until well into this century its people generally wanted no reminders of its origins. Although the overwhelming majority were not descended from transported convicts, a few people had an interest in the suppression of records. Bonwick reported a rumor that records were destroyed in Sydney to protect the interests of such people.¹⁵ It does seem likely that convict records were deliberately destroyed. In a *Report of a Board on the Disposal of Convict Records*, dated September 3, 1901, there is a statement that "about thirty years ago" the Colonial Secretary authorized the withdrawal from all country police offices of the convict records, consisting of indents, tickets of leave, punishment registers, and the like, which were called into Sydney and destroyed.¹⁶ Certainly at the turn of the century people were reticent, if not sensitive, about the convict origins of the colony. The History Board, which was responsible for the publication of *Historical Records of New South Wales* and which included the professor of history at Sydney University, de-

¹⁴ Canada, Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences, *Report*, 1949-51, p. 113 (Ottawa, 1951).

¹⁵ James Bonwick, *Writing of Colonial History*, p. 11.

¹⁶ Colonial Secretary Despatches, 1902.

cided that in returns and statements in the records "a blank line be inserted wherever a convict's name appeared."¹⁷ In a review of volume 2 of *Historical Records of New South Wales*, the principal Sydney newspaper revealed an ignorance and a lack of interest in the preservation of records that was probably typical of most people in the colony. After criticizing the inclusion of "a quantity of the dreariest public correspondence," it continued:

... the whole thing has been conceived on an excessive scale which neutralizes the talent of the historian and exposes the community to ridicule. There is no historian worthy of the name who will not go himself to the original documents for what he wants; and those documents are not so perishable that they need to be printed. The Records Office of this Colony, the British Museum, the Admiralty archives, and other depositories will still contain the public papers, and family papers of real value are not likely to perish in neglect.¹⁸

There was in fact no "Records Office" in the colony.

With such attitudes common, one could not expect to find any great public demand to have records preserved for posterity. No demand came from the departments, either. Fortunately the older departments had room enough to store most of their own records even until 1950 although, like departments elsewhere, they did not always look after their records as well as they might have done. Bonwick reports that in the 1860's he was "directed by the then Colonial Secretary to a room, destitute of any article of furniture, upon the floor of which lay a vast quantity of Papers, cast in thither, apparently as the refuse of Public Offices, but in which was discovered some valuable documents."¹⁹ These were probably the records of the Colonial Secretary's Office — the office of the "Keeper of the Records."

At first, the archives transferred from departments to the State Library were processed as library materials, with no distinction made between them and other manuscripts. It is easy to condemn this practice, but it may be understood when we remember that the only material being transferred was that which departments wished to discard. This meant that odd volumes and parts of series had to be organized. When the State Library began to receive accessions in series and became aware of the essential differences between archives and other library materials, about 1945, it began to process them as archives are processed today. So the position was that the library was recognized as the State's archival institution but

¹⁷ History Board, Minutes, Apr. 28, 1893.

¹⁸ *Sydney Morning Herald*, Jan. 20, 1894, p. 4.

¹⁹ Bonwick to Parkes, Oct. 2, 1891, in Parkes correspondence, vol. 5, p. 144.

there was no record retirement program. The State still did not have an Archives Department in the modern sense. The library had, however, preserved invaluable records of the foundation of Australia. It was therefore not surprising to find that after World War II, when office space became scarce, the Government, without consulting the State Library, established record stores, in which a number of departments kept their records. These were textbook examples of what happens in unsupervised stores. It is probable that the records in these stores would have been allowed to age and then have been destroyed, either by direction of officers who did not realize their value or by one of the many natural hazards of fire, water, vermin, and disorder. This has not happened because State Library officers and especially the present acting professor of history at the University of Sydney, M. Jacobs, took an active interest in their better preservation.²⁰

Before World War II librarians throughout Australia, realizing the special qualities of archives, had begun a movement for the clear distinction of archives from other library materials; and their proposals were for the most part for separate archives departments within the libraries. In 1940 the Australian Institute of Librarians, now the Library Association of Australia, made "Archives" the theme of its annual conference.²¹ This was on the eve of the fall of France, and after that no action was possible until victory was in sight. In the postwar years the trustees of the State Library again took up the question of archives legislation and government recognition of the value of State records. There was far greater interest in archives among librarians throughout Australia than in any other quarter. In 1949 a conference of Commonwealth and State authorities interested in archives included all the Commonwealth and State "national" libraries and the Australian War Memorial. C. E. W. Bean, chairman of the Commonwealth Archives Committee, stated the point of view of the conference when he said, ". . . the more I see of archival work the more I have come to realize that the archivists have an immensely important service to perform for the departments of government — providing as it were the final filing shelf in the whole government system of records."²² The questions dealt with by the conference included training, exchange of information, techniques, and legislation. It was also decided to ask the

²⁰ See, for instance, Miss Jacobs' article, "A New Approach to Departmental Records," in *Public Administration*, June 1955, p. 113-123 (Sydney).

²¹ Australian Institute of Librarians, *Proceedings*, 1940-42, p. 46.

²² *Report of Conference of Commonwealth and State Archives, 20-21st June, 1949*, p. 4 and *passim*.

Commonwealth Government to suggest that a prominent archivist come to Australia as a Fulbright lecturer. This led to the visit in 1954 of T. R. Schellenberg, now Assistant Archivist of the United States, in charge of the National Archives.

In the meantime, and independently, in New South Wales the Principal Librarian had persuaded the Public Service Board of the economies that could be achieved by associating record management with the archival activities of the State Library. The year 1953 saw the creation of a separate Archives Department of the library. It controls records stored in the State Library and in the Government Records Repository. The latter is a huge timber building, not air-conditioned or even fireproof, and should hardly be considered even as a temporary expedient. In using it the State is taking a risk. The State Library, on the other hand, is an ideal building on an ideal site, with room for expansion. The trustees hold land here, and they have persuaded the Government to have plans drawn for an archives addition to their building, which is both fireproof and air-conditioned. In time there may be an archives entirely separated from the library. But for the present the State Library is the only organization within the Government that can greatly influence it in the matter, and it is the agency to which the Government and the powerful Public Service Board look for advice.

Academic insistence, such as Mr. MacMillan's appears to be, on the setting up of a separate administration would confuse the single issue of better archives preservation and processing and especially would throw away a valuable site and a good chance for a secure repository in the near future. His proposal for a separate Archives Department, however, is more reasonable than his suggestion that the Mitchell Library, a great library of printed books and manuscripts of the Pacific area, should be turned into "an adjunct library" to an Archives Department. In the Australian context this is equivalent to a suggestion that a great and important part of the Library of Congress should be reorganized as an adjunct library to the United States National Archives, to which Mr. MacMillan would also give the manuscript collections of the Library of Congress. Incidentally we have in his suggestion an excellent example of the circle of argument that begins with the separation of archives from libraries and ends with the annexation of libraries to archives.

Although in the future there may be a case for the erection of a separate State Archives to preserve the records of the State's departments, Mr. MacMillan's proposal for a State Record Office to house not only State archives but all types of historical records,

including library materials, harks back to Henderson's report. Most archivists, librarians, and historians of New South Wales agree (as did Dr. Schellenberg) on the absolute necessity of separating Government archives from other records, whether they are in a library or not.

A state's archival organization should reflect the way in which the state's governmental institutions have grown. Any proposal to establish a record office not based on our traditions and history would further extend the days during which the New South Wales archives will lack "storage facilities, staff, independence of action, and finance."²³ It is interesting too that the Commonwealth National Library Inquiry Committee has recommended that the Archives Division of the National Library be established as a bureau under another department. It is not proposed, however, to make the National Library an "adjunct" library to the Archives. And while the opinion held by Dr. Schellenberg prevails, that archives should be administratively separated from other material at the national level, the same opinion accepts the view that at the state level there may still quite well be administrative association with physical separation and the accepted differences in method.

The Archives Department in New South Wales, in liaison with the Public Service Board, is concerned with efficient record management and the introduction of systematic disposal procedures in the State departments. It is also concerned with other departments outside the orbit of the board. By instruction, records are not destroyed without permission from the archival authority. The selection of records for preservation is not the responsibility of departmental officers except under schedules drawn up by the Archives Department.

Australia must solve its archives problems on its own terms and in the light of its own past. Even Dr. Schellenberg, who believes strongly in the separation of archives from library administration in the Federal Government, has said in his book, first published in Australia in 1956:

If funds are not available in a State for the establishment of a separate archival institution, the administration of its archives may well be combined with that of its library materials. . . . Such combinations may be made so long as the distinctions among the various types of materials, the methodology that applies to each of them, and the administrative requirements of an archival program are fully understood.²⁴

²³ MacMillan, in *American Archivist*, 20: 52 (Jan. 1957).

²⁴ T. R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives; Principles and Techniques*, p. 20 (Melbourne, Australia, and Chicago, Ill., 1956).

The archival position in New South Wales is by no means ideal. There is no archives legislation, there is not enough satisfactory repository space, and there is a general lack of understanding by departmental officers of the benefits that good archives management can bring to government. These are the problems of the Archives Department today. It is, however, an indisputable fact that if the State Library had not interested itself in record preservation there would have been fewer records preserved and those records that were kept by the departments would have been stored in out-of-the-way places, without supervision, without care, and without hope that any competent authority would interest itself in their future. In judging the archival position of New South Wales today an unbiased observer must consider this.