Solon Justus Buck—Archivist

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ON DECEMBER 9, 1944, before the Literary Society of Washington, Solon J. Buck read a paper entitled "Let's Look at the Record." [1] To look at *his* record, on the day on which his picture is being unveiled in this conference room, is an honor deeply appreciated by one who for many years had the privilege of respectfully observing the manifestations and the impressive results of his leadership in the archival field.

Not long after Dr. Buck had been appointed to the distinguished office of Archivist of the United States a great number of his friends and collaborators, at the invitation of Dr. and Mrs. Luther H. Evans, gathered at the Mayflower Hotel to celebrate the event and to wish him Godspeed. Many of us still remember the warm glow that excellent sherry and a happy anticipation of Dr. Buck's future achievements gave to the occasion. The day was December 7, 1941, and when the party broke up and the guests returned to their homes the news of Pearl Harbor was coming in over the radio. It seemed a somber enough prelude to Dr. Buck's term of office, and indeed it ushered in a period that would challenge the administrative and professional leadership of the man who was to be at the helm of the National Archives during the difficult war and postwar years. Still in its formative stage, the young institution's problems were to be of towering magnitude, comparable possibly to those of the early years of the National Archives of France, which had to grope its way during the days of the Revolution and the interminable wars of the Napoleonic Empire. How fortunate it was that the second Archivist of the United States had brought to Washington so rich an experience in the administration of historical source material—how felicitous that his voice had carried great weight in the conference of American archivists since its inception—and how appropriate that his portrait should now take

* The second of two addresses made at the unveiling of a portrait of Solon Justus Buck in the National Archives conference room, Apr. 8, 1960. The author, Fellow of the Society of American Archivists and the Society's past president, recently resigned as dean of the Graduate School of the American University and has returned to the duties of professor of history and archival administration at that institution.

[1] Published in *American Archivist*, 8:109-114 (Apr. 1945).

its place with those of the founding fathers who have preceded him in this growing Hall of Archival Fame!

When, in 1935, R. D. W. Connor, the first Archivist of the United States, began to select his principal aides, Solon J. Buck was his logical choice for the position of Director of Publications. From the vantage point of his office, Dr. Buck was in a position to observe both the growth and the growing pains of the infant National Archives, to gage its accomplishments, and to assess its working arrangements with a view to the services it should render to the Government and to research. To acquaint the scholars of the Nation with the increasing store of source materials in the National Archives, as early as 1937 he provided for inclusion in the Archivist's *Third Annual Report* a 58-page guide to the holdings, forerunner of the more elaborate *Guide to the Materials in the National Archives*, which, only five years after the Archives' establishment, described in more than 300 pages the records received before December 31, 1939. Old-line archivists could but marvel at the effectiveness thus displayed in forging a descriptive tool that most of the archives of Europe had been slow or remiss in furnishing the scholar.

Broadly interpreting his duties as a liaison officer with the world of archives and documents, Dr. Buck sought at an early time to obtain for the National Archives recognition of its place among the archives of the nation and those of foreign countries and to establish its contacts with other organizations in the field. He played a leading role in establishing the Society of American Archivists, officiated at the birth of the American Documentation

higher learning. Wisely, however, he decided that such a curriculum should be made available at the seat of our national archival agency, and so in the following year he taught the first class in the history and administration of archives at the American University, including me as a partner in the enterprise.

Perhaps the crowning achievement of his career as Director of Publications was initiated when on March 11, 1940, the Archivist was inspired to appoint Dr. Buck chairman of a committee to study finding mediums. Proceeding from the conviction that the technicalities of archival description (the committee's immediate concern) could not be isolated from other aspects of archival work, the committee probed into the basic problems of the organization and control of archival holdings. There emerged from its deliberations the concept of the record group, the pragmatic adaptation of the vague concept of *respect des fonds* to the distinctive nature of the records of twentieth-century government with its mammoth agencies, its hectic growth, its ever changing structure. As a result of the deliberations of the committee, the Archivist issued, on February 28, 1941, his "Directions for the Preparation of Finding Mediums," [2] containing the concept of the record group, born of the traditions of archival economy but adjusted to the problems of the present—a concept that has proved to be a most effective means of controlling and making accessible the information in the bulky records of modern administration.

No doubt it was in recognition of these outstanding contributions of Dr. Buck that the Archivist, on March 3, 1941, broadened his responsibilities and changed his title to that of Director of Research and Publications. His office had truly developed into a center of research in which the basic principles of archival administration were being explored with due attention to comparable experience abroad and its possible application to the American scene. And when, some six months later, the first Archivist resigned to accept a recently endowed chair of American history and jurisprudence at the University of North Carolina, it was but fitting that Dr. Buck should have been made the second Archivist of the United States.

Characteristically, when the duties of the highest office were conferred upon him, the new Archivist rose to meet the challenge with a deepening sense of responsibility. Still struggling with the problems arising from the confused and frequently amorphous character of the records from which the National Archives must select and assimilate those of enduring value, he was convinced that the

[2] Published as appendix 3 of the *Seventh Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*, 1940-41, p. 65-68.

remedy lay in action taken within the agencies of origin, at the time when the documents are filed, when they are first consciously considered as record material. He knew that the judicious appraisal and selection of records of enduring value depended on their having been initially arranged and administered with that end in view. He knew that the problem of records, from the day they come into existence in the agency of origin until they are finally either disposed of or deposited in the archival agency, should constitute the subject matter of an integrated program—records administration. With a Government operating under the stress of international tensions and war, with new war agencies being established and additional masses of record material coming into existence at a vastly accelerated rate, the Archivist obtained a supplemental appropriation from Congress and set up formally as a new activity his own records administration program designed to "persuade and assist the operating agencies . . . to give adequate attention to the problems of records management." [3]

The agencies, especially the war agencies, were only too happy to cooperate. Many of the members of the National Archives staff went out into the war agencies to assist in the establishment and operation of records administration programs, and thus the ideas, concepts, and techniques of records management found their way into the bloodstream of the Federal Government. Dr. Buck's initiative and guidance and the pioneer work of his emissaries laid the foundations for what was later to become the legal responsibility of an expanded and reorganized National Archives and Records Service. Of the forward-looking and sensational nature of this development there can be no doubt. What in their fondest dreams European archivists had never hoped to achieve, within 15 years after its establishment the National Archives was able to do.

Another innovation almost as dramatic as that of the records administration program was the initiation and expansion of microfilm publication as a service to both Government and scholarship. True, most European archival agencies had recognized the scholar's right to ask for and obtain microcopies of whole runs of records, and many had in fact assisted a Library of Congress mission in producing them. But a program under which copies of important bodies of records would be readily available for the modest cost of positive prints was a totally new departure in the field of reference service and was bound to eradicate completely the famous proprietary attitude of the archivist toward his records. If, in Dr. Buck's own words, archives are "the official record of human exper-

[3] *Eighth Annual Report of the Archivist of the United States*, 1941-42, p. 4.

ience in organized living," multiplication of copies by means of a cheap publication program was the most effective way to enhance "their effective utilization in the maintenance of peace and the advancement of civilization." [4]

Precious little time and money, however, were available during the war years for the furnishing of service to scholarship. In that period the National Archives assisted other agencies in their war efforts by providing information upon receiving individual requests and by anticipating and constructively meeting such requests through its series of *Reference Information Circulars* that described material pertaining to critical problems and stategic areas.

Soon, however, Dr. Buck and the National Archives were to be called upon to extend their services beyond the confines of the United States and to enter the field of archival concern on an international plane. Early in July 1943 representatives of the Committee on the Protection of Cultural Treasures in War Areas met with Waldo G. Leland and Dr. Buck, in the latter's office, and asked for the Archivist's cooperation in a program designed to assist in the protection of cultural monuments, including archives, in war areas. Dr. Buck, intensely interested in contributing to so important a task and dedicated to the common cause of the profession, made the facilities of the National Archives available to prepare the desired data for the committee and to issue the material in the form of lists of archival repositories in enemy and enemy-occupied territories. Although the contribution these lists made to the actual protection of archives cannot be measured, it is certain that Dr. Buck's initiative helped to establish the National Archives as the country's expert and official voice in archival matters pertaining to the war. Later on, archives officers of the U. S. Army, selected and recommended by the National Archives, rendered effective service not only in securing and making available the records of German agencies but also in helping to rehabilitate damaged archival depositories abroad and in returning displaced and confiscated archives to their rightful owners. Such efforts convinced European archivists that the National Archives and their colleagues in the United States were willing and ready to extend them a helping hand.

But this was only the beginning of the National Archives' career in the field of international archival leadership, which, in the postwar period, was to reveal most clearly the imprint of Dr. Buck's personality and guiding hand. In his presidential address on the archivist's "one world," delivered on October 24, 1946, before

[4] "The Archivist's 'One World'," in *American Archivist*, 10:12, 24 (Jan. 1947).

the Society of American Archivists,[5] he made two proposals. The first, calling for the establishment of a United Nations Archives, played its part in getting that unit established, though it failed to develop into the great international archival agency that Dr. Buck envisioned. Farther reaching and more effective was the proposal for a UNESCO archives program aimed at the creation of an international organization of professional archivists. Happily, at the 1946 Paris conference, his suggestion was included in UNESCO's program. Encouraged by its approval, Dr. Buck in his dual capacity of Archivist of the United States and president of the Society of American Archivists could take the initiative in calling upon about 120 prominent archivists in other countries to join with him in determining "the nature of the organization that archivists want to see established . . . and the next steps to be taken." [6] At a meeting held upon UNESCO's call in Paris in June 1948, a committee of experts considered a proposed constitution prepared by the United States and, resolving itself into the first constituent assembly, adopted this constitution with certain changes. In due recognition of the leading role he had played in organizing the International Council on Archives, Dr. Buck was elected one of its two vice presidents. Two years later, at the First International Congress, also held in Paris, Dr. Buck, as spokesman of the American delegation, effectively pleaded for a more democratic organization of the Council that made it "a professional organization of archivists" rather than "a federation of national archives and national archival societies." [7]

When he attended the 1948 Paris meeting, Dr. Buck had already resigned as Archivist in order to accept the position of Chief of the Division of Manuscripts and incumbent of the chair of American history in the Library of Congress. While this position brought him closer to research activities in the field in which he had his roots and while it reduced to more manageable proportions his heavy administrative burdens, it did not diminish his continued interest in archival work. In fact, it enabled him to inject the archival point of view and experience into the handling of private papers and thus to reduce the existing cleavage between the techniques of the archivist and those of the custodian of manuscripts. (This, to the archival generalist, seemed a most important step, inasmuch as—in most of the older European archives—government records

[5] Published in *American Archivist*, 10:9-24 (Jan. 1947).

[6] *American Archivist*, 10:229 (July 1947); the full text of the letter and annexes is on p. 227-231.

[7] Margaret C. Norton, "The First International Congress of Archivists, Paris, France, August 21-26, 1950," in *American Archivist*, 14:15 (Jan. 1951).

and private papers had been treated in accordance with identical principles and techniques.) In that manner, Dr. Buck's term of office in the Library of Congress was an extension of his archival leadership into a closely allied field.

Meditating about the archivist's status and stature in modern society, the British archivist Hubert Hall regretfully arrived at the conclusion that "archivists are feeble folks." Not so the second Archivist of the United States; on the contrary, his was a profile in archival courage. He diagnosed, attacked, and solved some of the pressing problems of the National Archives; and he did so with determination and incisiveness, always with firm convictions and often with a crusading spirit. Surely he did not do so single-handed; for while he had a liking for "do-it-yourself projects," as a wise administrator he knew how to make use of the manifold talents and abilities of a distinguished staff, how to arouse their enthusiasm for the attainment of his purposes, and how to recognize their contributions. And, speaking of his collaborators, who would not want to single out for highest honors his lifelong collaborator Elizabeth Hawthorn Buck, beloved First Lady of our archival microcosm?

s we have looked back upon his record, we cannot fail to pay ıte to the size and significance of Dr. Buck's achievements. en, in 1941, he took over the governance of the National Ar- es, archivists the world over knew little of the existence of this ıtante. Its first reports adorned the shelves of archival libraries remained largely unread. When he left, it had developed phi- phies, practices, and techniques that attracted the interest of colleagues in foreign lands, and its role as one of the leaders ıe field was recognized and gladly accepted. In the world of ives, it had achieved a place of prominence. A large part of record it has established for itself is the record of Solon J. ĸ. We rejoice in seeing it visually perpetuated in this confer- room as an expression of the admiration of his friends and orkers and as an inspiration to future generations of archivists.

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—Solon J. Buck, "The Training of American Archivists," in *American Archivist*, 4:84 (April 1941).