

The Queensland State Archives

By R. C. SHARMAN*

Public Library of Queensland

MANY Americans who served in World War II are familiar with Brisbane, the capital of Queensland and headquarters for General MacArthur's Southwest Pacific Area. The friendly "occupation" of the city by American troops during the war may have done something to modernize Brisbane, but in matters of immediate concern to archivists Brisbane—and Queensland as a whole—had the distinction of being slower in the development of a public records program than any other part of Australia. Queensland, however—the youngest of the six Australian states—did not achieve Separation from New South Wales, the "Mother State," until 1859, and therefore had some excuse for being the last Australian state to appoint an archivist.

The government passed the Libraries Act in 1943, and Part IV of this deals with public records. There is evidence that the whole act was hastily prepared and ill-considered, and nowhere is such criticism better founded than in relation to Part IV. As E. E. Burke points out in his article "Some Archival Legislation of the British Commonwealth,"¹ there was a considerable family resemblance between the three state archives acts that had been passed in Australia at the time he wrote his article. Part IV of the Queensland act is remarkably similar to the Tasmanian Public Records Act, passed earlier in the same year. In fact the Queensland legislation is based, practically word for word, on the Tasmanian act—an amazing piece of imitation, considering that the Tasmanian act had not been implemented and that no one then had any idea how effective it would be in practice.

The Queensland act puts the ultimate archival authority in the hands of the state librarian and makes the Library Board responsible for the final approval of disposal schedules. In brief, it provides for the destruction of public records in certain cases, for the deposit of public records with the state librarian, and for the compulsory transfer to the librarian of records found to be in improper custody. Unlike the Tasmanian act it does not provide

* The author, State Archivist of Queensland and formerly in charge of the Tasmanian State Archives, is a member of the Society of American Archivists.

¹ *American Archivist*, 22:275-296 (July 1959).

for compensation to dispossessed custodians, nor does it exempt from the operation of the statute the records of the legislature.

There was a provision in Part IV of the act to postpone its implementation until the Governor should bring it into force by proclamation, and for 15 years the archival legislation of Queensland remained a dead letter on the statute books. Meanwhile the John Oxley Memorial Library, a library of Queensland historical books and documents, had been brought under the wing of the Public Library, and it collected some of the historical records of the state that normally would have been deposited in an archival institution. In 1945 John W. Metcalfe, principal librarian of the Public Library of New South Wales, Sydney, visited Queensland to make a report for the Queensland government on library services, and he recommended that the archival service should be got under way and that it should form part of the Oxley Memorial Library. It is unfortunate that many recommendations of Mr. Metcalfe's report dealing with library services were not accepted. Archivists in Queensland today, however, are grateful that the action of the government in ignoring a generally valuable report at least saved them from becoming a mere subsection of a library that in itself is only a small part of the total library organization. Mr. Metcalfe reported:

The need for early action is obvious. In one Government office on open shelves and without any apparent relation to any other records are to be seen and handled by any casual visitor the originals of early despatches from the Colonial Office to the Governor.

It is recommended that a state historical collection be formed in the state library, preferably having the Oxley Library as its nucleus and bearing its name, and that an archives department be established in close connection with it. A senior officer of the state library might be known as the Oxley Librarian, and a deputy to him as the State Archivist. He would need to have some historical as well as library training, and should have the opportunity of securing special archives experience first at Sydney and Canberra and possibly later overseas.

Urgency of action about archives derives not so much from any urgency for their immediate use, as from obvious weaknesses in their present custody. If experience elsewhere is any guide it is certain that unique records are being destroyed almost daily in ignorance of their historical and administrative significance, or wantonly by persons who are unsympathetic to the preservation of past records or who are anxious to secure extra office space with the least trouble to themselves. Even those willing to help in the preservation of records are often unskilled in their valuation, mere curio value is often confused with historical value; for example, letters and account books throwing light on the history of a period, a place or a movement may be destroyed, whilst

out of the same material a mere curio such as a "miniature" newspaper, is pathetically preserved.

Everything cannot be done at once, but if the setting up of an archives department were postponed, for example until space could be provided for it in a new building, the Board might be accused, even though unfairly, of a dereliction of duty. The whole of the upstairs floor and gallery of the present building [the Public Library building in Brisbane] might be devoted progressively to the Oxley Library and archives, and the Board might have part IV of the Act proclaimed at an early date and advertise its willingness to receive archives, even though it might not be able to arrange them and make them properly available to students for some time.²

Nothing was done, however, and meanwhile valuable public records dating from the earliest days of settlement provided fodder for white ants (termites) and silverfish or moldered away in the semitropical humidity of Brisbane's summer.

In May 1956 a new spur to implementing the archives legislation came in the form of a threat. If the librarians did not do something about the question, other people would. In that month a paper was read at a meeting of the Royal Historical Society of Queensland on behalf of its author, David S. Macmillan, archivist of the University of Sydney. Macmillan has always been a zealous advocate of the separation of archives from libraries, and he realized that Queensland provided the only opportunity in Australia, so far as public records were concerned, for archival administration to be initiated on what he claimed was the right footing. His paper ("Planned Archives—Queensland's Opportunity") urged the establishment of a state Archives independent of library control and administered, with the help of the Historical Society, by some such authority as the Premier and Chief Secretary's Department. Writing for the *Brisbane Courier-Mail* a review of T. R. Schellenberg's *Modern Archives*, in December of the same year, Macmillan said:

Although part of the Libraries Act of 1943 made provision for the maintenance of the records of Queensland, the relevant section of the Act has not yet been proclaimed.

"Modern Archives" lays down sound lines of approach to Queensland's problems.

It advocates separation of the library and archives functions.

This is necessary for efficient records management and archival administration.

This book makes it obvious how far Queensland lags behind, not only the

² "Public Library Service In and From Brisbane" (1945).

advanced countries overseas, but also those other Australian States which have begun to preserve their record heritage.

If Queensland's archives can be organised along the lines indicated by Schellenberg, avoiding the mistakes which have been made in other States in Australia, Brisbane may yet have the repository which Queensland, by its history and by its importance in Australia, deserves.³

Macmillan also urged this step very persuasively in letters to Sir Raphael Cilento, president of the Historical Society, who took a leading part in preparations for the celebration of the centenary of self-government in Queensland. The Historical Society, which had for some years collected historical records, relics of the past, and other museum pieces and had displayed them in a national house in Newstead Park, Brisbane—where stands the monument to American servicemen who “passed this way” in the Second World War—began to show concern that Queensland was the only state without an archival institution. Queensland was rapidly nearing the end of its first century of separate government, and those who were active on the Historical Committee of the Executive Committee of the centenary celebrations formed the view that an archives office should be established. Among those who supported the president of the Historical Society and David Macmillan in their campaign to have Part IV of the Libraries Act repealed and a new act passed vesting the control of public archives with the Premier's Department were the undersecretary of that department and the parliamentary librarian.

Meanwhile two members of the history faculty at the University of Queensland began a task that has had an important bearing on the establishment of the State Archives. Under the auspices of the Library Board, A. A. Morrison and R. Joyce, senior lecturers, began a survey of historical records in Queensland. Their aim was to produce a published “Bibliography of the Records of Queensland.” They were to investigate all known resources, including deposits of public records; records of semipublic bodies, business firms, sheep and cattle stations, churches, and other voluntary societies; and historical records in private hands. In a state with an area of 607,500 square miles and a population more widely distributed than in any other Australian state, this was a giant undertaking, especially as the work had to be done during vacations and without compensation. In various trips over the years 1957-59, Messrs. Morrison and Joyce covered a large part of Queensland and in many cases found material of considerable value. Arrange-

³ *Courier-Mail*, Dec. 4, 1956.

ments were made for some of the smaller deposits to be sent to the Public Library for preservation by the Archives Section when at last it was established.

The survey has not been completed; indeed, under the circumstances it would be surprising if it had been. In 1960 one of the lecturers went overseas on study leave and the other suffered ill health. Plans are in hand, however, for the resumption of the work, in which the Archives staff, appointed in 1959 and 1960, is expected to take some part.

The librarians had won the battle for the control of archives, and in July 1958 Part IV of the Libraries Act was proclaimed. Efforts were then made to secure the services of an archivist, and in November 1959 this writer became the first State Archivist.

An old stone building of three main floors and a loft has been designated for the use of the State Archives. This building has the distinction of being one of Brisbane's oldest; its two main floors were erected by convicts when Moreton Bay, as it was then called, was a penal settlement. Though the original building dates from 1829, a brick wing and an additional floor were added later. There are some 10,000 square feet of floorspace within the main brick and stone walls, and about three-quarters of this can now be used for accommodating public records.

In 1960 the State Archivist, aided by an officer of the Public Service Commissioner's Department, carried out a survey of accumulations of records in government departments in Brisbane. It was discovered that some 50,000 feet of records were occupying premises that could well be devoted to other purposes and that these records should be transferred either to an archival repository or to an intermediate records center. The footage above did not include records in departments that still had adequate space for them.

The government was urged to erect an intermediate records center, and plans were soon drawn up for a building to be constructed on half an acre some six miles from the heart of the city. Recently these plans have had to be curtailed somewhat, as it was found that the cost of the building would have exceeded the amount that the Public Service Commissioner was willing to submit to the cabinet. The building now to be erected will be less ambitious than that planned at first and will probably leave half the site vacant, so that later, if need be, a multifloor building can be erected there.

Over 14,000 feet of records have been removed to the old

building, which is to house the archives. These are not by any means all historically valuable. The institution of a file-issue service for semicurrent records was necessary at the very outset, and other records being stored are of the type that have no permanent value but must be retained for a number of years because of auditing requirements. Many valuable series, however, dating from both before and after Separation from New South Wales and in fact dating from the very beginning of the operations of several instrumentalities of the state are preserved in the Queensland Archives. They include records of the Department of Justice from 1859, the Secretary for Lands and Works from 1863, the Colonial Secretary (later the Minister for Health and Home Affairs) from 1859, the Surveyor-General from 1846, the Supreme Court from 1857, and the Board of Education (subsequently the Department of Public Instruction) from 1860. On the Archives staff are seven persons, only three of whom are graduate professional officers; with a staff so limited, progress in the detailed description and arrangement of these records is slow. However, about a third of the records have been described in fair detail, and the rest are so arranged that most material on hand is available at short notice. The detailed control, however, that the State Archivist would like to exercise over the records has not yet been established.

The government has recently taken further steps to insure that departments will not keep obsolete files and to make available to historical researchers other material that cannot be accommodated in the principal building. A room 64 feet square has been set aside in one of the main public buildings (the Anzac Square Buildings, in the center of Brisbane's business area) as a records storage area. This room, on the ground floor, has been completely equipped with Compactus shelving, the mobile units of which are six feet high. By husbanding every square foot of space, the contractors were able to install 12,000 feet of shelving in this room. It will be made available for departments having a records accumulation problem, chiefly departments already in the building. The allocation of space, however, will be the responsibility of the Archives staff, who will also give service to offices that need to refer to the records.

This venture represents a new development in records administration within the Queensland government. It was originally intended that the departments storing records there would be allocated a certain number of the 21 lockup units provided by the Compactus shelving. Each department would be supplied with

keys to its units, and there would be no central control over the repository. The Public Service Commissioner's Department decided, however, that this plan would lead to difficulties. Some departments would ask for more units than they could economically use; others would use their allotted space for records that might well be destroyed. So the administration of the area was entrusted to the Archives staff. The conclusion one may draw from this development is, I think, that in future the government wants to keep all storage areas for noncurrent records under the control of the Archives staff.

Other accommodations to be administered by the Archives staff will be made available in a former hospital building in Wickham Terrace, Brisbane. Here some 2,000 square feet of floorspace will be used for storing records that are definitely not current and are of doubtful value but that must, because of the requirements of the auditor general or of the Department of Justice, be retained for all time. Many court records from rural areas, financial records of local governmental bodies, and similar items will be stored in the old hospital building, which takes its name from Lady Bowen, the wife of the first Governor of Queensland.

Plans for the future include the appointment of a records administration officer, whose task will be to study methods of filing records in departments and to report on ways to prevent unnecessary accumulation of documents and on earlier decisions made as to the disposal of material of limited usefulness. In short, he will be a liaison officer with the record-creating agencies and will help them establish programs of paperwork control and records management.

We hope also to appoint a field officer to coordinate records disposal programs throughout Queensland's 112 shires (rural local governmental bodies), 7 towns, and 14 cities. Part IV of the Libraries Act gives to the archival authority the same responsibility for local government records as for state records. The field officer will also have an obligation to seek out records of such semigovernmental organizations as harbor boards, regional electricity boards, and pest control authorities. For so large a state, the establishment of regional records repositories would appear to be an ideal goal; but, since more than half of the state's 1,400,000 people live in or within 60 miles of Brisbane, the removal of records to the capital is not so inequitable as may first appear. The field officer will also do what he can to arrange for the preservation of nonpublic records, business archives, historical manuscripts, and the like; but, if these are transferred to the Library Board of

Queensland, the Oxley Memorial Library will probably have control of them. Indeed, that library already has a useful collection of such material.

The problems confronting Queensland archivists are similar to those of archivists in most countries of the world. Here, however, in some ways they have been aggravated by unfavorable climate and topography, and in overcoming these the state has an opportunity to make a real contribution to archival administration. The extremes of climate between the humid coastal areas and the arid or semiarid inland and the seasonal contrast between monsoon rainfall in summer and drought in winter—especially in the northwest part of the state—cause a deterioration in paper that, in conjunction with other and more common influences, imperils the continued existence of documents. Insect pests thrive in the warm, moist climate of areas like Brisbane, and the present archives building is by no means immune to the depredations of rats or safe from the danger of fire. Termites frequently appear, consuming everything in their paths.

This building is in fact ancient and ramshackle; it will have to be restored and renovated. Because it is one of only two surviving examples of convict construction in this city, there is a disinclination to demolish it. It is a historical relic in itself. The decision to house historical records in such a building may seem appropriate to lay persons, but to one who has to conduct an efficient and effective service in such a building its suitability is open to grave doubt. The restoration of the building is indeed planned; but if this entails, as some have suggested, the reduction of the structure to the dimensions of the 1829 original, two-thirds of the floorspace that might be used for housing archives will be lost. Even with an intermediate records center in the suburbs, the old building will soon become too small, and if the threatened reduction takes place the structure left will be utterly inadequate.

A reference service to historians and other academic inquirers has been put into operation, but the demand for such service appears to be small as yet. Using written historical inquiries as a criterion, it is interesting to note that the Tasmanian State Archives, of which the writer was in charge before coming to Queensland, handles well over 200 of these a year. In a year's time in Queensland, however, only about 60 have been dealt with. This is all the more remarkable because Tasmania's population is only one-quarter of Queensland's. There is, however, a considerable stirring of interest in historical records and their potentiality for research among the postgraduate schools of Australian universities;

several doctoral theses are now being based largely or partly on records in the State Archives. It is, however, an interesting indication of Queenslanders' disbelief that their own state could provide any material of interest that the postgraduate students of the University of Queensland are making practically no use of the archives.

“. . . respecting the Cuban national archives . . .”

President Woodward of this Institution has kindly given me a letter of introduction to you. But I am led to believe that the next few days will be on your part so full of business that it is better for me to write, since one of the two things about which I should wish to speak to you ought to be presented, if at all, before your departure for Cuba. I should like, if I may, at a later time to present the letter of introduction and ask for a few minutes of your time in a matter not so easily covered by correspondence.

My immediate business is to ask you, if you deem it proper, to take some action respecting the Cuban national archives, in the interest both of the Cubans and of the historical scholars of the United States. I may claim in a sense to represent the latter, not only by reason of my position in this Institution, but also as being the president of the American Historical Association.

The Cuban archives, even though much was carried away to Spain, contain a great amount of valuable material for Cuban history; and I think it will be agreed that unless such materials are well preserved and placed at the service of historical enquirers, we cannot expect that interest in the past of the Island to be developed, without which we cannot expect the Cubans to become in any high degree public-spirited and self-reliant.

But those archives also contain a very large and important body of material for the history of the United States, partly because of the close relations, political and commercial, which have subsisted in the past between the Island and our country, but mainly because of the former dependence of East Florida, West Florida, and Louisiana upon the captain-generalcy of Cuba. The interest of this department in this body of material has been warmly aroused by the results of an investigation of them which we undertook some time ago, as one portion of our general work in foreign archives. Mr. Luis M. Pérez of the Library of Congress spent several months in Havana at our instance in the preparation of a Guide to the Materials for the History of the United States in Cuban Archives. He prepared a detailed report respecting these materials, which we have now in press as a volume of about one hundred and fifty pages. It will, I am sure, reveal to our workers an unsuspected amount of valuable and interesting material for our history, and will make it plain to all that our country has a distinct interest in the security and the orderly maintenance of the archives in which these documents are in so great abundance to be found.