

# Archives Administration in Australia

By MAIZIE H. JOHNSON\*

*National Archives*

**A**N INTEREST in national archives developed later in the Commonwealth of Australia than in European countries or in the Australian states. When the Commonwealth was formed in 1901, the six states of Australia already existed. These states, whose history and records began early in the 19th century, not only became archives conscious earlier than did the Commonwealth Government but from the beginning were mainly interested in locating and preserving records of the past. The new Commonwealth Government, with fewer old records, became concerned with archives largely because of the proliferation and wanton destruction of Federal records. Thus, on the Commonwealth level, attention has been primarily directed toward accession, use, storage, and disposal of predominantly 20th-century records. Yet, because of its youth, the Commonwealth was aware of the necessity for a records management program far earlier than most countries or states. In spite of these two contrasting motivations, both the Federal Government and the Australian states until recently have administered their archives programs through sections of the national and state libraries.

By 1961 most of the permanent Federal archives were in Melbourne or Canberra, in the Archives Division of the National Library, but these two repositories were staffed by a total of only seven archivists, plus other, nonprofessional workers, to administer, service, arrange, and describe the Central Government's permanently valuable records. Clearly, the central archives administration was understaffed. Another problem was that of accessibility. Australia, proceeding in the fashion of the British Government, opened to the public only records over 50 years old. Because few records could be opened before 1962, many requests for access had to be referred to the Government department concerned, a time-consuming procedure.

The Archives Division was also handicapped because a central

\* Mrs. Johnson is on the staff of the Archival Projects Division, Office of Military Archives, National Archives.

registry system, used in all Commonwealth departments, made it difficult to separate the valueless series from the valuable, to describe records by function, or even to ascertain their provenance. Consequently the new-born Archives Division ran into difficulty both in describing records and in evaluating them.

Furthermore, although it was Commonwealth policy to restrict accessions to the records of the Commonwealth Government departments, no chronological limitations were placed on accessions. Frequently records were accessioned too early, with the result that Government agencies had to refer too often to their own recent records. At the same time the Archives Division was fostering the accessioning of reasonably current records because the archivists, in the lack of definitions of series in the registry system and confronted with frequent organizational changes in the departments, could obtain necessary information only from the memory of living officials. This problem was further confounded by the accession of vast amounts of records over a short period of time so that all staff members were employed in transferring the records, creating storage space, and sorting and repairing records.

In common with most other archival agencies, the Archives Division faced the problems of too little money and too little space, but the problems mentioned earlier really guided the direction of the Archives Division of the Commonwealth National Library and the Commonwealth Archives Committee. These two bodies became primarily interested in records management.

Mention should be made of the Archives Section of the Library Association of Australia (L.A.A.), established in July 1950. The membership of this section comprises librarians, archivists, research officers, historians, and interested scholars from all six Australian states and the Capital Territory. The establishment of such a section was sensible inasmuch as many libraries had become archival agencies. Its organizers considered it advantageous to have the Archives Section attached to the larger body, composed as it was of people interested in archives, who would have a sympathetic attitude toward archives and archivists. Furthermore, it was thought that archives could function more economically if attached to libraries than as separate agencies. The heterogeneous membership of this organization naturally bespoke its concern for the importance of all types of source materials.

Three important developments have taken place in archival administration in recent years. The first of these was the development of public records administration on the national level. The others

were legislation in the Commonwealth and in New South Wales and a change in the requirements for certification of archivists. These developments came about through an increased and revitalized interest in archives and management. An important contributory factor in this quickened interest was the extended visit of T. R. Schellenberg from the U.S. National Archives. As a result of an invitation from the National Librarian and a Fulbright lectureship, Dr. Schellenberg spent several months in Australia during 1954 lecturing and conducting seminars. He conducted two seminars on a nationwide basis, one in records management and one in archives management, both in July 1954. The Archivist of the National Library and archivists from all states except Queensland attended, as did representatives of the Australian War Memorial and the universities.

The seminars provoked much discussion. Undoubtedly the records management seminar served to spur the Commonwealth Archives Committee and the Archives Division of the National Library to work in records management, to which they had already tentatively committed themselves.

As early as 1951 the Archives Division had worked out retention and destruction schedules, and beginning with its annual reports in 1952 the Commonwealth Archives Committee had emphasized primarily the number of schedules created, the volume of records authorized for destruction, and the volume of records transferred to archival depositories. By 1958, however, the Committee realized that, in spite of the primary concern with the disposal program, the program had been unsuccessful in many instances. Most departments had assumed no responsibility for disposal of records, and few really satisfactory schedules had been prepared. This unsatisfactory situation, it was concluded, could be attributed to flaws in the recordkeeping systems of the various departments. Consequently, at the invitation of the Public Service Board, a steering committee was created to plan a syllabus, training documents, and the program of a course to be given to registrars appointed for the departments.

Ian Maclean, the Chief Archives Officer, as a member of this steering committee worked zealously for the training of the registrars. He had heralded the new era of records management launched in the United States by the Hoover Commission in 1949 and had criticized those archivists who thought of themselves as "historians serving historians" and made only "occasional sorties into the domain of records management." He believed that records mana-

gers and archivists belonged to the same profession, but that within the one profession there should be some degree of specialization. "There will be, too, those who prefer public relations work and those who prefer backroom activities . . . ."<sup>1</sup>

Although Mr. Maclean appears to be one who prefers public relations to stack-area activity, he did deprecate the Australian situation, which permitted no time for finally arranging and describing the archival records—a situation which had, at least until 1958, relegated the Archives Division to the position of a records management division.<sup>2</sup> Although one can appreciate Mr. Maclean's concern for the uncompleted archival work, one must take exception to his firm belief that records managers and archivists are one and the same. Even Dr. Schellenberg has agreed that the records management system in the United States might have worked just as satisfactorily as a division of the Bureau of the Budget as it has as a division of the National Archives and Records Service.<sup>3</sup>

Since Mr. Maclean believes that the arrangement of records is planned with the purpose of making them available for use—that is, that a "planned arrangement" rather than a "natural order," is the basis for recordkeeping—it was on this basis that the training syllabus for the registrar appointees was prepared.<sup>4</sup> The course was conducted during a 4-month period in 1958, with the result that a trained records management specialist was appointed in each Government department with responsibilities for developing a continuous and consistent records management program involving current record systems, disposition schedules, and special departmental reference and information services. Indeed, Australia does now have a comprehensive public records administration.

Through his seminars and other lectures Dr. Schellenberg generated considerable interest in archival matters throughout Australia and aroused enthusiasm in the archivists themselves. Thus, though indirectly, the problem of whether archives should, or should not, be associated with libraries arose. This problem had less to do with the manner in which archival material, as contrasted to library material, was treated than with the inadequate support that archives sections were receiving within the various libraries. In the earlier years archival material had been handled as library

<sup>1</sup> Ian Maclean, "Australian Experience in Record and Archives Management," in *American Archivist*, 22: 388, 389 (Oct. 1959).

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 393.

<sup>3</sup> *Proceedings of the Records Management Seminar Held at Canberra, July 1954*, p. 36 (Canberra, Commonwealth National Library, 1955).

<sup>4</sup> Maclean, in *American Archivist*, 22: 400 (Oct. 1959).

material had, but this was a common occurrence in most countries. By 1954, however, most archival records were being treated and inventoried in the way recommended by the U.S. National Archives in its *Staff Information Circular* no. 14 because all librarians and archivists were aware of, and most were convinced of, the necessity for handling archives in record groups rather than by the cataloging methods of librarians.

Several archivists, however, believed that they lacked the support of the librarians. Dr. Schellenberg's stated preference for the separation of archives from libraries and his recommendation to the Commonwealth Archives Committee that the Archives Division be separated from the National Library was an intoxicating draught for those archivists who were already convinced of the desirability of separation or who, with their enthusiasm now aroused, saw a more successful future if they were not continued in subordinate positions in libraries. This desire for freedom depended greatly upon how enlightened the librarian was and the extent of his support. Many archivists saw separation on the horizon and approved it but wanted it to come later, at a time when archivists would be strong enough to stand on their own feet in an independent profession. Others at the time believed separation desirable but later, usually after a change in librarians, thought they had more to gain from cooperation with, rather than separation from, librarians.<sup>5</sup>

The intensity of the debate between librarians and archivists and among archivists over the separation or association of these two professions was revealed—largely between the lines—in *Archives and Manuscripts*, a publication of the Archives Section of the L.A.A. begun in November 1955. The librarians did not aid their cause by insisting that library methods courses were necessary qualifications for archivists, for the result was that the archivist had both to pass library examinations and to meet certain archival qualifications.

The principal spokesman for the secessionists was David S. Macmillan, appointed archivist in 1954 at the University of Sydney. He berated the state archives organizations upon their failure to mature over the years, but he did admit that the insufficiency of money and staff prevented the surveying of Australian records. Even so, he still avowed, "This connection with libraries is probably the biggest retarding factor in Australian archives develop-

<sup>5</sup> T. R. Schellenberg's private papers on his Fulbright lectureship.

ment today—bigger even than the financial difficulties for the States . . . .”<sup>6</sup>

Allan Horton, then the Archives Officer of the Public Library in New South Wales, decried Mr. Macmillan's attitude. Mr. Horton's partiality to the early archival work undertaken by the librarians disclosed itself in his statement: "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."<sup>7</sup> Horton believed that a separate administration for archives would confuse the single issue of better archives preservation and processing and would throw away valuable sites and safe repositories. As for Macmillan's idea that the Mitchell Library of New South Wales—the chief repository in Australia for historical records—be turned into "an adjunct library" to an Archives Department, Horton saw in that 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."<sup>8</sup>

By the end of 1959 the Archives Section of the L.A.A. was clearly split. The members of a special committee established to consider the problem of archives and libraries were in disagreement except on three points: that generally "as in other countries, archives and libraries, will become separated but that there will still be archives in libraries, and libraries in archives"; that two separate professions did exist; and that provisions should be made for those archivists who wished to remain in the L.A.A.<sup>9</sup>

As early as 1957 a committee known as the Paton Committee of Inquiry Into the Commonwealth National Library had recommended that the Archives Division of the National Library become a separate agency of the Government. Nothing came of this recommendation until 1960, when the National Library Act was passed. It became effective on March 23, 1961, and provided for the separation of the Archives Division from the National Library. The latter became the National Library of Australia, while the former became an Archives Division Office as a part of the Prime

<sup>6</sup> D. S. Macmillan, "A Programme for Australian Archivists," in *Proceedings at the Summer School in Archives Held at the University of Sydney, March 1957*, p. 39.

<sup>7</sup> Allan Horton, "Archival Backgrounds in New South Wales," in *American Archivist*, 22:43 (Jan. 1959).

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 46.

<sup>9</sup> Archives Section Committee, "Report on Archives and Libraries," in *Archives and Manuscripts*, 1: 27-28 (Nov. 1959).

Minister's Department. This office became responsible for the preservation of Government archives and had the same functions as the former Archives Division.

The first archival legislation to be passed in the State of New South Wales, the Archives Act of 1960, followed on the heels of the national legislation. Mr. Macmillan worked earnestly for this legislation and was frequently consulted by the Department of Education, which drew up the bill. The act established an Archival Authority of New South Wales to control the activities of the Archives Office, an office concerned only with Government records. The Mitchell Library, like the National Library of Australia, was to continue to collect other historical source materials.

In spite of this obvious secessionist trend, the librarians did not concede defeat. The special committee of the L.A.A. in 1959 made an extensive survey of the difference in requirements for archivists and librarians. Some 3 years of discussion followed. In April 1962 the Board of Examination, Certification, and Registration of Librarians of the L.A.A. achieved some agreement concerning a Registration Certificate in Archives. For the first time in Australia, an attempt was made to minimize the amount of study necessary for archivists in fields not relevant to the archivist's needs. With the approval of the new Registration Certificate in Archives by the General Council of the L.A.A. the Association became the recognized examining and professional body for archivists in Australia as it is for librarians.

Probably the most specific plan to come out of the archives management seminar in 1954 was that of publishing a Guide to Pre-Federation Records in Australian Archival Depositories, both state and national. Preliminary inventories were to be submitted to the editors by September 1956. Although this was an admirable decision, the guide is still far from complete. Several suggestions have been made, such as setting 1970 as a more realistic date for the guide, preparing a guide only to record groups rather than to the series comprising each record group on the basis of completed inventories, religiously devoting a certain percentage of staff working time to preparing the inventories.<sup>10</sup> Considering the small staffs, the volume of records accessioned, and the absence of any inventories before 1957, it is not surprising that no greater progress has been made toward preparing the guide.

Although archivists have looked askance at the close association

<sup>10</sup> D. J. Bluford, "Guide to Pre-Federation Archives," *Archives and Manuscripts*, 2: 18-19. (Dec. 1961).



of libraries and archives in Australia and have deplored the jewel-box attitude toward the contents of archives taken by archives sections of libraries, it would seem that lack of money and a late development of interest in archives have had a far more important effect upon the slow development of archives than has any association with libraries. The librarians and historians, indeed, initially stimulated archival thinking.

No doubt Dr. Schellenberg's visit in 1954 raised the morale of Australian archivists and served to develop an esprit de corps among some of them. This quickened spirit was an important factor in bringing about the separation of archives from libraries in the Commonwealth and in New South Wales. It remains to be seen, however, whether this is the beginning of a trend toward separation or merely two isolated cases. With the increased cooperation by librarians, as exhibited in the L.A.A., the 1960 type of legislation may quite conceivably be nonrecurring. Available literature reveals little change in procedures in either New South Wales or the National Archives Office since achieving independence, but it is still early to draw a conclusion. The situation in Australia is confusing in that, even with separation, the L.A.A. is the examining agent for archivists. The only publication for Australian archivists is the *Archives and Manuscripts* of the Archives Section of the L.A.A., and the archivists in this section are working assiduously both to publish a progressive and improved periodical and to attract Australian archivists as members of the section.

Thus it is quite probable that the secessionist wing of the archival profession has gone as far as it will go, and this may be for the best. What Australian archivists need is money—money for verminproof and weatherproof buildings, money for equipment, and money for a staff large enough to arrange and prepare finding aids for their records. The necessary funds will probably not be forthcoming until the financial responsibilities of Federal Commonwealth versus states have been sorted out and redefined,<sup>11</sup> but the limited money available might better be spent for true archival needs and functions than for the increased overhead expense of supporting two separate administrative organizations in each state. Cooperation rather than independence may ultimately be the solution.

<sup>11</sup> David S. Macmillan, "Archival Reform in Australia," in *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, 1:213 (Oct. 1958).