

The International Scene

MARJORIE BARRITT *and* NANCY BARTLETT, *Editors*

The International Scene department is a forum for short substantive pieces on archival practices and issues in foreign settings. Particularly welcome are papers that illustrate archival practices or thinking that is not characteristic of the American archival scene. Articles by foreign archivists focusing on significant and innovative programs, projects, and activities in their institutions; observations of American archivists abroad; and commentaries by foreign archivists examining American archival practice and theory are of interest.

Occasionally International Scene will feature abstracts from foreign archives journals. The coeditors welcome inquiries from readers interested in preparing such abstracts.

Correspondence relating to International Scene should be addressed to Marjorie Barritt and Nancy Bartlett, Bentley Historical Library, 1150 Beal Avenue, Ann Arbor, MI 48109-2113.

Archival Education in Britain

MICHAEL ROPER

The main path of entry into the archival profession in the British Isles is through one of the graduate university courses leading to a diploma or a master's degree (the distinction is irrelevant for all practical purposes). Such courses are offered by the University of London at University College London, the University of Liverpool, the

University College of Wales at Aberystwyth, the University College of North Wales at Bangor, and the University of Ireland at University College Dublin. With the exception of London, the courses are taught within a history department. At University College London the course is taught within the School of Library, Archives and Infor-

Michael Roper has been the Deputy Keeper of Public Records in the Public Record Office, London, since 1985, having served in a variety of professional posts in the office since joining it in 1959. He is a former chairman and vice-chairman of the Society of Archivists and a former member of its Training Committee. He taught (part-time) the use of computers in record offices at University College London from 1972 to 1987, was external examiner for the diploma in archives studies at University College Dublin from 1982 to 1986, and has been external examiner for the master's degree in archive administration at the University of Liverpool since 1986.

mation Studies, sharing teaching staff and other resources with the library and information studies courses, but otherwise forming a completely self-contained unit. Each of the courses uses practicing archivists to teach part-time, supplementing in varying proportions the teaching provided by full-time university staff. Those courses which offer a diploma require one academic year (October to June) of full-time study; those which offer a master's degree require one calendar year (October to September) of full-time study. At University College London the course may be taken part-time spread over two years.¹

The syllabi of the courses bear a considerable resemblance to each other, comprising (under various titles) archive administration, records management, arrangement and description, administrative and legal history, palaeography, and diplomatic. These subjects provide the wide range of skills which an archivist will require if employed in a general post within a national or local government record office or one of the older manuscript collections: that is, in an archival institution with holdings which extend from the medieval period to the present day. Only at University College London is the pattern significantly different in that a range of options enables students to choose between a traditional course and one which is more appropriate for business and institutional archivists dealing only with modern records. Also at University College London there is a course leading to a master's degree in overseas archive administration, incorporating the core subjects of the main courses, but with a range of options specially devised to meet the needs of archivists from the third world. All the courses require their students to have undertaken some preliminary voluntary work in an archival institution, and arrange short periods

of attachment and study visits as integral components of the teaching program. Students also undertake a variety of practical exercises within the context of some of the course components, and these are taken into account alongside written examinations in the final assessment.

The university courses are at present producing enough qualified archivists to satisfy the job market, although there are some doubts as to whether they are necessarily producing archivists with the right qualifications for the jobs which are available. In recent years the main growth area within the archival profession in Britain has been in the private sector of business and institutions, yet except for those who take the modern range of options at University College London, few have trained specifically for this area of work. Growth in the profession is likely to continue to be largely in this area, and even in national and local government record offices the demand is proportionately less and less for those with the traditional archival skills related to the interpretation of medieval and early modern records and more and more for those who can handle the mass of modern records through their whole life cycle. Moreover, with the exception of London and Liverpool, the use of computers in records and archives management and the preservation of machine-readable records are not covered in any great depth, and even there problems exist in keeping up to date; some doubt also attaches to the extent to which all the courses are teaching preservation and conservation as an overall policy for the archivist rather than as a practical skill. There is also an imbalance between the courses in the extent and relevance of the practical work to which students are exposed. It may be that the time has come to adjust the balance between academic and practical professional subjects and to give greater

¹The views expressed in this paper are entirely personal and do not necessarily reflect those of the several university courses with which I have been associated as teacher or examiner or of the Society of Archivists.

weight to those which will be relevant to the greater proportion of the profession in the last decade of the twentieth century.

In any such reappraisal we must also consider whether archival education can continue to be kept completely separate (even at University College London) from that of librarians and other information professionals. If archivists are to escape their dusty image as the custodians of old parchment and papers and present themselves as equal partners with librarians and information specialists in handling information irrespective of its medium and format, can they afford to be educated in isolation? A recent study of the basic education of information professionals undertaken by a working party of the Joint Consultative Committee of the five professional organizations representing librarians, archivists, and information scientists concluded that there is a distinct difference of emphasis between courses for archivists and courses for librarians and information scientists. For the former, first priority is given to the materials and their preservation and second priority to the user; for the latter, the first priority is the user. Existing courses tend to reflect this in the sequence of subjects taught; this reduces the possibility of designing a common core curriculum which would be acceptable to all three professions. The working party, however, did identify a number of topics which are as relevant to archive studies as to library and information studies: user needs and training, information systems and services, storage and conservation, presentation of information, reprography, information technology, and management. One of the current challenges is the establishment of a core curriculum for archivists, librarians, and information scientists in such areas of common interest and its integration into courses which give due weight to those areas of specifically archival theory and practice which must be taught separately.

For those whose path of entry into the profession has been other than through one of the university courses, the Society of Archivists offers its own diploma. It is for holders of professional archival posts who are members of the Society of Archivists; it is not an alternative to the university courses as a means of entry into the profession. The subjects offered match the range provided by the university courses and, as at University College London, the division into core and optional subjects permits students to tailor the course to meet individual needs. It is a correspondence course involving some eighty lessons which are intended to be worked through in two years. Course work based upon each lesson provides the opportunity for interaction between students and teacher. This interaction is reinforced by a short, intensive series of lectures and discussions, and the student is strongly encouraged to visit other record offices and to attend professional meetings and appropriate training sessions not directly related to the course. The student is required to produce a critique of a piece of work carried out in the course of his or her employment and to take a written examination. This examination consists of three written papers, each of three hours, on the nature, use, and management of archives; the questions are interdisciplinary, and candidates are expected to draw on their practical experience as well as on what they have learned from the correspondence course. The final assessment takes into consideration marks given for course work, critique, and examination.

National archival institutions, notably the Public Record Office and the Scottish Record Office, have their own in-service training programs. This is not just because they do not necessarily recruit those who have a formal archival qualification, although five of the last seven professional recruits to the Public Record Office have had such a qualification. Unqualified, and even qualified

but inexperienced, professional recruits to the Public Record Office undertake a two-year program which takes them for varying periods to each section of the office, where they are introduced to its work and perform, under supervision, appropriate tasks. Even those who are highly qualified and have experience must undergo an appropriate period of training, normally for one year, aimed at filling gaps in their previous experience and introducing them to the specific procedures and practices of the office and to the records which it holds.

The question of professional qualification has recently become a matter of some importance following the decision of the Society of Archivists at its 1987 annual general meeting to establish a voluntary professional register based upon qualification. Council of the society, in 1984, had already agreed upon a procedure for the recognition of archival training courses, and the five university courses have now been assessed and have been recognized by the society. The society is about to turn its attention to the recognition of in-service courses, such as that at the Public Record Office.

A word should also be said here about the training of archive conservators in Britain, since they are equal in status with archivists within the society and eligible for its professional register. Their training is usually undertaken through the society's in-service training scheme, leading to the award of a certificate. Such training, which is open only to conservators in post, involves a series of attachments over a two-year period working under the supervision of an approved instructor, interspersed with practical work in the home workshop. Candidates also attend a compulsory week of lectures and an optional (but probably soon to be made compulsory) week of instruction in paper chemistry. At the end of their training they take a written examination, present specimens of their work, and undergo a viva voce assessment. Full-time courses

in archive conservation are offered by Camberwell School of Art and Crafts and the Colchester Institute; other institutions offer courses in some of the skills which an archive conservator requires, while, as in the case of archivists, the national archival institutions provide their own in-service training. Validation of such courses and in-service training is on the program of the society for early action. Another issue which is gradually being faced is the ongoing transformation of archive conservation from a craft into a profession, with greater emphasis being placed on scientific theory and on the extension of responsibilities beyond mere repair and restoration of documents to wider areas of conservation and preservation, including care for newer forms of documentary media. One way of encouraging this may be to institute a higher qualification, which would enhance the basic qualification.

A more recent development on the part of the Society of Archives has been the publication of a series of course notes for the use of archival institutions in their in-house training programs for their archive assistants and other sub-professional support staff.

The attention which has been devoted recently to developments in the basic education of British archivists and archive conservators has not obscured the fact that such basic education does no more than equip those who pass through it to begin to practice their profession, and that, especially in a time of rapid change, existing skills need to be updated, and new skills need to be acquired. With this in mind the Society of Archives has always been especially active in promoting continuous education. It does this in a number of ways: through an annual in-service course on a specific theme (recent courses have included reprographics, management for archivists, and records appraisal); through courses arranged by its committees and groups on subjects within their specific areas

of concern (e.g., records management, conservation, and computers); through the opportunities provided for professional interchange within the society's regional branches and at its annual conferences and other meetings; and, perhaps above all, by a program of publications, including the *Journal*. In 1986 new ground was broken by the arrangement of a course for recently qualified archivists. Other organizations interested in archival matters—the British Records Association, the Records Management Society, and the Business Archives Council in particular—also provided opportunities for continuous education through their courses, seminars, meetings, and conferences. In addition, individual archival institutions take advantage of training opportunities provided in or through their own parent administrations, especially in such areas as management and computer applications.

All this may seem a little hit and miss. It must be admitted that advantage is taken of continuous training opportunities mainly by those who are most aware of their needs and who happen to have sympathetic employers; they can pass by those who may be most in need of them—those so pressed by the burdens of work and the lack of commitment by their employers that they never seek or are given the opportunity to

stand back from the trees and contemplate the wood. A number of possible ways of ensuring that all members of our profession continue to develop suggest themselves. Greater coordination of the several training initiatives of the Society of Archivists and other bodies has already been attempted with mixed success, but it is worth persevering. At the same time we should try to get away from a preoccupation with keeping the cost of training courses and conferences at a low level by providing less than ideal conditions and low quality accommodations. It is said that archival institutions can only afford to send staff to courses and conferences if the costs are kept to the minimum, but colleagues in other professions seem to have no difficulty in obtaining funding to attend seminars and conferences which are produced on a much more lavish commercial scale. If we archivists sell ourselves cheaply, our employers are likely to accept us at our own low valuation. Can we call ourselves professionals if we continue to act as amateurs in our approach to continuous training? This prompts the even more revolutionary thought that the Society of Archivists might at some future date make continuation on its professional register dependent upon participation in some formal continuous education program.