THE BRITISH HISTORICAL MANUSCRIPTS COMMISSION

THE establishment of the Royal Commission for Historical Manuscripts in 1869 was an outgrowth of the concern for public records which had reached a climax only a few years earlier. As far back as 1661, William Prynne was appointed by Charles II to care for the public records in the Tower of London. Prynne described them as a "confused chaos, under corroding, putrifying cobwebs, dust and filth. . . ." In attempting to rescue them he employed successively "old clerks, soldiers and women," but all abandoned the job as too dirty and unwholesome. Prynne and his clerk cleaned and sorted them. He found, as he had expected, "many rare ancient precious pearls and golden records."[1]

Nevertheless, by 1800 the condition of the records was deplorable again, and a Record Commission was appointed for their custody and management. It was composed of men of distinction, was liberally supported, and it published various important documents. In spite of its work, the commission could not cope with the scattered records and unsuitable depositories. Of the latter, one was a room in the Tower of London over a gunpowder vault and next to a steam pipe passage; others were cellars and stables. The agitation aroused by the commission led to passage of the Public Records Act in 1838. The care and administration of the records was restored to the Master or Keeper of the Rolls, in conjunction with the Treasury department, with enlarged powers. The Master of the Rolls had been in the fifteenth century a clerk and keeper of the records. By the nineteenth century he had become one of the three Supreme Justices of England, still bearing the same title but no longer having charge of the public records, until they were returned to him in 1838. A new building, the far-famed Public Record Office in Chancery Lane, was begun in 1851. It contained rooms for research investigators and copyists, in contrast to the earlier lack of accommodations for and indifference to scholars.

Public records being well in hand, thought turned to the wealth of manuscript material in Great Britain still in private hands. In 1859 a petition to the prime minister was drawn up and signed by

[1] "Report of the Council," *Proceedings* of the American Antiquarian Society, 1880-1881 (Worcester, 1882), N.S., I, 24-25.

sixty well-known noblemen, scholars, and others, asking that a commission be appointed to investigate means of making these private collections accessible. Not until ten years later, however, was a warrant issued by Queen Victoria, dated April 2, 1869, establishing a Royal Commission for Historical Manuscripts.

The warrant from the Queen began: "Whereas it has been represented unto us that there are belonging to many Institutions and private Families various Collections of Manuscripts and Papers of general public interest, a knowledge of which would be of great utility in the illustration of History, Constitutional Law, Science, and general Literature, and that in some cases these Papers are liable to be lost or obliterated," a commission was appointed "to make inquiry as to the places in which such Papers and Manuscripts are deposited, and for any of the purposes herein mentioned . . . authorize you, with the consent of the owners of such Manuscripts, to make abstracts and calendars of such Manuscripts. . . ."[2]

The commission was to be composed of five noblemen and four commoners, with the Master of the Rolls as chairman, the Deputy Keeper of the Records a member, and three to constitute a quorum. The appointive members were persons "calculated to recommend the advances to be made to owners of manuscripts who might possibly have looked askance at any investigation of private papers . . . some of whom were intimately concerned with historical research." On the first commission was Baron Romilly, Master of the Rolls, and Thomas Duffus Hardy, Deputy Keeper, who had already achieved a reputation by their work at the Public Record Office. Others were the Earl Stanhope, historian and member of the Society of Antiquaries, Sir William Stirling Maxwell, historian and antiquarian, Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, biographer and student of the Napoleonic period, Sir George Dasent, a Scandinavian-English scholar, President C. W. Russell of the College of St. Patrick, Maynooth, Ireland, the Earl of Airlie, and the Marquess of Salisbury. Two additional members were appointed the same year: the Bishop of Limerick and Baron Talbot de Malahide, president of the Archaeological Society and member of the Royal Irish Academy. Eventually the commission numbered fourteen.

Curiously enough, the commission was intended to be temporary

[2] First *Report* of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts (London, 1874), iii, iv.

at the time, one suggestion being for five years. Its success was so marked, however, that it was continued and increased.

In beginning its work, the commission, through a secretary, sent out a circular enclosing the queen's warrant to owners of manuscript collections in England, Scotland, and Ireland, stating carefully that "the object of the Commission is solely the discovery of unknown Historical and Literary materials, and in all their proceedings the Commissioners will direct their attention to that object exclusively."[3] A chronological list or brief calendar would be drawn up, the original to be deposited at the Public Record Office, not to be made public without the owner's consent. The commissioners would give advice, if so requested, on repairing and preserving the papers. These circulars brought a gratifying response of many invitations to examine collections. The mass of material was overwhelming, so much so that, with the two inspectors (later increased to five) who were to do the actual visiting, the commission decided to make a preliminary survey and to catalogue only enough manuscripts to suggest the content of some of the more important collections.

Accordingly, the first *Report*, 1870, was a partial list of the collections brought to the attention of the commissioners, followed by an appendix containing excerpts and lists of letters from sixty private and municipal repositories visited. The investigators had uncovered, for instance, seventy-two original letters of Mary, Queen of Scotland, material on some of the least known periods of English history, and many collections whose existence had not been known till then.

One of the inspectors, in the course of his work, found a key labeled "Key to old writings over stable" and used it, discovering among the dust and rats a most valuable collection which was at once cleaned, mounted, and bound at no little expense (the owner's, of course). This incident was publicized, and a later secretary said that it led to investigations by owners and in many cases to proper care of neglected manuscripts. The Southampton municipal records were found in disorder; but the visit of the inspector stimulated the authorities to have them arranged at their own expense.

The first year's work, the commissioners felt, had uncovered valuable historical material, given owners a definite stimulus to look after their manuscripts, and set a new standard of value on what was too often thought to be rubbish.

[3] *Ibid.*, 133.

The second *Report*, 1871, stated that the first had created "great public interest." Three editions of it had been printed, 1,625 copies, and presented to members of Parliament and to all who had assisted the commission. The commissioners expressed themselves as gratified (and obviously relieved) at the response of the public, who had proven eager to help. An inspector for Scotland was added the second year. Already some collections had been given or sold to the Public Record Office, British Museum, and Bodleian Library. The commissioners suggested that funds be made available for copying the most valuable documents as a safeguard against possible accidents to the originals.

By the time the third *Report* appeared in 1872, the commission was soundly established. Public opinion and private co-operation was favorable beyond its hopes, and more work was in sight than could be done for several years.

Successive reports of the commissioners were always addressed to the sovereign. The first nine contained the reports of the inspectors in the appendices. Although the reports of the commissioners grew longer as the years passed, the real meat for the research worker was in the inspectors' reports on the particular collections. At first the commissioners reported annually, then at longer and more irregular intervals. From the tenth to fifteenth published *Report*, the appraisals of the inspectors were issued as separate volumes, although each was still called an appendix and was somewhat arbitrarily attributed to a commission report. By this time the system of numbering had grown complicated as the calendars of some collections ran to more than one volume appearing in different *Reports*. To simplify matters, after the fifteenth *Report*, the calendars appeared under the name of the collection, with a series called *Various Collections* taking care of the shorter calendars.

The *Reports* were issued as parliamentary blue books, folio size in double columns, paper covered, and costing three-pence for each 64 pages, the price by law for blue books. With the tenth *Report*, they changed to octavo size as being more convenient. At the request of the commissioners in 1897, they were changed to Stationery Office publications, still octavo, paper covered.

The first circular issued by the commission, and the second sent a year later, also said: "In no instance will any MS. be removed from the owner's residence without his request or consent, but if for convenience the commissioners be intrusted with any MSS., they will be

deposited in the Public Record Office, and be treated with the same care as if they formed part of the Public Muniments. . . . The costs of the inspections, reports, and calendars, and the conveyance of documents, will be defrayed at the public expense without any charge to owners."[4] In practice it was soon found convenient to make a selection of material and have it sent to the Public Record Office in London or Dublin, or the General Registry Office in Edinburgh, where the inspectors could work with greater regularity than in private houses.

Some of the rules for calendaring laid down by the Master of the Rolls were:

> 1st. All formal and official documents, such as letters of credence, warrants, grants, and the like, should be described as briefly as possible.
>
> 2nd. Letters and documents referring to one subject only should be catalogued as briefly as is consistent with correctness. But when they contain miscellaneous news, such a description should be given as will enable a reader to form an adequate notion of the variety of their contents. . . .
>
> 7th. Where letters are endorsed by the receivers and the date of their delivery specified, those endorsements are to be recorded.
>
> 8th. The number of written pages of each document is to be specified, as security for its integrity, and that readers may know what proportion the abstract bears to the original. . . .
>
> 10th. Where documents have been printed, a reference should be given to the publication.
>
> 11th. Each series is to be chronological. . . .[5]

Instruction to the inspectors also included emphasis on privacy and, to insure it further, all notes made by them in the course of their employment were the property of the commission. Years later a one-time inspector said of his work: "I determined, in the preparation of my list, to aim less at conciseness than at an explanatory amplitude that should satisfy, whilst provoking, the peruser's curiosity."[6]

The inspectors, "on whose knowledge and discretion great reliance was necessarily placed," worked under the guidance of the commissioners and secretary. In the course of the years, many were men of reputation and ability. Several were appointed commissioners later.

[4] *Ibid.*

[5] W. C. Ford, "On Calendaring Manuscripts," Bibliographical Society of America, *Papers*, 1909 (Cedar Rapids, 1910), IV, 56.

[6] R. A. Roberts, "Concerning the Historical Manuscripts Commission," *Transactions* of the Royal Historical Society, 1910 (London, 1910), Third Series, IV, 73.

They played an anonymous role at first, except for occasional signed notes in the appendices. As the calendar of an individual collection grew longer, the commissioners might mention which inspector was working on it. In 1929, by a vote of the commissioners, the name of the inspector was to appear on the title page of future calendars.

Richard Arthur Roberts, inspector, secretary to the commission, and later a commissioner, seems to have been the only one who has written much about the body's work. He mentioned that the preliminary survey period lasted until about 1876, with more than 420 collections examined. Later on the work, which showed signs of increasing after forty years rather than decreasing, became less extensive and more intensive. Better methods of working developed; all material was taken to the Public Record Office for examination, and a more uniform style took shape. The aim was "to do what was done adequately and exhaustively for the purposes of the student."[7] In consequence, a number of the earlier reports were amplified and issued again.

The commission worked along with apparently quite slender funds. As in all royal commissions, the members gave their services gratuitously, but "where they involved any great deal of professional skill compensation was allowed for time and labor." The second *Report* revealed that the commission was allowed £1000 for the first year's work and was granted £1200 for the second. The next definite mention of finances was not made until 1914, when civil budgets were being pared because of war. The commission suspended all new work as well as some printing already in progress. Only volumes advanced in printing and calendars in progress on collections deposited by owners in the Public Record Office, which could not be held indefinitely, were finished. The amount spent in the fiscal year 1914-1915 was £1800. This sum diminished to £200 for the year 1919-1920. By 1923-1924 it had risen to only £700. In 1926 the commission urged that £1000 a year increase would be of real benefit to hurry the work before the breaking-up of private libraries and the sale of estates put the manuscript collections out of reach. The war was now taking its toll of wages through increased taxes.

Certain reports deserve particular mention. The only collection reported on outside the British Isles is described in the first *Report*. Lord Edmond Fitzmaurice, one of the original commissioners, while

[7] *Ibid.*, 80.

traveling in Germany stopped to see the material relating to England in the university library at Heidelberg and rendered an inspector's report on it.

The reports on the manuscripts of the House of Lords began with the first meeting of the commissioners, when the papers were unexpectedly brought to their attention. They had been discovered when the clerk of Parliament gave a scholar permission to search for material. Through an old officer who had saved the papers from the fire of 1834, this scholar located twelve rooms full of papers in the basement of the House, on river level but fortunately dry. Realizing the value of what he had found, he reported to the clerk. The commission supervised an investigator appointed by the clerk. The old records proved to be an amazingly rich storehouse of information. At the request of the commission, the treasury provided funds for the sorting, arranging, and calendaring of the manuscripts. The work continued under the general supervision of the commission until 1896, when at their request it was transferred to the House of Lords. The reports continued to be published by the commission.

Benjamin Franklin Stevens, well known to American scholars for the transcripts he edited and the index he compiled which is now in the Library of Congress, calendared that section of the Earl of Dartmouth's manuscripts which appears in the fourteenth *Report*, Part X (1895). He also did much of the work on the four volumes of *American Manuscripts in the Royal Institution*, published by the commission (1904-1909).

Of special interest are those calendared collections that have come to the United States in recent years. Part of the Lansdowne manuscripts listed in the third, fifth, and sixth *Reports* are now owned by the William L. Clements Library of the University of Michigan, where they are known as the Shelburne Papers. This library likewise has most of the manuscripts formerly belonging to Mrs. Stopford-Sackville and calendared in the *Ninth Report*, Part III.[8] They are the papers of Lord George Germain. The William Knox Papers once owned by Capt. Howard Vicente Knox and calendared in *Manuscripts in Various Collections*, Volume VI, are also in the possession of the Clements Library.

The Royal Institution sold its American papers in 1930 to Dr. A. S. W. Rosenbach of Philadelphia, who in turn sold them to John

[8] Revised and reissued in 1904 and 1910.

D. Rockefeller, Jr., for Colonial Williamsburg, Inc., where they may be found now. They are the papers of Sir Guy Carleton, Lord Dorchester, saved by Maurice Morgann, his secretary.

The present war, although affecting the work of the commission, has not caused it to be suspended. The latest reports to be published were four volumes in 1942 on the collections of Lord Polwarth, the Earl of Lindsey, Robert Graham, and Maj. Gen. Lord Sackville. In December, 1942, the commission issued a leaflet seeking the present location of various collections which have changed hands and incidentally offering a summary of its work. The Royal Commission for Historical Manuscripts has published during its seventy-three years reports of "varying degrees of completeness" on 628 collections: 213 were archives of boroughs, dioceses, colleges, endowed charities, and other corporate bodies; and 415 were owned by private families.

Besides the direct results of the commission's work, its influence has prompted many gifts, loans, and purchases of manuscript collections to British institutions. The commission's efforts also have inspired societies and individuals with an interest in caring for old records. When the commission's work will terminate, no one dares say.

Today the commission numbers seventeen members and they are: Baron Greene, chairman, R. L. Atkinson, secretary, the Earl of Ancaster, Viscount Cranborne, Lord Herbert, Viscount Sandon, Lord Wright, Lord Chief Justice MacKinnon, Sir Frederick Kenyon, Professor A. F. Pollard, R. A. Roberts, D. A. Chart, C. T. Flower, S. C. Ratcliff, William Angus, K. W. M. Pickthorn, and Professor E. F. Jacob.[9]

JESSIE E. BECKHAM

Grand Rapids, Michigan

[9] Whitaker's *Almanac*, 1943.