

The Role of Preservation in the National Archives

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Introduction

Australian Archives is responsible for preserving the unique records of the Commonwealth Government for present and future researchers, both government and private. To ensure that records likely to be of value are kept, Australian Archives assists departments and authorities to draw up disposal schedules which designate some records for permanent retention, other records for appropriate periods of temporary retention and others for destruction. A daily lending service to departments of material they have deposited in our custody is operated. In the A.C.T. in the year 1974/75 there were 17,450 departmental requests for items in our custody. This meant that 57,475 separate items were issued of which 50,125 were returned. The logistics of an operation of this sort alone are considerable. Records in our custody are arranged and described in our finding aids so that we can retrieve the information contained in them.

Physically housing these records and providing the staff to care for them is an expensive operation. The salary bill for the total operations carried out by Australian Archives for the 1974/75 financial year was almost \$3 million. The value of our buildings demonstrates the extent of our operations, especially in the regions, Villawood in N.S.W. \$5.3 million, the new building in Perth \$2 million and the recently completed Darwin building \$1.1 million. The annual cost of leasing buildings for archival purposes, in addition to those actually owned, is \$374,000. In 1974/75 the bill for repair and maintenance was \$70,000 and for furniture and fittings \$116,000. Of course the provision of adequate suitably designed buildings in Queensland, Victoria, South Australia and particularly in the A.C.T. to replace the existing disgraceful conditions will involve heavy capital expenditure.

It is, however, useless to designate records for "permanent retention" and to preserve their

original order and painstakingly describe them, if the physical condition of the records is such that only a very short life for them can be expected.

Size of Australian Archives Conservation Problem

To serve all the departments and authorities of the Commonwealth Government, Australian Archives maintains offices in nine cities – Canberra, all State capitals, Darwin and Townsville. Taking into account only those records of permanent value, in these nine cities we have in our custody 100,000 metres of records. If these records were placed on a single row of shelving it would stretch from here to Goulburn, a distance of some hundred kilometres.

Most of the records held are on paper. They are in the form of files, often of poor quality, highly acidic paper, which, due to poor and frequent handling and inappropriate and crowded storage conditions, are rapidly deteriorating.

There is not as much information as is desirable about the magnitude of the problem but two surveys have been carried out. In Canberra in 1972 the 10 most used series of records were selected¹. The aim of this survey was to find out how many of these records needed professional conservation care. They included records of the Department of External Affairs, Prime Minister's Department, Department of Defence, War Cabinet and the Attorney-General's Department. These were naturally the larger series and the total quantity was about 700 metres of records. A conservator examined a 2% sample of these records. It was concluded that to repair, clean and deacidify the records examined using traditional methods would take one person around thirty years. Therefore to repair and stabilize the whole of the 10 most used series so that they were in proper condition and protected against future deterioration could take one person 1500

years. Even with 10 people 150 years work would still be involved. The size of a series varies considerably. Sometimes it is only a few files, sometimes it is thousands. To estimate the total problem we cannot simply multiply the number of years for one series (150) by the number of series but the fact that there are some 4,000 series designated for permanent retention in Canberra gives some idea of the size of the problem.

There is a higher proportion of permanent material housed in Canberra than in other cities since most policy making for the Government is now carried out in Canberra. There is however, a significant quantity of permanent material in all regions. A survey, carried out in our N.S.W. Office in 1974, estimated that forty million pieces of paper, twelve hundred volumes and two hundred thousand cards had been designated for permanent retention. All of the paper requires deacidification and all leather or calico bound volumes should be treated to kill mould growth.

Diversity of the Problem

Size is not the only aspect of the problem. Although most archives are in file form, Australian Archives is responsible for significant quantities of other kinds of material.

During the 1920s and 1930s W. G. Mildenhall was employed by the Federal Capital Design Commission as Official Photographer. His task was to record the development of Canberra and this he did by producing some 7,000 glass plate photographic negatives. The collection has been in archival custody since 1959. As we do not yet have a complete set of reference prints researchers wishing to view the photographs must often use the glass negatives. Since the glass plates are still stored 10 or so to a cardboard box with no interleaving paper the risk of scratching and breakage with every use is considerable.

There are plans to copy these negatives this year, but of course the delay of 15 years in doing this (the delay being the result of inadequate finance), has not contributed to their preservation. In fact plates have in some cases been scratched and broken and so the delay in copying them has meant that a small but valuable part of the record of early Canberra can only be recovered, if at all, with great difficulty and cost.

Since this is the American Bi-Centennial Year and the hundredth anniversary of Walter Burley Griffin's birth we might also consider the 15 drawings which won the Federal Capital Design Competition in 1912. Australian Archives holds

the other winning designs submitted in the competition. Some are water colours and all except the Burley Griffin drawings are on paper. Burley Griffin's own drawings present special problems since they were executed on silk. Although the drawings were framed for protection in 1965 we have no proper storage for framed items, which tend to be stacked together on the floor with consequent risk of damage. Recently the drawings were removed from their frames for photographing and it was found that cleaning, deacidification and protective fumigation are needed. We do not however have a conservator nor the equipment to carry out this work. The drawings, unless adequate funds are provided, therefore, might well not last till the end of this century.

We also have weather charts from the Bureau of Meteorology, maps and aerial survey photographs from the Bureau of National Mapping, technical drawings, blueprints and dyelines from the Department of the Navy and the Department of Civil Aviation, photographic prints and negatives from the Department of Information, gramophone records, tape recordings and films from the Australian Broadcasting Commission, microfilm from the Attorney-General's Department and the Australian Customs, and X-rays from Repatriation. Perhaps the most dramatic changes in record keeping have been brought about by the computer. In Sydney we hold 7,000 digital tapes, 18,000 analogue rolls, 45,500 analogue tapes and 700 analogue discs. The number of agencies using computers is increasing rapidly.

From the Public Service Board's Annual Report for 1975 it can be seen that there is an increasing use of computers in the service — 59 large/medium computers used by 25 departments and authorities². The impact of ADP on our archives can be enormous. As well as computer tapes held at Villawood in Sydney and throughout the country we are being asked to accession enormous quantities of printout and cards. Retrieval of this material will be a problem in later years as systems change but the sheer physical area needed to store them is currently under urgent consideration.

In our Sydney repository we also hold 60,000 charts, 2,500 maps, 200 drawings, 11,000 photographs, 60 films, 40,000 gramophone discs, 400 sound tapes, 100 microfilms and 1½ million X-rays. These audio-visual and machine readable records have their own special conservation problems. For example films and magnetic tapes need vaults with a specially controlled environment, computer tapes may require regeneration and equipment is needed for this, and films also need special cleaning and preservation facilities.

Calls for Action

There have been several government inquiries recently which have touched on the subject of the conservation of cultural material. *The Committee of Inquiry on Museums and National Collections* reported that the condition of items housed in most Australian museums was deplorable and that few had conservation laboratories. Where there were laboratories they were deficient in space, equipment and staff.

Looking more directly at the position of the National Archives one might get the impression that, as with museums, there had indeed been a saga of neglect but that now the problem was recognised and action was being taken to rectify this.

Thus we have Dr W. Kaye Lamb, a former Dominion Archivist of Canada saying in March 1974 in his report entitled *Development of the National Archives* [of Australia]:

"Conservation and repair is an important field in which the Archives Office [the Australian Archives] might take the lead. A well qualified conservator was added to the staff recently and even in minute quarters and with minimum equipment he had already made a significant contribution to the Office. If conservation work was developed on an adequate scale, the National Archives could assist smaller institutions possessing important documents in a fragile condition that they had no means of repairing themselves."

Ironically the conservator referred to by Dr Lamb left a month later. It was a year before a successor was appointed and since she resigned in January of this year, Australian Archives is again without a conservator in Canberra. With the present Government attitude to staffing it is unlikely that we could fill this position even if a suitable conservator was available, but of course to conserve the material we have, we need not just one conservator. We need a whole team of trained staff and adequate facilities.

Australian Archives has positions for conservators in N.S.W., Victoria, South Australia and the A.C.T. The New South Wales position was occupied for some 18 months in 1974/75, but, again, there is little prospect of filling this vacant position in the immediate future. Of all these positions only the Victorian one is filled. A conservator there took up duty in January but no matter how dedicated he might be and how hard he works he cannot hope to do more than scratch the surface of the problem.

The Lamb Report created a feeling of false security. For instance we have a later report, that of

the *Committee of Inquiry into the National Estate*, saying in its findings and recommendations (number forty-nine):

"The new initiative by the Australian Government in establishing a national archives system will help to ensure the preservation of archival resources."

Nothing could be farther from reality. The Labor Government failed to take action to put into practice its proposed improvements to the national archives, and the present Government's financial restrictions and staff ceiling have crippled the work of my institution, especially in the area of conservation.

The real position is that, except in the areas of preventive conservation (techniques being introduced as by-products of new archival building projects, air conditioning, filtration of ultra-violet light, increased vermin control) little has been done to preserve the bulk of the material of permanent historical interest in archival custody. This material is now a few years older than when Lamb issued his report, the acidity of the material is that much more dangerous and the problem will be correspondingly greater when it is finally tackled. It was hoped to continue the building programme in the next financial year but government economy measures have meant that the new Canberra repository planned for Mitchell (to replace the Parkes building) has been postponed as have plans for extending our buildings in Adelaide and Brisbane.

Achievements

The Australian Archives can point to some achievements in the conservation field. Over the years some rebinding of fragile volumes has taken place and some series have been microfilmed. Control records, that is indexes and registers, for some of the early records of the Department of Home Affairs and the Public Service Commissioner have been rebound. The two main strands in the micro-filming programme have been the filming of Papua New Guinea records and of records brought to Australia for safe keeping at various times, for example after the Rabaul earthquake and during World War II. Copies of the 360 rolls of microfilm produced so far and the further 200 to be produced will be available for reference in Australia and also in Papua New Guinea, thus reducing the need to handle the originals, many of which are fragile. The control records so far filmed include 17 series from the early records of agencies such as the Department of the Treasury, the Prime Minister's Department and the Department of Home and Territories. About 100 rolls of film have been produced. As well as these programmes, during

the short time a conservator was operating some items were repaired in the conventional manner.

However the most noticeable achievements have been in the planning and completion of purpose built repositories incorporating preventive conservation measures. For instance, the Villawood repository in Sydney completed in 1975 at a cost of \$5.3 million contains sophisticated air conditioning and purification equipment, a film vault capable of holding canisters of audio-visual material including computer tape and a conservation area. As well plans are underway, finance permitting, to install a vacuum fumigation chamber of 15 cubic metres, and an airing room for the treatment of damp records.

In April of this year a new repository was completed in Darwin. The building is air conditioned and contains a conservation area but no conservator.

The repository is a solid concrete chamber and at the time of Cyclone Tracy it was almost completed. Since it stood up to the cyclone suffering only minor damage to uncompleted sections of the building it has now been designated a primary cyclone shelter.

A new building in Perth will be completed later this year with advanced facilities and a conservation area.

Plans for Canberra are well advanced and building was to have begun this year of a new repository in the northern suburb of Mitchell. This was to have been advanced from a conservator's point of view and to contain fumigation and microfilming facilities and a preservation laboratory. However, the project was postponed by the Government in March with the result that it will be some years before the atrocious storage areas (three Nissan Units) at Parkes (in front of the new National Gallery on the shores of the lake) can be replaced. This means that the bulk of the national archives, from federation onwards, will continue to deteriorate, often to a stage where restoration is impossible.

Future Plans

The overall plan of the Australian Archives is to have modern purpose-built repositories in all capital cities, each containing conservation facilities. The problem will undoubtedly be finding the skilled staff to conserve not only paper but also other kinds of records such as computer tapes, films, gramophone recordings and other technical media.

Solutions

What then must be done to overcome the years

of neglect which has resulted from lack of awareness of the needs of archival material. For many people an archival authority merely has the duty of removing an embarrassing storage problem from departmental minds. In fact, of course, the life of a record does not end when it is no longer of use in the day to day functioning of an office. When this is realized the importance of conservation becomes apparent and the woeful position in the Australian Archives at the moment must concern us all.

It is not difficult in a talk of this sort to paint a gloomy picture of governmental neglect and bureaucratic apathy. It is, however, harder to offer solutions. One can of course suggest new repositories equipped with scientific conservation laboratories. This we are achieving, albeit slowly, in the Australian Archives. More fundamental still is the need for personnel to staff these areas. The plain fact is that there are not enough conservators in Australia at the moment to staff what few positions there are in archival institutions. What is more, staff are just not being trained. Training courses must be started upon soon and proposals to provide such a course in the Canberra College of Advanced Education are under consideration. We need courses to train working conservators and technicians to assist them. Conservators could be trained at the postgraduate level but they should also be trained at graduate level in courses which provide a balance between the philosophical and the scientific and technical aspects of their work. It is vital to increase the number of conservators in Australia who are capable of taking responsibility for organizing the conservation programmes of sizeable institutions. As well, it is essential to have practical courses at technical colleges where on the job training given to practising craftsmen/technicians in our conservation laboratories can be supplemented. We must have trained personnel to tackle the problem of decaying records. Along with training must go a greatly increased number of positions for conservators and the creation of a career structure.

The Public Record Office in London, the national archives of the United Kingdom, employs a staff of some 45 in its conservation workshop, the National Archives of Canada some 17 on document conservation, the Library of Congress 40, the British Museum 140, the French National Archives 16. The Australian Archives in turn has one conservator, based in our Melbourne Office.

Departmental Responsibility

The problems of conservation of government documents begin when the files are created in departments. Poor registry procedure, inadequately trained staff, lowly classified staff, rough handling

of files and appalling departmental storage conditions have all meant that files are often in an advanced state of decay when they come into our custody. Coupled with this is the poor quality of paper used for government records. Highly acidic paper has always been used with the resultant well

known effect on the records. The Commonwealth Government, with its massive purchases of paper, is in an ideal position to lay down adequate acid free paper standards to manufacturers thereby doing an immense amount to improve the conditions of the national archival heritage.

References

1. A series is a group of record items, such as files or volumes, which have been created in the same numerical alphabetical or other identifiable sequence by an administrative unit and perhaps its successors. An example would be the Department of External Affairs Correspondence files, alphabetical series, 1925-1942.
2. These figures exclude computers used in C.S.I.R.O. and other statutory organizations as well as those used for defence purposes of a classified nature or for communications.