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The Collecting of State Records by New South Wales Regional Repositories

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This paper is concerned with the collecting of State (or public) records by New South Wales regional repositories. It begins by outlining the way the State's de facto archival agency, the Mitchell Library, managed the acquisition of 'local' or 'country' records in the years prior to passage of the Archives Act in 1960. It then shows how its appraisal and selection of public records was firmly rooted in the library manuscript (or private records) collecting tradition. And, finally, it suggests that this not only shaped the arrangements put in place by the Archives Authority in 1963, which permitted regional universities and libraries to acquire public records, but significantly influenced subsequent acquisitions.

Prior to passage of the State's first archival legislation in 1960, the acquisition of public records appraised as worthy of preservation as archives was the responsibility of the Mitchell Library at the Public Library of New South Wales. Its policy was to relocate what it described as 'local' or 'country' records to Sydney. Not that the policy was vigorously pursued or systematically implemented. Scattered references in Archives Office subject files suggest that the Mitchell's indefatigable Librarian, Ida Leeson, undertook a collecting visit (or visits) 'about 1935' to some '50 of the larger and/or older country centres'. This netted the Library 'over 250 volumes of records, many dating back to the 1820s and 1830s, and one dating from 1816'. It was 'suspected, and in some cases known, that old records ... still exist[ed] in some

country centres, even in some towns which were visited in 1935',¹ but the onset of war prevented library staff from making further country visits. It also precluded them – perhaps rather conveniently in the circumstances – from having to confront the forces of localism that encouraged Clerks of Petty Sessions to hide 'their' records so as to prevent them from being taken away to Sydney.

Almost a decade after the war's end the transfer of local records became a matter for public concern as archivists, librarians and historians debated archival reform, not only in professional journals, but in the columns of the *Sydney Morning Herald*. The foremost advocate of decentralisation was the University of Sydney's archivist, David S. Macmillan. A product of the Scottish Record Office, Macmillan regarded the record office model as a universal panacea, providing custodial management of both official and private records at the national, state or local levels as required.² So did the University of New England's librarian, Frank Rogers, who had previously administered an official place of deposit at the Bristol University Archives. He found unexpected support from Phyllis Mander Jones, the then Mitchell Librarian. She agreed there were 'many arguments in favour of regional official repositories' for public records as well as 'for some business archives and private papers'.³ But her Library colleagues were strongly in favour of centralism.⁴

Although the 1960 Archives Act permitted the newly created Archives Authority to establish branch repositories in country districts and to loan records to other institutions equipped to preserve them, the preference of the Principal Archivist, Gordon Richardson, who was also the State's Principal Librarian, was to continue the transfer of local records to the Archives Office repository at the Mitchell Library, then on the point of moving into more commodious accommodation. To this end he secured Authority approval for staff members to make a series of country visits,

¹ Memo for Principal Archivist (G.D. Richardson) by David A. Bluford, 22 June 1961, Country visits/visits to Court Houses, 1961-63 file, Archives Office pre-1965 Subject Files, box 4, SRNSW (I am indebted to Richard Gore for providing me with copies of relevant documents from this file).

² David S. Macmillan, 'The Future of Australian Archives', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, no. 25, November 1955, pp. 81-82.

³ Phyllis Mander Jones to F.H. Rogers, 30 July 1956, Correspondence–Mitchell Library file, UNE Archives–Administrative records pre-1989, A0037, box 1.2.1, UNERA (I am indebted to Bill Oates for this reference).

⁴ A. Horton, 'A Further Note on the Problem of Local Records', *Historical Studies Australia and New Zealand*, no. 27, November 1956, pp334-335. For a more detailed coverage of this debate see D. Boadle, 'Origins and Development of the New South Wales Regional Repositories System', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol. 23 no.2, November 1995, esp. pp. 275-277.

commencing with a two day visit to Maitland and Newcastle in September 1961 and a five day visit to East Maitland and the Newcastle district in December. The primary concern was the collection of 'older public records' of 'more than local significance', but staff were also authorised to examine and to open negotiations 'on behalf of the Mitchell Library' for 'books and manuscripts of Australian historical significance'.⁵ The initial forays to the Hunter were sufficiently productive to warrant more extended seven to ten day visits to country court houses in Braidwood and the 'Southern Tablelands' during February 1962, to Bathurst and district in May 1962, and (most ambitiously of all) to the Central West in February 1963. Thereafter, funds and possibly enthusiasm appear to have been exhausted, obliging the Archives Office to seek further transfers through what it crisply described as 'correspondence' with police and court house officers.

Several points need to be made about these country visits:

- First, they revealed that localism was operating as strongly as ever. In Oberon the coroner 'claimed to know nothing of old records' and cut his wife 'somewhat short' when she 'started to say ... "what about those old books you've got"'.⁶ And in Bathurst editorials in both local newspapers thundered against Sydney 'slowly usurping much that the State of New South Wales possesses in the way of historic items of consequence and interest', and wound up by urging 'Bathurstians [to] resist any attempt to remove any historic document, private or official from their city'.⁷
- Secondly, the entire modus operandi of the country visits demonstrated that the library manuscript collecting tradition, with its emphasis on 'treasures' – in this case early colonial records and printed books – was alive and well among Archives Office staff, as David Macmillan had already found satisfaction in pointing out. To his mind, one of the most unfortunate legacies of the 'age of the great collectors' was 'the lingering of the collectors' concern for the rare item to the exclusion of more mundane material'.⁸

⁵ G.D. Richardson to Editor, *Maitland Mercury*, 15 September 1961, Country visits/visits to Court Houses, 1961-63 file, Archives Office pre-1965 Subject Files, box 4, SRNSW.

⁶ Bluford, Report on the visit to Bathurst and District, 30 May 1962, *ibid*.

⁷ 'Bathurst must not forsake its historic heritage', *Bathurst National Advocate*, 15 May 1962; 'Why should they go to Sydney?', *The Western Times*, 15 May 1962.

⁸ Macmillan, 'The Future of Australian Archives', p. 81.

- Thirdly, it is reasonable to suggest that this ‘treasures’ mindset significantly affected the appraisal and selection of ‘local’ records by Archives Office staff. Reports on the country visits consistently identified the ‘most valuable single item found’. By contrast, they discounted the value of the ‘usual series of registers of purchases, leases etc.’ in Land Board Offices, insisting that these were ‘duplicates’ of central records held by the Lands Department in Sydney or contained information which was summarised on card indexes retained in country offices.⁹

Now it was a disposal recommendation for the destruction of Land Board Office records acquired during the East Maitland visit that provided the occasion for Rogers to press UNE’s claims to host a ‘regional repository’. Citing a ‘recent MA thesis’ submitted at UNE which used Land Board Office records from Tamworth to challenge accepted generalisations about the impact of the Orders in Council of 1847 and the Robertson Land Acts on the Liverpool Plains, he argued ‘that records necessary for regional studies must be preserved’, preferably in the region where they were created.¹⁰ While the Principal Archivist managed to persuade other Authority members to defer consideration of UNE’s bid to host ‘an experimental regional repository’, he failed to derail a compromise proposed from the chair at the October 1963 meeting permitting the loan to UNE of ‘public records relating to the New England region, which were duplicates of State archives’. Several Authority members then championed the claims of other institutions, including the Newcastle Public Library, with the result that it was ‘generally agreed that a precedent was being established which could appropriately be applied in the future at the discretion of the Authority’.¹¹

This compromise was grudgingly accepted by Richardson and his Archives Office staff, who remained as centrally minded as ever. A key element in the decision was that loans were to be ‘subject to consideration in each individual case’. So Rogers was offered the opportunity in April 1964 to consider whether UNE was prepared to accept the loan of seven records series (one of which had already been approved for

⁹ Report by Mr A.J. Hutchins and Mr B.J. Stuckey on visit to Central West of New South Wales, 18-18 February 1963, Country visits/visits to Court Houses, 1961-63 file, Archives Office pre-1965 Subject Files, box 4, SRNSW.

¹⁰ Rogers to Richardson, 31 January 1963 with enclosure, ‘Disposal of Lands Office Records—New South Wales’, Regional Repositories, 1963-64 file, Archives Office pre-1965 Subject Files, box 7, SRNSW.

¹¹ Archives Authority Minutes, 14 October 1963, SRNSW.

destruction) from the Land Board Office at Armidale.¹² I have not made a detailed study of subsequent loans to either UNE or the Newcastle Public Library, but the obvious point to make is that what was being put on loan were record series that ostensibly were regarded as insufficiently important to be preserved centrally as State archives. I have argued elsewhere that there may well have been an element of sophistry in this face-saving device: both Richardson and his deputy, Russell Doust, were accomplished historians of public policy making and administration and the suggestion that Rogers' painstakingly documented arguments about the value of local records for studies of regional administration were lost on them does not carry much conviction.¹³

By 1970 the Archives Authority had endorsed a recommendation from Richardson that steps be taken to ensure the preservation and transfer as State archives of registers in offices of Crown Land Agents and Land Boards. Speaking to this recommendation, Richardson contended 'it was now clear that the local office records were of prime importance for historical studies': an opinion endorsed by the Challis Professor of History at Sydney University, John M. Ward, who was then an Authority member.¹⁴ Belatedly conceding that it already had put State archives on loan, the Authority resolved in 1973 to vary its original 1963 resolution to provide that 'subject to consideration in each individual case, *State archives of particular local interest* may be made available to appropriate universities, or other established institutions, on long term loan'.¹⁵

The wording of this resolution is of some interest, because it allowed both the Archives Authority and the regional collecting institutions a high level of discretion in terms of the agencies and series which were sought and/or offered. While the needs of academic (and, in some cases, community) stakeholders and availability of sufficient storage space were demonstrably important variables in determining collection development priorities,¹⁶ there are grounds for suggesting that the 'treasures' mentality continued to operate at both ends of the selection process, with Archives Office staff declining to part with early colonial records like the bench books

¹² Archives Authority Minutes, 13 April 1964, SRNSW.

¹³ Boadle, 'Origins and Development of the New South Wales Regional Repositories System', p. 282.

¹⁴ Archives Authority Minutes, 9 February 1970 and 13 April 1970, SRNSW.

¹⁵ Archives Authority Minutes, 12 February 1973, SRNSW. The emphasis is my own.

¹⁶ D. Boadle, 'Academic or Community Resource? Stakeholder Interests and Collection Management at Charles Sturt University Regional Archives, 1973-2003', *Australian Library Journal*, vol. 52 no. 3, August 2003, pp. 273-286.

of local magistrates (or else making concessions to the extent of tolerating 'split' series with the earliest records in Sydney and later consignments in the locality of origin), and regional repository staff selecting records to complement their private record collecting (for instance, pastoral station and Land Board Office records at UNE) or special subject interests (like education at the University of Newcastle).

The immediate consequence of this selectivity was that relatively small quantities of State archives were placed on loan with regional institutions. The most extreme example was the University of Newcastle which in 1995, after almost two decades of collecting, held just 6 metres of State archives. The other Newcastle repository, at the Region Public Library, held around 315 metres by this time, but was constrained by a serious shortage of repository space. The University of New England suffered from similar constraints, but this was partly because its archivist had chosen to prioritise the collecting of private records, notably from pastoral properties and mining companies, which were much in demand by the university's economic historians, interested in the origins of landed settlement and the exploitation of their region's natural resources.¹⁷ By 1988 UNE held just 30 shelf metres of State archives (from land, court and mining agencies) and at least ten times that quantity of private records. After the archives moved to new accommodation in 1995 additional series of court, land, mining and police records were transferred from the Archives Office in Sydney bringing UNE's total holdings of State archives to around 315 metres. Only Charles Sturt University (which became a regional repository in 1978) had unrestricted storage capacity in these years, and this together with its staff's regular collecting trips to centres within its two collecting regions ensured that its holdings of State archives totalled 885 metres by 1995.¹⁸

Assessed in accordance with the parameters of the original scheme – which aimed simply to supply the regional universities with limited quantities of research resources – the loan system can be judged a reasonable success for both the Archives Authority and for regional end users. Yet by the 1970s, with changes in senior staffing at the Archives Office and its formal separation from the State Library, a commitment to creating an American-style regional repository network ensured that

¹⁷ D. Boadle, 'Documenting 20th Century Rural and Regional Australia: Archival Acquisition and Collection Development in Regional University Archives and Special Collections', *Archives & Manuscripts*, vol. 29 no. 2, November 2001, pp. 72-73.

¹⁸ G. Purkis, Report to the [UNE] Archives Management Committee, 8 September 1988, UNERA; Archives Authority of NSW, Regional Repositories Overview, April 1995. Note that these figures exclude the universities' own records and records from local government and health agencies which were not managed as public records under the 1960 legislation.

expectations were somewhat higher. There is no doubt that the regional repositories had satisfied at least in part the Authority's aim of keeping records in the regions (if not the actual localities) in which they were created and 'reducing the temptations for individuals and groups in country areas who sometimes seek to alienate public records from official custody on the moral ground that they are "their records" and they are only preventing them from being taken away to Sydney'.¹⁹ But it is questionable whether any of the regional repositories – except perhaps the CSU Regional Archives – was being sufficiently proactive in locating and arranging transfer of sufficient quantities to deliver the savings the Authority had anticipated from not having to negotiate records transfers itself and organise transport to Sydney.

¹⁹ D.J. Cross, *Regionalisation of the State Archives: A Policy Review*, 21 November 1991.