

New Zealand's Archives

by JUDITH HORNABROOK

The observation that "archives in New Zealand, even at the national level, have never achieved any real measure of general acceptance" emphasises their fragmented and undeveloped state. The country's public records are in the care of the National Archives in Wellington while the Alexander Turnbull Library, a division of the National Library, holds the country's premier manuscripts collections and has recently been particularly active in acquiring from the private sphere. Outside the capital, however, as S.R. Strachan again notes, archival functions have "tended to be assumed by related but not primarily archives institutions, such as libraries, museums and historical societies, in which archives exist tenuously as an appendage to very much larger book and artefact collections. These commonly lack trained staff, properly supervised and serviced reading rooms, adequate finding aids, repair facilities and are short of space".¹

Except for the period 1853-1876, New Zealand has had virtually no provincial or regional government. The Archives Act of 1957 allowed for the development of regional archives in its provision for repositories to be recognised for the deposit of public archives "in excess of or unsuitable to the requirements of the National Archives".² Ten such repositories (eight outside Wellington) have been recognised but the majority of these have not been able to develop very far. A notable exception is the Hocken Library at Dunedin, where there is a long tradition of local and business records acquisition with a trained archivist in charge, and the city corporation at Palmerston North where the records officer's work is specially praiseworthy. Only two other local institutions, the Canterbury Museum and Canterbury Public Library in Christchurch, have appointed archivists, though other positions are being considered elsewhere. The Local Government Act may yet be of value to local archival development but it is too early to tell. Under its provisions, local authorities are obliged to take measures for the preservation of their records and the National Archives is quite specifically empowered to gazette categories of local authority records which may not be destroyed without approval of the

1 S.R. Strachan, "Local Archives in New Zealand". A paper prepared for the Archives Committee of the New Zealand Library Association, 1975, p.6.

2 "An Act to provide for the custody and preservation of the public archives of New Zealand", 1957 no. 13.

overseas training), an attempt was again made to build a framework without suitable accommodation, statutory authority, or staff. A disastrous fire in 1952 destroyed the records of four key government departments and focussed attention once more on the archives, resulting eventually in passage of the 1957 Archives Act. Two years later, the right of the National Archives to exercise legal custody over the public records was provided by cabinet order, despite the fact that at one time archives were housed in as many as twenty six places. The following period saw a general increase in staff, but the death of Standish and two senior archivists, together with the continuing lack of a proper building, was a further burden. Only in 1972 did the National Archives move into a building which would bring the archives under one roof, but even this structure—the Air Centre in Wellington—is still temporarily leased and is shared with Air New Zealand.

The National Archives is, of course, the repository for several government offices throughout the country. Current holdings consist of ten thousand linear metres of records, excluding approximately half a million maps and plans and more than two thousand five hundred microfilm reels mostly comprising documents relating to New Zealand in Great Britain and Australia. Some papers of former ministers and records of semi-official bodies are also housed. The National Archives is under the control of a Chief Archivist, two senior archivists and eight staff archivists, one typist, a conservation clerk, and some temporary workers obtained under unemployment relief schemes. Two records centres for storage of semi-current records are located at Lower Hutt (run by three non-professional staff) and at Auckland (with a staff of two) where the centre caters to the northern part of North Island. All public records more than twenty-years old are transferred from government offices to the National Archives, unless declared exempt. No public record may be destroyed without the consent of the Chief Archivist who has wide powers of records inspection and advice.

Despite the statutory responsibility laid down in the 1957 Act, in practice the lack of staff and power of implementation have limited records management activity. At present, archivists take care of this function even though some attempt has been made to appoint records advisory officers to liaise with departments and to improve records-keeping practice. National Archives staff lecture to library school diploma students, and address various government and public groups. Meetings with researchers, especially from universities, have been inaugurated for archivists to discuss sources and methodology. Improved physical facilities have made exhibition work possible, especially with school children in view. Plans are now under way to begin publication again of information pamphlets and inventories of record groups lain dormant since 1961, and to revise the Dominion Archives *Guide* first published in 1953.

Because New Zealand is a small country (population of little more than three million), career openings for archivists are few and far between. This, coupled with a constant lack of resources and slight recognition of the importance of archives, has always been discouraging to say the least. Only one National Archives staff archivist has been able to take the year-long diploma course in archives offered by the University of New South Wales in Sydney, though the Chief Archivist was able to take the Public Archives of Canada's

month-long course in 1971. For some years, the few archivists and keepers of manuscripts met together under the auspices of the New Zealand Library Association but, stimulated by a noticeable growth of general interest in archives, the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand (ARANZ) was formed in 1976. ARANZ now has a membership of almost four hundred and is fostering a sense of common interest and cooperation amongst those most involved with archives throughout the country. It publishes a bulletin *Archifacts*⁴ and has run several successful training seminars⁵ in addition to investigations into problem areas. Branches of ARANZ have already been formed in Wellington, Auckland, Hamilton and Dunedin. It was at the invitation of ARANZ, supported by a grant from Internal Affairs, that the Dominion Archivist of Canada, Wilfred Smith, came to New Zealand in February 1978 to report on the condition of its archives and to recommend measures for its future development. His visit and report are milestones in the history of archives in New Zealand.⁶

4 The bulletin of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand, published quarterly—subscriptions: NZ \$6.00 (individuals), NZ \$10.00 (institutions). Available from the Secretary, ARANZ, c/o National Archives, Box 6162, Te Aro, Wellington.

5 See for instance R.S. Hill and M.D.W. Hodder, eds., *Archives and Manuscripts. Proceedings of a Seminar held in Wellington, 21-26 September 1975* (Wellington, 1977). Available free of charge from the New Zealand Library Association, 10 Park Street, Wellington.

6 Wilfred I. Smith, *Archives in New Zealand. A Report* (Wellington, 1978). Available at NZ \$3.00 from S. Dell, Alexander Turnbull Library, National Library of New Zealand, Wellington. See a commentary on this report by R.C. Sharman under "Dr. Smith Goes to Wellington" in the "Communications" section of this issue of *Archivaria*.

Résumé

Le développement archivistique de la Nouvelle-Zélande, petit pays à faible population, n'a pas été très remarquable jusqu'à maintenant. La situation change cependant grâce à l'action des professionnels du métier, notamment l'*Archives and Records Association of New Zealand* (ARANZ). C'est d'ailleurs cette dernière qui a chargé l'Archiviste fédéral du Canada de rédiger un rapport, publié en 1978, sur les besoins archivistiques de leur pays.