

# Communications

## Dr Smith Goes to Wellington

It would be advisable for all future applicants for the position of Dominion Archivist of Canada, on such rare occasions as the post becomes vacant, to demonstrate an ability to walk and talk like the natives down under, for a precedent seems to have been established that the holder of the premier archival post in Canada will include amongst the perks of office a trip to advise his antipodean colleagues on the conduct of national archival affairs. It is suggested therefore that applicants for the position learn to perambulate on their heads and to pronounce the word "mate" as if it rhymes with "light".

W. Kaye Lamb did not qualify for his Australasian visit until after his retirement. In 1973 he visited Australia on the invitation of the then Special Minister of State (Lionel Bowen, MP, though Senator Don Willesee had been in office at the time the invitation was issued). Dr Lamb conducted an inspection of the work of the Australian Archives, including its buildings in about half of the major cities, was present at a Seminar in Canberra on 1 September 1973, had discussions with officials, archivists, historians, librarians and others, and ultimately wrote the report that is named for him.<sup>1</sup>

Wilfred Smith, the present Dominion Archivist of Canada, visited New Zealand five years later. He was in that country for almost exactly the same period as his predecessor was in Australia, but because it is a smaller country his coverage was somewhat more thorough than was that of Lamb. The New Zealand tour was intended, moreover, to cover all sorts of archival institutions, whereas Lamb's overwhelming concern was with the Australian (Government) Archives. The Smith Report, *Archives in New Zealand*, has now been published.<sup>2</sup>

Visits by North American archivists to Australia or New Zealand have become quite a feature of the archival scene in the two countries, especially in Australia. The visit to Australia in 1954 of the late T.R. Schellenberg, then Director of Archival Management at the National Archives and Records Service in Washington, DC, was the starting point for a good deal of cooperative action on the part of Australian archives institutions. The Lamb visit, almost twenty years later, was also a watershed in the development of Australian archives, though it had significance for one archives institution, the official custodian of the Commonwealth Government's public records, rather than for archivists and archives management generally.

The Lamb and Smith visits, however, one to Australia and one to New Zealand, have much in common. They are similar, not only because in both instances the visitor was a Canadian archivist, but also because in both cases they were motivated by a

1 W. Kaye Lamb, *Development of the National Archives: Report* (Canberra, 1974). See also R.C. Sharman, "Australia in Lamb's Clothing", *Archivaria* 1 no. 2 (1976): 20-32.

2 Wilfred I. Smith, *Archives in New Zealand: A Report* (Wellington, 1978).

desire to enable the archives institutions of the two countries to overcome particular problems—problems that were seen in political terms rather than professional. Schellenberg came to Australia to conduct courses in archives and records management for a group of people who, by and large, had no formal training as archivists (some of them were qualified in librarianship). His visit helped Australian archivists to see themselves as members of a distinct professional group, and out of it grew many significant developments. It was not, however, a visit that had been motivated by a desire to bring about change in administrative or legislative arrangements. If, in the course of time, the feeling of separateness engendered in Australian archivists at the time of the Schellenberg visit became one of the factors making it possible for the Archives Division of the then Commonwealth National Library to break away, in 1960, from its parent body, and become a separate agency, this was probably no part of Schellenberg's original motivation in accepting the invitation, and certainly no part of the National Library's motivation in extending it!

Kaye Lamb's visit can be seen in entirely different terms. The Australian Government in the early 1970s could see that a lot of the criticism it suffered on the subject of access to government archives was justified. There was probably an awareness that legislation was needed, and that its archives institution (by 1973 its name was changed to the Australian Archives) needed to be upgraded in terms of staff and other resources allocated to it. Having established the objectives, it became a matter of formulating the administrative acts which would enable those objectives to be realised. A visit by a distinguished overseas archivist seemed to be the right sort of step to be taken in those heady days of 1973 when so much was happening under a vigorous, reformist (if somewhat unstable) government. The Lamb visit, and the report that the visitor wrote, was the outcome. If one takes the long view, and makes allowances for the difficulties into which the Federal Labor Government fell, or blundered, in 1974 and 1975, and for the policies of severe restraint pursued by its conservative successor in 1976 and thereafter, it would be possible to say that the objectives of 1973 were ultimately well on the way to being realised. By 1978 a distinguished historian, Robert Neale, has been some years in office as Director-General of the Archives, and there has been some improvement in the premises available to the Archives, an Archives Bill has been prepared and has at least reached the second reading stage in the Federal Senate.

Dr Smith came to New Zealand at a time when archives institutions in that country were suffering similar problems to those of their colleagues across the Tasman Sea. A preliminary questionnaire sent out to archives institutions in New Zealand, and discussions which Smith conducted with those he met in that country, revealed the following problems:

- 1 The fragmented nature of archival collections which do not have the mandate, resources and staff to provide adequate archives services.
- 2 The lack of a distinct identity with separate budgets, accommodation, relationships with creators of records and authority to perform archival functions.
- 3 The lack of adequate archives to serve the major regions in the country, particularly the complete lack of local authority archives.
- 4 Serious weaknesses in records management systems for central government bodies and particularly local authorities and the lack of any records management systems for most non-public corporate bodies.
- 5 The lack of rationalisation in the collection of non-public archival material.
- 6 Inadequate provision for education and training for archivists, records managers and technical staff.
- 7 The lack of conservation facilities for most archival material.

In some respects, New Zealand was in fact worse placed than Australia. There are problems involved in having a federal as against a unitary system of government, but there are advantages, too. Australian governments are seven in number (one federal, six State) and these different authorities share responsibility for the preservation of public archives. If one of the seven falls down on its job, all is not lost. In New Zealand, however, a very great deal depends upon the central government. Smith visited that country whilst a Nationalist (conservative) government was in power. As in Australia, so in New Zealand, severe restraints were being placed upon the growth of the public sector of the economy. New Zealand's National Archives had been established under legislation which, at the time in 1957 was recognised as among the best in the world. Developments had been slow, but some progress was achieved. However, by 1977, when Wilfred Smith was invited to visit the country, it was easier to see problems than prospects in the National Archives crystal ball. The Archives itself is certainly not sufficiently highly placed in the government hierarchy to enable its chief officer to acquire a proper share of public resources and support. Smith says that the Chief Archivist was five levels removed from the Minister controlling the Department of Internal Affairs, which includes the National Archives. The National Archives at the time of the visit played a somewhat uncertain role in the records management area, standards of performance by government departments in this matter were ill defined, career opportunities for records managers were too limited, and the National Archives was seriously under-staffed. Smith makes recommendations pertinent to all these deficiencies.

In the area of regional archives, Smith recommended that regional repositories should be set up "in locations most easily accessible to the majority of people with a potential interest in using them consistent with their good care". Archives should be in the care of those trained to manage them, and there should be a career structure to encourage archivists to dedicate their professional lives, or part of them, to this regional system of repositories. This, as Smith was probably quick to realise, was a counsel of perfection, and as there was really no infrastructure capable of dealing with this situation at the time, the Canadian visitor might well have begun by suggesting one. It is true that in his sixth recommendation Smith suggested that an Otago Regional Archives be established, as a model for other regions to follow, but the suggestion seems a little opportunistic as it involves taking advantage of the existence of the Hocken Library at Otago University. Conditions that apply in Dunedin are not likely to apply elsewhere in the country, and the model, if it is ever established, may never be emulated.

If facilities for the preservation and use of public archives in New Zealand are somewhat inadequate, how much less adequate are those for the preservation and use of business, society, trade union and other archives. Dr Smith points out quite rightly that, with the exception of the National Archives, the Alexander Turnbull and Hocken Libraries, and the Canterbury Museum, archives institutions do not really exist as distinct entities in that country. Indeed, even the Turnbull and Hocken Libraries and the Canterbury Museum are not archives institutions pure and simple. There are many institutions which collect and care for this type of material, but the amount of staff time spent of this activity is an indication of the very low priority assigned to it. As an example of just about the minimum input of staff effort, it is recorded that the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand (ARANZ) questionnaires sent out before Smith's arrival elicited one response which showed that ten minutes each week were devoted to a business firm's archives. In Australia, this would be regarded as a really quite respectable total work effort by many trade unionists, but in New Zealand, where they try harder, it is to be assumed that the employee was devoting the rest of his week to other tasks!

The recommendations traverse a large part of the field that one would expect a

report on archival provision to traverse. Local authority archives are mentioned (Palmerston North should establish a pilot project); the accommodation situation of the National Archives is deplored, and recommendations made relating to its improvement; there is discussion on access to public records; and there are recommendations on non-public records, audio-visual records, maps and plans and on the principal areas not specifically relevant to the National Archives but concerned with the preservation of other parts of the country's documentary heritage. Thus, he deals with the Alexander Turnbull Library, Business Archives, Labour Archives, Church Archives, and University Archives.

Conservation of archival materials naturally appears as a major item of concern, as well it might. Archives institutions have been remarkably slow to realise how important it is to have a conservation programme, and the training of conservators has been undertaken with leaden feet. This applies to many other parts of the world, in addition to New Zealand. Smith's recommendations follow a familiar pattern: "training be provided in short courses. . .", "consideration be given to grants for archival conservation. . .". No matter with what sympathy the Smith report is received, it seems to the present reviewer extremely unlikely that anywhere nearly enough resources will be devoted to this task. "Too little, too late" should be engraved on the doors of all archival conservation laboratories as a reminder that public resources to preserve the documentary evidence of previous public acts are simply never enough, and are never allocated early enough.

The final appendix to the report is the list of suggested alterations to the Archives Act. These follow the lines of the references to legislation and enhanced functions for the National Archives as mentioned in various parts of the main report. The part the Archives should play in records management is instanced as a needed change in the Act; doubts are cast on the need to exempt from the Act certain confidential records which Section 3 deals with; there is a need for prohibition to be placed on the removal from New Zealand of public records; the Act should provide for a records officer to be appointed to each Department; and so on.

The report is addressed, not to a Minister of the Crown, but to the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand. Smith himself justifies the status of his report, and describes it as an "independent" one. His visit to New Zealand was supported by Government funds (proceeds of a New Zealand lottery, in fact), but he makes it clear that he is reporting to an association of archivists and records managers rather than to the government itself. This is a curious phenomenon. The present reviewer does not subscribe to the belief, implicit in Smith's remarks, that the report of an outside consultant would be any the less independent were it addressed to a government authority. Consultants are commissioned to express the views that they have and to make recommendations as they think fit. They are not expected to fall into line with the views of their hosts, or to refrain from saying what will not be acceptable to those who financed their visit (the gamblers of New Zealand?). There is the point that, had Dr Smith depended upon the Government of New Zealand to publish his report, it might not have seen the light of day, or it might not have been published anywhere nearly as soon. This is valid, but of itself it does not seem to be an adequate argument against a consultancy such as this being commissioned by and for the government.

The final thought must be "Is it worth all the trouble?" Does a government, or a professional association, benefit sufficiently from an exercise such as this? I have implied above that the Australian Government at the time Kaye Lamb came to Australia had already made up its mind what was needed. Lamb came here, in effect, to write a report which would confirm the Australian Government's preconceived views, and add impetus and authority to the campaign to have these views implemented. If this were so with regard to the Lamb report, it is even more true of the Smith report.

Here we see the aims and objectives of the Archives and Records Association of New Zealand written up with Wilfred Smith's signature attached. This does not mean that the visitor in any way compromised his own attitudes, or accepted the role of puppet. The truth is that the things that are wrong in New Zealand archives are obvious to any trained observer, and the Smith report could easily have been written on the basis of the documents that were supplied to the Dominion Archivist before he left Canada. The archivists, records managers, and historical research workers of New Zealand believe that a considerably greater proportion of available resources should be allocated to the provision of better facilities, the engagement of more staff, the upgrading of archivists and record managers in salary scales and the creation of new infrastructure to enable better services to be provided. It would be strange indeed if the visiting Dominion Archivist of Canada did not agree with them.

Will the publication of the Smith report help them to achieve their objectives more quickly, more thoroughly? That is the question.

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## Eyes of Time

Photography and history were the focal points for the first of a projected series of national conferences sponsored by the Public Archives of Canada. *The Eyes of Time*, presented 23-26 May 1978 by the National Photography Collection in association with Heritage Canada, attempted to bring together the creators, users and custodians of the photographic record to exchange views and ideas. Its organizers hoped that the conference would also "stimulate a national awareness of the photograph as an historical record". A whole series of photographic events were orchestrated. The nationally distributed *Weekend Magazine's* colour feature put the conference and its subject before some five million readers, while newspaper and radio coverage and numerous photography exhibitions in Ottawa, to say nothing of the eye-catching logo designed for the conference, must have made the Ottawa public almost camera-shy. The time was well-chosen to insinuate such a topic into the public consciousness for the 10 July 1978 issue of *Maclean's* featured an article by Tom Hopkins on "The New Masters: How the photographer's art finally came of age". According to art critic Gary Michael Dault, "Vintage photos are doing much better than gold as an investment". If numbers are anything to judge by, the conference succeeded beyond the planner's dreams. Some two hundred participants from across Canada, and the United States included creators (38 photographers and 27 teachers of photography), custodians (26 archivists and 37 curators) and 56 users of photographs along with 15 staff members of the National Photography Collection.

Less successful was the aim to bring such a diverse group together to achieve a productive exchange on our photographic heritage. General sessions, where each speaker represented one of the three major interest groups, alternated with workshops each designed to attract one of the three groups. Yet from the very first general session, it became apparent that the number and volubility of the active photographers present would result in attention being focussed on contemporary photographers and their problems far away from the retrieval and interpretation concerns of archivists and historians. This was especially upsetting because the required reading for the conference (*Archivaria* number 5, winter 1977/78) was directed squarely at historical photographs and archival considerations. In "The Photograph: Record in a Visual Age" most attention was directed to Ted Grant who was closely questioned about the objectivity and representativeness of his photo-documentary work on the modern cowboy's daily life.