

Asia-Pacific Economic and Business History Conference
Queensland University of Technology, Brisbane
16-18 February 2006

Free beer, and what else can we get you?: Archives catering for the economic historian

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When I was at university in Sydney in the 70s there were posters on telegraph poles that said 'FREE BEER' in large letters followed by the name of a local pub. If you went to that hotel, of course, you would find out that the beer wasn't free but you did get to hear a band that called themselves 'Free Beer'.¹

This is just one of the strategies I've been toying with to attract economic historians to the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. I can't actually offer free beer but I can offer the records of Tooth and Company, Resch's, the Australian Hotels Association, the Institute of Brewing, and even Lindemans and Penfolds if you prefer wine.

Last year the Noel Butlin Archives Centre at the Australian National University had over 1000 reading room visits as well as about half that number of researchers whose requests were dealt with by mail or email. The vast majority of these researchers were not economic historians. In fact when I present my statistics I use formulas such as 30% of our researchers are from the Australian National University, 35% are from other universities and 35% from elsewhere, and highlight some of the notable cases: research done for major histories, biographies, theses or documentaries. This satisfies my political masters who want to be reassured that the archives are used for 'serious research'. But it tends to hide the fact that, for instance, our extensive holdings of CSR Limited records are used mostly by family historians and that our records of Tooth's hotels are used mostly by heritage architects.

Also hidden in the statistics is that in any year many of our collections are not used at all – not once – and I suspect that there are collections which have never been used, because we tend to count what happens rather than what doesn't happen.

It may seem ironic that the collection started over 50 years ago by Noel Butlin, Professor of Economic History at the Australian National University from 1962 to 1986, to support his and his colleagues' economic history research² is now used more by researchers in other disciplines, and not just history and economics, but Aboriginal studies, anthropology, archaeology, art history, environmental studies, epidemiology, geography, international relations, law, linguistics, musicology, occupational health, political science, psychology and sociology.

This is not at all surprising to archivists who are used to the idea that records created or indeed collected for one purpose are used for other purposes.

So what has been used? I'm pleased to report that at least six speakers at this conference have used the Noel Butlin Archives Centre collection. I'll mention in particular the work of Mark Wilson on the Tooth and Company records, particularly because Mark is the president of the Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre. I should also mention Simon Ville's work on the history of stock and station agents which drew on the records of Dalgety's, Elder Smith Goldsbrough Mort and others held by the Noel Butlin Archives Centre.³

There seems to be still a cottage industry of celebratory publications for company anniversaries – Australian Agricultural Company's 175th anniversary publication 'In good company',⁴ CSR Limited 150th,⁵ the centenary history of HB Selby,⁶ the Institute of Brewing's 50th,⁷ and Commonwealth government agencies since the centenary of Federation (the Senate's biographical dictionary⁸ and the Department of Defence's centenary history⁹ are just two examples which have used our holdings).

It's interesting to see the difference in how CSR Limited celebrated its 100th anniversary (a weighty tome including a history of its past operations)¹⁰ and its 150th (a photographic history with photos by Max Dupain and others, with minimal text and a calendar in a CD case). While the centenary volume engaged at least a dozen contributors, the 150th photographic record acknowledges their Manager Communication, an art historian and a photographer.

The age of the serious celebratory history is not yet gone: last year we had a former employee of Humes Ltd (manufacturers of concrete and steel pipes) examine every item in their collection of 229 metres, researching for their centenary history. He perhaps would not describe himself as an economic historian but he certainly bumped up our statistics, visiting every day for several months.

Biography is also a growth industry and while the Packer biographer, Bridget Griffen-Foley, might not have had access to his own papers, she made good use

of the records of the Australian Journalists Association, the Australian Workers Union and the Printing and Kindred Industries Union records held at the Noel Butlin Archives Centre.¹¹ This raises the question which can be the clincher when it comes to encouraging a company to maintain its own archives: do you want your company's history to be written solely from the records of the unions that your employees belong to, or would you rather that future historians have access to the minutes of your Board – we might have a debate at this point about which account would represent the 'real' history of the company which I suspect would be somewhere in between.

There is continuing use by institutional users for biographies, such as the Australian Dictionary of Biography, the National Archives with their Prime Ministers guides series,¹² and the Biographical Unit at the Senate.

What hasn't been used? As Michael Piggott mentioned, archivists are often collecting in the dark, and by that I mean not knowing what future generations of historians will want to have access to. As I mentioned before, often records collected with one purpose in mind are used for quite another unexpected purpose. One recent example is the use of Waterside Workers Federation membership records to prove exposure to asbestos in Dust Diseases Tribunal cases – there are few formal personnel records for wharfies but wharves were a 'closed shop' so every wharfie was a member of the union and this is often the only evidence that someone worked on the wharves loading asbestos products.

When collecting records we are trying to cater for the whole range of 'historians':

- family historians who want us to keep all the company staff cards, all the membership records for unions
- local historians who would like us to keep all the building and site records for the factories, wharves and other structures
- everyone wants us to keep photographs and annual reports.

We try to identify records which we think are of long-term value such as minutes of Board meetings, correspondence of senior staff, and aggregated financial records. We try to cover the range from 'nationally-significant' companies and organisations to the 'small business', both metropolitan and regional, and we collect records of both the employers and the employees.

I've had a recent offer of the records of a pastoral company which dates back to the 1850s – a large western NSW property which has been in the same family since then. Of course I'm interested but we already have the records of similar properties. What new insights might these records offer? Or am I just duplicating existing holdings and adding to our preservation backlog? Will they be used by

others apart from descendants of that particular family? A question for this audience, are economic historians still interested in pastoral companies? Our station records have been used more by Indigenous family historians and more recently, to track local climate change through rainfall records.

I just want to mention some of the recent collections we have which haven't yet been used by economic historians. I'm concentrating here on company records, though we do also collect trade union records and records of peak industry councils, eg the Cattle Council, the Confederation of Australian Industry (now the Australian Chamber of Commerce and Industry), the National Farmers Federation, and the Retail Traders Association.

- We recently received six metres of Unilever Australasia records from 1873: including Kitchen and Sons, Lever Brothers and other predecessors
- There are 23 metres of Ford New Holland records (manufacturers of farm equipment in South Australia) and also records of Pioneer International, concrete manufacturers
- There are 430 metres of Burns Philp records now in our custody following a massive transfer coinciding with the Company's vacating of its Bridge Street premises in 1997. In fact we are still processing this collection nine years later.
- Other large collections are regularly added to: Australian Agricultural Company, Adelaide Steamship, CSR Limited, Sugar Australia, and Elders.

Older collections which have hardly been used include the records of the Central Queensland Meat Export Company, the Sydney Meat Preserving Company, Johns and Waygood (lift manufacturers), Lindemans, Arnotts, Dunlop Rubber, Marcus Clark, and Nugget Shoe Polish, and I would particularly mention the records of friendly societies, building societies, credit unions and insurance and investment companies (though these tend to be small companies which are no longer extant). Have these records been fully exploited by economic historians yet?

So the question is: why haven't these records been used?

- Communication: have we told you we have them? We do include a list of new accessions in every update to our News on our website, but do we need to do more? One idea the Noel Butlin Archives Centre and the University of Melbourne Archives have been developing is to produce

online guides to particular industries indicating both our holdings, eg wine industry, mining industry

- Are economic historians now more interested in other countries, as the program for this conference suggests? Are other research methods being used?
- Is archival research too hard? Take too long? Our most used collection last year was a collection of printed ephemera. We are often asked to supply photographs for books written without the benefit of archival research.
- Do younger historians want to do archival research or know how to go about it? Within the Australian National University, the Archives offers 'how to do research using archives' sessions to history students where we cover some very basic ground such as the fact that files are in reverse chronological order, what a carbon copy is and what is missing from it that's on the original letter sent out, what a telegram is...
- Are we collecting the right stuff? A particular problem for archivists is taking a gamble on what might prove useful in the future – you have to sort and catalogue the material, house it in acid-free boxes, shelve it, and promote it, but what if having done all those things and having kept it for 50 years, nobody has ever used it? At what point do you decide not to persevere, though it is almost inevitable that the current fashion will wane and the records will be in demand again at some point?

So let me leave you with that last question in particular: Are we collecting the right stuff? Or how can archives cater better for the economic historian?

¹ There have been a number of bands with this same gimmick, see www.freebeernet.com and www.freebeer1981.com.

² For a more complete account, see B Howarth & E Maidment (eds), *Light from the Tunnel: Collecting the Archives of Australian Business and Labour at the Australian National University, 1953–2003*, Friends of the Noel Butlin Archives Centre, Canberra, 2004, especially the chapters by Bob Gollan and Selwyn Cornish.

³ Simon Ville, *The Rural Entrepreneurs: A History of the Stock and Station Agent Industry in Australia and New Zealand*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge, 2000.

⁴ *In good company: 175 Years of Australian Agricultural Company, 1824-1999*, Australian Agricultural Company Limited, Sydney, 1999.

⁵ *CSR 1855–2005: Celebrating 150 years*, CSR Limited, Chatswood, NSW, 2005.

⁶ Samuel Furphy, *Selbys the Science People: A History of H B Selby Limited*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, 2005.

⁷ John V Harvey, *Keeping a Head? : The Institute & Guild of Brewing - Asia Pacific Section 1952-2002*, Winetitles, Adelaide, 2002.

⁸ Ann Millar (ed) [et al], *The Biographical Dictionary of the Australian Senate, Volume 1, 1901-1929*. Melbourne University Press, 2000.

⁹ Joan Beaumont, *The Australian History of Defence. Volume VI. Australian Defence : Sources and Statistics*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 2001.

¹⁰ *South Pacific Enterprise: The Colonial Sugar Refining Company Limited*, Angus and Robertson, Sydney, 1956.

¹¹ Bridget Griffen-Foley, *The House of Packer: The Making of a Media Empire*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1999.

¹² Susan Marsden and Roslyn Russell, *Our First Six 1901-1915: Guide to Archives of Australia's Prime Ministers*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2002 and John Connor, *Stanley Melbourne Bruce 1923-1929: Guide to Archives of Australia's Prime Ministers*, National Archives of Australia, Canberra, 2003.