The Historical Manuscripts Commission (HMC)

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The Historical Manuscripts Commission (formally known as the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts) was established by Royal Warrant on 2 April 1869. Its remit was to bring to light and publish original manuscripts and papers of 'Institutions and Private Families' which 'tend to the elucidation of History, and the illustration of Constitutional Law, Science and Literature'(1). It lay firmly within the tradition of enlightened enquiry and the establishment of evidence for the advancement of learning and society which characterised mid -Victorian Britain.

The appointment of a Commission had been mooted for some time but a previous attempt by George Harris of Rugby, a lawyer and antiquary, to secure such a body in the 1850s had failed. In the early 19th century, another body, the Records Commission, had already begun to publish archives of the state and in 1838 with the passing of the first Public Records Act the scattered and often poorly kept records of government departments had been brought under unified control. These initiatives had already focused attention on the importance of primary source material for the study of history. Harris had been chosen to write a life of Philip Yorke, 1st Earl of Hardwicke, in 1845 and his work on the Yorke papers (which he subsequently calendared) impressed on him the importance of such private papers for historical studies. In 1857, he proposed a survey of the location and contents of important manuscript collections in private hands, subject to the consent of their owners, by inspectors who would examine them in order to prepare and publish concise reports on their contents and a general catalogue of these collections. He subsequently drew up a memorial to the Prime Minister (2), and with the support of Lord Brougham, Sir Frederick Madden of the British Museum and other prominent public figures, he sought to obtain a commission for setting his enquiry under way. Unfortunately, Harris failed to understand the archival politics of his time and neglected to obtain the backing of Lord Romilly, the Master of the Rolls and Keeper of Public Records, or of other key staff at the Public Record Office (PRO). Harris did have a meeting with the Prime Minister, Lord Palmerston, in 1859, but his proposal was subsequently rejected by the government on the advice of Romilly.

Having seen off Harris's plan, Romilly devised another of his own in 1860 along similar lines but providing inspections not by staff of the British Museum but by those of the PRO, under his control. Romilly did not pursue the scheme until 1869 and the causes of this delay are disputed. He then activated the proposal for a royal commission to investigate private records at a cut-down cost of 500 per annum, one quarter of Harris's projected figure, which the government accepted. The Commissioners, as appointed, differed somewhat from Romilly's plan for a Commission comprising the Master of the Rolls, the Deputy Keeper of the Records and three members respectively of the House of Lords and House of Commons. Instead, the members were chosen more for their relevant expertise and influence (several with noted scholarly interests), including Thomas Duffus Hardy as the professional record keeper and Charles Russell, professor of ecclesiastical history at Maynooth. They also numbered owners of archival collections. This pattern of appointing owners, custodians and users of archives as Commissioners was maintained throughout its entire history as an independent body. Owing to concerns about the possible infringement of owners' property rights and privacy, it was made clear that title deeds of recent origin would be specifically excluded from the scope of material to be surveyed and indeed, at first, no information on material after 1800 was published.

The Commission was founded just as university reform was creating a new professional class of academic historians and other scholars and provided to them in published form much of the raw material for British historiography over the next century. This remained the case until changing scholarly fashion placed more emphasis on first-hand scrutiny of the sources as they became increasingly accessible with their deposit among the local and specialist repositories which sprang up mainly in the period between the 1950s and the 1970s. But publication also made this original material much more widely available through the reference sections of the great municipal libraries which were established in the years after 1850, and through the distribution of the early reports at low prices owing to their publication as Command Papers. No reference or academic library was subsequently complete without the products of this great Victorian scholarly enterprise.

Originally it was envisaged that the work of the Commission would be accomplished within five years but it rapidly became clear that the task it was set in identifying and publishing important material would stretch out far into the future. In 1876 a new warrant was issued, confirming the appointment of what had effectively become a standing commission, and appointing new members. In the same year the Commissioners decided to depute the Master of the Rolls and the Deputy Keeper to carry on the general work of the organisation. From 1883, the Reports to the Crown giving brief surveys of the collections examined by the inspectors were separated from fuller calendars seeking to open up the contents of significant private collections as separate volumes. A considerable

momentum was built up before the First World War and in the 20 years preceding it no fewer than 117 volumes were published, including selected Cecil papers from Hatfield House, Fortescue (Grenville) MSS., and papers including those of Lords Kenyon, Lothian, Carlisle, Ancaster, Mar and Kellie, and Montagu of Beaulieu, together with the Stuart papers at Windsor Castle. In addition, reports covered the archives of ancient boroughs, cathedral chapters, and other old-established foundations. Nowhere else in Europe or North America were private archives extensively surveyed in this way at this time, although the limited funding, and the need to publish as well as to survey, meant that the work proceeded piecemeal rather than beginning with a comprehensive overview of what survived in the hands of owners.

Contrary to Romilly's plans, staff of the PRO and British Museum were not used as manuscript inspectors at first since they were not released from official duties to participate. Harris's plan of specially recruited inspectors consequently came into play and two barristers, A. J. Horwood (the son-in-law of Duffus Hardy) and H. T. Riley, were appointed in England, although in Scotland and Ireland inspectors were drawn from the General Register House and Public Record Office in Dublin respectively. As time went on, however, professional historians and archivists were increasingly employed, including Sir John Knox Laughton, Dr Reginald Lane Poole (later editor of the *English Historical Review*), Sir Henry Maxwell Lyte and the Revd W. D. Macray. The emphasis of the work changed too from the surveying of significant archives to the editing of calendars at the beginning of the 20th century.

Up until 1914 progress was fairly rapid and over half the total of the Commission's volumes of reports and calendars had been issued by this date. The First World War slowed progress and afterwards the Treasury vote was reduced to a mere 600 in 1924 and remained low for the next two decades. Already, however, there were signs of the Commissioners using the information collected through surveying and editing to comment on wider questions relating to the preservation of archives. In 1926, the Commissioners voiced concern about the increasing number of collections of family papers that were being sold by private treaty or dispersed at auction as landed families suffered significant falls in their income. Some of their remedies, such as inviting potential sellers to negotiate with local or national repositories before offering their archives for sale on the open market and making copies of original material before it was sold, would eventually become part of the national system of protection to secure important material for public benefit. The taking of copies of material which was exported eventually became a feature of the export licensing procedures introduced under the Waverley Report (2) in 1952. However, the practical work of rescuing records and ensuring their preservation was largely taken up by other bodies: initially the British Record Society in the 1920s and then the British Records Association (BRA), founded in 1932. The BRA's Records Preservation Section was to play a major part in finding homes for unwanted records and in particular older material held by solicitors in the London area. The Commission nevertheless began to play a part in finding homes for significant collections, including the papers of Lord Hampton, which were taken into temporary custody and eventually placed on deposit in Birmingham's Central Library.

In this inter-war period, too, the idea of an overall census of the nation's archives was first mooted, which came to fruition only in a different form in 1945 with the establishment of the National Register of Archives (NRA) when concerns about the survival of historical records had been heightened by wartime bombing and salvage drives. The Register has been an important part of the Commission's operations ever since, although at first it had a separate budget and staff, and relied heavily on reports from volunteers organised by local county committees. It is the central collecting point for information about archival material outside the public records and by 2008 incorporated some 44,000 lists of collections and much more information from other sources in its indexes. The original local NRA committees, were, in many cases, the basis from which many individual county record offices developed.

In 1959, following the passing of the Public Records Act in the previous year, the Commission was given a new extended Royal Warrant. This extended its advisory functions and formally gave it responsibility for maintaining the NRA and also the Manorial Documents Register, originally set up by the Master of the Rolls in 1925 for legal purposes but increasingly used for historical research. The operations were moved to accommodation outside the PRO in order to provide more space for the expanding National Register as it became the key central collecting point for information about historical records beyond the PRO's holdings.

During the 1970s, progress was made with the computerisation of the NRA's Personal Index and in 1995 this and other indexes became the first such central indexes to archival holdings to become available worldwide over the Internet. In the meantime, the Commission's editions of family and institutional papers were wound down in favour of joint publications with local record offices and finally more succinct guides to the whereabouts of papers of scientists, cabinet ministers, politicians, churchmen, colonial governors and great landed families along with others focussed on various types of business records. From 1973, it became increasingly involved in advising grant-awarding bodies, and also government, on issues relating to the purchase and protection of manuscripts and archives and the allocation of such material accepted in lieu of tax to suitable homes. In order to advise on purchase it developed a sales monitoring service to gather intelligence about material passing through dealers' and

auctioneers' hands.

The Commission also established itself after 1959 as an inspecting and standard-setting body which approved record repositories and sought to improve levels of archival care and service provision. On the basis of its wide range of knowledge and information gained from surveying and information-gathering, it was also uniquely placed to advise owners on all issues relating to archives and manuscripts in their possession. Following a review of its activities in 2001–2, however, and in a climate unfavourable to standing royal commissions, the HMC and the PRO were merged to form The National Archives (TNA) in 2003, with the Keeper of Public Records becoming the sole Historical Manuscripts Commissioner following the issue of a new Royal Warrant.

As an independent body, the HMC had a major impact in charting the archival sources for British history (other than those of the state and the judiciary) and in preserving and making such records accessible. Its work continues within the context of TNA.

1. *First Report of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts* , (London,1870, reprinted 1874), Commission, pp. iii-iv.
2. The National Archives (TNA): HMC 1/10.
3. *The Export of Works of Art, etc. Report of the Committee on the Export of Works of Art* (London, 1952).

Suggested further reading

Paul Morgan, 'George Harris of Rugby and the prehistory of the Historical Manuscripts Commission', *Transactions & Proceedings, Birmingham Archaeological Society*, 82 (1967 for 1965), 28–37.

Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, *Manuscripts and Men: an Exhibition of Manuscripts, Portraits and Pictures Held at the National Portrait Gallery, London, June-August 1969, to Mark the Centenary of the Royal Commission on Historical Manuscripts, 1869–1969* (London, 1969).

Reports and Calendars (1870–2004).

Secretary's Report to the Commissioners (1969–2003).

Guides to Sources for British History, 1–12, (1982–2003).