

N.Z. ARCHIVES

HELP FROM WASHINGTON

THE question of what is happening to New Zealand's archives—the official letters, maps, photographs, and other records which are the raw material of any country's history—has worried alert historians and laymen for a number of years. Two years ago, after a fire in a Wellington business building, it was discovered that hundreds of irreplaceable documents which the Government had stored there for want of a better place had gone up in smoke. Several years before that the original Treaty of Waitangi was found in a somewhat rat-gnawed condition in a cupboard in Wellington's Government

Buildings. Other documents which had been stored in leaky sheds at an air force camp were recently found damaged by rain-water.

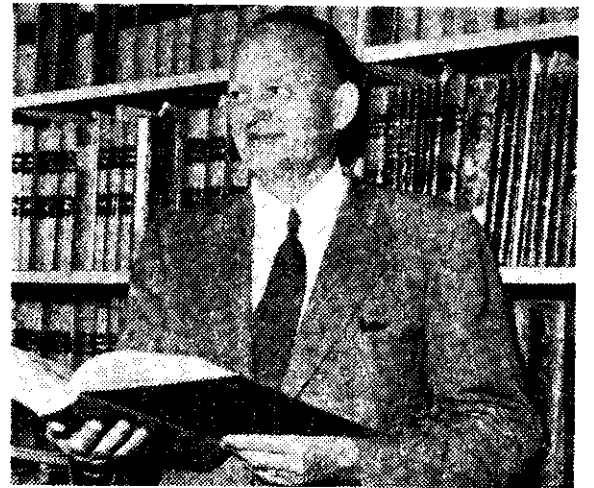
Last week Dr. Theodore R. Schellenberg, director of the National Archives of the United States, visited New Zealand at the invitation of the Government to discuss the whole question of the preservation of archives. In an interview with *The Listener*, Dr. Schellenberg said that our problems were far from unique. He had just spent seven months in Australia advising the Commonwealth and State Governments, and he has had invitations from the Governments of Ceylon, Pakistan and Greece to visit their countries and advise them on his way home from Australia. He also expects to visit the archives departments in Germany, France, Austria, England and the Netherlands before he returns to America. His visits are being made under the Fulbright exchange programme.

Our first question was why an American expert should be called in to advise on a problem of which European countries might be thought to have had much more experience.

"My official programme is in Australia only," Dr. Schellenberg said, "and the problems in Australia and America are very similar. Both are modern Governments, of recent origin, with large volumes of records. So the principles we have adopted in America are more likely to be of help to Australia and New Zealand than what they have done in Europe. Actually, all countries have been rather slow in recognising the values that exist in public records. We in America were awfully slow. Our early records had quite serious losses through fires, and many valuable documents passed into the hands of manuscript collectors. Even recently there has been occasional pilfering of records, particularly during the Second World War. Our archives department was established in 1935. Now we have 266 staff members and our headquarters are in a magnificent building, designed like a Greek temple and one of the finest buildings, from an architectural viewpoint, in Washington."

"What do you think of the situation in this part of the world?"

"I would say without hesitation that I am very much impressed by the quality and ability of the people working on archives in Australia and New Zealand. They are very conscientious and keen on their work, and they deserve more support. But having said that I would like to add that there is lacking in Australia and New Zealand enough recognition that Government records have research value beyond their immediate purposes. A great deal of work needs to be done in appraising the backlog of records here in New Zealand. There is an important body of records already collected in the Archives Section in Wellington. But obviously a review should be made of records in out-of-the-way places. New Zealand also has a very considerable quantity of records occupying valuable space in buildings right in the heart of Wellington. It might be a real economy for the



DR. T. R. SCHELLENBERG and (at top of page) the vast Library of Congress Building in Washington, D.C. The U.S. National Archives building—Dr. Schellenberg's domain—is the white building on the left of the main library block

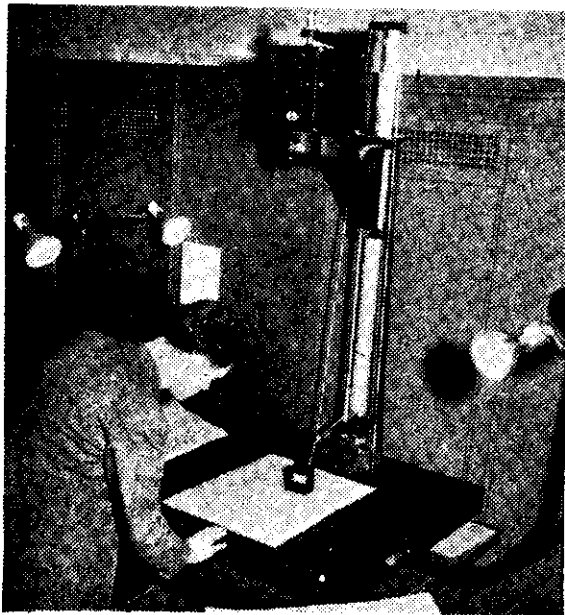
Government to put them in record centres further from the middle of the city."

Dr. Schellenberg said that in 1947 President Truman set up the Hoover Commission to try and make economies in all aspects of Government work. One of the main results was the formation of a Records Management Division of the Archives. "Records management is an important aspect of Government work," he said. "We already have 24 million cubic feet of records in our Government, and despite all our efforts they are still being produced at a rate faster than they are being destroyed."

In Washington, Dr. Schellenberg said, his department preserved immense amounts of material: first, records of Government; secondly, records needed by private citizens to establish or protect their legal or fiscal rights; and thirdly, records useful to citizens for their own amusement, from a genealogical or antiquarian point of view.

"We have in our custody practically all the valuable records created by the

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