**The Grigg Report**

The *Grigg Report*, more formally the Report of the Committee on Departmental Records Cmd. 9163, published by the UK government in 1954, was to become one of the most significant influences on archival practice, not just within central government – and, especially, at the Public Record Office (PRO) - but also within other archival contexts which, in statutory terms, lay outside the scope of the Public Records Act 1958 which implemented its recommendations. Processes based on elements of what became known as the ‘Grigg System’ found their way into UK local record offices which were attempting to rationalise and systematise their own archival selection procedures; similar processes, often underpinned by legislation became enshrined, whether appropriately or not, in legislation and in practice throughout the recordkeeping systems of the countries making up the new British Commonwealth. For some, the Grigg Report has also acquired significance as representing a struggle between old and new and, specifically between archival practices and attitudes associated with Sir Hilary Jenkinson (qv) and those which sought to introduce not just new techniques, but a more progressive mindset, into the management of archives.

Sir (Percy) James Grigg (1890-1964), who chaired the Committee which bears his name, has, as a highly successful Civil Servant, only an honorary place in an *Encyclopaedia of Archival Writers.* Nevertheless, his career, based as it was principally in the Treasury (the great department of state which was financially responsible for the PRO, both its annual establishment planning and extraordinary capital expenditure) is indicative of the context in which he and his committee were to address the problems of Departmental Records in 1952. Grigg served as principal private secretary to five chancellors of the exchequer between 1921 and 1931, and spent five years in the Indian Government service between 1934 and 1939 and, during the Second World War was appointed to the War Office, as chair of the standing committee on army administration which sought to increase organizational efficiency. In this he was highly successful and in 1942 was appointed Secretary of State for War by the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill. Briefly a Member of Parliament (1942-1945), he retired from public life after losing his seat. He thereafter took up a number of commercial directorships and public appointments, including a role as the first British executive director of the International Bank for Reconstruction and Development in 1946. His appointment as Chairman of the Committee on Departmental Records in 1952, to which the *DNB* gives only passing reference, was one of his last public appointments.

Grigg was considered, from his earliest years, at the Treasury “intolerant and arrogant,” a man who “undoubtedly prized competence and precision above tact and diplomacy” (*DNB*); at the same time he was also regarded, not least by Churchill, as a man of exceptional ability and administrative gifts. These characteristics, together with his close association with the Treasury, and immersion in the principles of Organisation and Methods, might be regarded as inevitably putting him at odds with Sir Hilary Jenkinson, then the Deputy Keeper (*de facto* head) of the PRO, who was, and with some justification, regarded as arrogant, and difficult to deal with; in his history of the Office (*The Public Record Office 1838-1958*, HMSO: London, 1991) John Cantwell concluded that it had been Jenkinson’s “unwise assertion of his own supremacy” which drew the attention of the Treasury to the need for structural reform at the Office as well as within the systems for managing departmental records.

While the establishment of that Committee, at the instigation of the Treasury, was driven both by the ever-increasing production, and thus cost of maintaining those records, both in departments and then subsequently, in the PRO, there was also concern in the Cabinet Office that the provisions currently in force were insufficient to ensure the preservation of records of historical value. The terms of reference of the Committee were, therefore, “to review the arrangements for the preservation of the records of Government Departments … in the light of the rate at which they are accumulating and of the purposes which they are intended to serve; and to make recommendations as to the changes, if any, in law and practice which are required.”

The situation that the Committee was called on to address was, to some extent, caused by the statutory role of the PRO, and more specifically by the provisions of the two Acts which provided the mechanisms for selection of records as archives. Established by the Public Record Office Act 1838, the PRO had twin functions, to serve as the institutional repository for government, particularly for its legal records, and as a resource for research into, and production of, the national story, in the grand tradition of nineteenth century historicism. In the latter case, it was (as a 1852 Order-in-Council confirmed) responsible for the preservation of records considered to have historical value, including the administrative records of departments of state. Historical value was not always easy to recognise or agree upon; and while some Departments refused to part with records already hundreds of years old, others were delighted to use the PRO as a convenient dumping ground. The impossibility of running an archives without some kind of formal selection mechanism, already evident in 1838 (and critical from 1858, when the Treasury rejected a plan to build a new wing for the Office) was eventually recognised by the 1877 Public Record Office Act. The 1877 Act allowed, rather than required, departments, to draw up schedules of records which were “not of sufficient public value to justify their preservation in the Public Record Office” in consultation with members of the Committee of Inspecting Officers (drawn from the senior ranks of the PRO). Revised Rules in 1889 mandated that Destruction Schedules were to be drawn up by a nominated Departmental officer who was required to “take every precaution against the inclusion therein of any documents which can reasonable be considered as of legal, historical, genealogical or antiquarian use or interest, or which give any important information not to be obtained elsewhere.” It was the Schedule itself, not the records, which was then inspected by the Committee. The system established under the 1877 Act was in force at the time the Grigg Committee convened.

The PRO had made some moves to address the consequences of ever-increasing records creation, notably, in the late 1940s, through the establishment of the ‘limbo’ scheme, a network of intermediate repositories located outside London for non-current, and predominantly non-archival, departmental records. While this contributed to reducing storage problems, it did not solve the underlying problems of systematically selecting records for permanent preservation. In October 1951 a Treasury survey of records still held in departments had revealed that, while 250,000 linear feet could be quickly destroyed *in situ*, the amount of records due for permanent preservation in the nation’s archives would more than double the PRO’s existing holdings. By the end of the same year, even the Prime Minister, Churchill had noted with concern “the large sum of money being spent in the coming year by the Ministry of Works on filing cabinets” (Cantwell, 465). Such high level recognition of the expense of current government recordkeeping practices encouraged the creation of a Committee likely to make radical and effective recommendations: this outcome, it was recognised, was unlikely if Jenkinson, with his ‘difficult’ reputation and wedded to the practices of the 1877 Act, were part of that Committee. The Gordian knot of accounting for what would be a notable omission in its membership was achieved by letting it be known that Churchill himself had decided that the membership should be drawn entirely from outside the Civil Service (Cantwell, 466).

“Undoubtedly the formation of the committee without Jenkinson was a shattering blow to him. He regarded himself as the world authority and believed that everything would be simple … if only his favoured methods [for identifying the transfer of records worth of permanent preservation] were adopted at once. But as they revolved around a system based upon the segregation of ephemera at the outset and the wholesale registration of the rest, the Treasury was unimpressed, doubting whether it had been feasible even when advocated by Jenkinson in … 1922 and thinking it pure fantasy in 1952” (Cantwell, 467).

Although the Report’s assessment of Jenkinson’s principles softened a little, its final recommendations, implemented in the 1958 Public Records Act, were to make major changes to the way in which government records were managed in departments, and then transferred to the national archives. The key elements of what came to be known as the Grigg System can be summarised as:

* the appointment of a Departmental Records Officer to take responsibility for records within a department, and to lead the process of review and selection, the latter in tandem with officers from the PRO; this collaboration included the creation of record disposition schedules which listed the actions to be taken for known classes of records (usually within registered file systems);
* closing all registered paper files (except case files which were dealt with separately)after a maximum of five years;
* A First Review 5 years after closure, to assess the file’s continuing (or future) administrative value. Files without such value to be destroyed either immediately or at a stated future point ;
* Second Review 25 years after a ‘surviving’ file was created, carried out by departmental reviewers, in conjunction with PRO officers. This Review can consider ‘historical’ value as a criterion; files with such value are transferred to the PRO (which became The National Archives (TNA) in 2003);

The 1967 Public Records Act reduced the period for retaining files within departments from 50 to 30 years, and although the 1981 Wilson Committee on Modern Public Records reviewed selection and access processes, there were to be no other substantive changes to the system for nearly 50 years. The selection and transfer processes and procedures based on the Grigg Committee’s recommendations worked well enough for the paper records of central government institutions, especially where those records were held within well-managed registries. But even where registries were in place, the system, predicated as it was on the records lifecycle, was already breaking down by the 1970s, as electronic working, the ever-increasing paper mountain, and bureaucratic upheavals changed recordkeeping, and therefore archival, practices for ever.

Wider Influence of the Grigg System

With the exception of its application to those records of central government functions created and held locally (health and justice records being the most important), UK county and civic record offices are not bound by the provisions of the Public Records Act 1958, and thus there was, in the 1960s, no formal requirement to adopt any of the selection processes derived from Grigg. But local government faced the same type of document control problems as those encountered at national level and it was inevitable that local archivists looked to the centre for, at least, inspiration: the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* published a flurry of articles in the aftermath of Grigg reflecting on the appropriateness of the approach for local archivists. Especially in those larger offices which were giving thought to their role in the management of the parent authority’s own records, it was unsurprising that aspects of the Grigg System including its two stage review, collaborative agreement on scheduling, and closure periods, became understood as the norm of records and archival selection. In particular, the 30-year closure period acquired an almost iconic status, being applied to all kinds of record groups without any mandate for its adoption in the wider archive sector.

The application of Grigg beyond the context for which it was conceived was not wholly realistic. As County Archivist of Kent, Felix Hull (qv), convened a working party to address the County’s filing, records storage and destruction needs. His 1968 recommendations (“County of Kent Working Party on County Records”, *JSA 3, no.10,(1969)* 572-575), drew on those of the Grigg Report, including destruction by the creators, transfer after a five year period of the remainder to a records centre (under the control of the archives), and the collaboration of County Archivist and the O&M officers over disposal schedules “so that the needs of scholarship and the advantage of mechanisation are understood.” (Hull, 574). Hull’s appreciation of the inevitable tensions between parties in selecting records of historical value mirrored those which the 1981 Wilson Committee was later to address in central government: the interests of the parties involved in selection and transfer did not necessarily coincide: “The department creating the records has an immediate administrative interest which will be limited to a term only rarely exceeding 25 years and in most cases determined after a much shorter interval. The archivist is concerned with ensuring that such records as have a positive value for the history of the authority or for the wider purposes of scholarship, should be preserved for posterity and that in the orderly disposal of the remainder due care should be taken that nothing of significance is lost. The archivist’s difficulty is that he must bridge the gap between the time when papers cease to be in current use and the moment when they can rightly join the mass of historical records of the county …” (Hull, 573) .

In any case, though there was general admiration for the model, the wholesale adoption of central Grigg-like processes at local level was untenable given the differences in scale, in existing recordkeeping practices, and because few authorities had the resources to add the equivalent of a Departmental Records Officer to their establishment. At this local level, responsibility for selection was inevitably thrown back onto the archivists, especially where those archivists were also responsible for the ‘new’ discipline of records management then being introduced into the UK by Michael Cook (qv) and other practitioners influenced as much by American innovations as by the central government recordkeeping tradition. (Cook, “Surveying Current Records,” *Journal of the Society of Archivists* 4, no.5 (1972), 413-422).

On the global stage, the 1950s and 1960s saw the break-up of the British empire, the dismantling of colonial administrations and the creation of independent states. In recordkeeping terms, it was inevitable that elements of the Grigg report (and, more specifically, those elements as embedded in the Public Records Act 1958) found their way into the archival and records legislation of the countries of the new British Commonwealth as newly-independent states, anxious to establish their own state archives as an indicator of nationhood, adopted its principles of archival selection. In her 2002 survey of *Archival Legislation in Commonwealth Countries* (Association of Commonwealth Archivists and Records Managers), Dagmar Parer found (p.2) that a majority of this legislation was based on the assumption that “the primary responsibility of an archives was to ensure that historical records survived for research purposes and the regulatory powers conferred by legislation in most Commonwealth countries, often strongly influenced by the [UK] Public Records Act 1958 … should enable the archives to achieve that purpose.” Thus, she noted, archival legislation in the Commonwealth typically aims to:

* prohibit destruction of records without prior approval
* establish an archival authority to give or deny such approval
* empower the authority to receive records not authorized for destruction
* mandate transfer of records, generally after 25 to 30 years
* confer right of public access

The frequency with which such provisions occur in Commonwealth legislation, while not of course limited to those countries, is nevertheless a clear indication of the far-reaching influence of Grigg on practices and processes for the selection of archives.

The Fate of the Grigg System

Despite its flaws, and complaints from historians about the consequences of ‘historical’ value not being considered at the first review stage (so that too many records were being destroyed), there was little appetite for revisiting the practices established for UK central government. The Wilson Committee, though convened in the context of increasing volume, technological change in format and storage of records, and with an eye to the costs of staffing and accommodation, had no substantive impact on those practices, and indeed it is difficult to see what, given the legislative requirements of the 1958 Act, might have replaced the Grigg System. Nonetheless, these problems only increased: by the turn of the twenty-first century the speed of technological innovation, the concomitant existence of hybrid recordkeeping systems, along with constant machinery of government changes, and new open government and data privacy regimes had already prompted a re-evaluation of transfer and selection practices within the Public Record Office, with the development of new acquisitions and appraisal policies and practice, a re-evaluation which was also necessary when the access provisions of the 1958 Public Records Act were superseded by the 2001 Freedom of Information Act. It is now the latter Act which ensures access to all records of public authorities from their creation, and which applies retrospectively to all such records, whether held in the creating department, or in an archives. At the same time, the Public Records Act 1958 requirement to select and transfer records of historical value to an archive within a set period remains, though that period was shortened from 30 to 20 years by the 2010 *Constitutional Reform and Governance Act*.

Reassessment of processes in an era of legislative and technological change is not, of course confined to the UK : in the digital environment, the need for such reassessment is recognised internationally, and TNA, in common with national archive services globally, continues to develop processes for appraisal, selection, transfer and access, in particular exploring the new automated processes necessary for born-digital records. These developments will necessarily be adopted, or adapted, by local archive services, at least insofar as the records of their parent authorities are concerned: dealing with the selection of externally-generated born digital records is notoriously problematic, and systems, such as Grigg, designed to facilitate in-house transfer, whether of paper records, or of their electronic successors, can only ever be partially relevant to collecting archives. But whatever the future holds, in the UK in particular, the legacy of Grigg has been to encourage liaison between records creators and archivists, something which, in the e-environment, is even more critical than ever.

**Bibliography**

Report of the Committee on Departmental Records Cmd. 9163 (HMSO: London, 1954).