

The AXA Collection: Discovering the social value of business records

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Many business archives come to be transferred to a permanent repository such as the University of Melbourne Archives (UMA) due to heightened awareness of their endangered status, an impending move from premises long inhabited, or when an approaching anniversary or milestone awakens the desire to endorse an official history or celebration. The relocation of the archive of AXA National Mutual to UMA came about largely because of the former. It had been housed for many years in the basement of the AXA building at 447 Collins Street, languishing three floors below the concourse level, infrequently visited, and largely forgotten by the parent company. In mid-2007 UMA staff were alerted to its existence. AXA was planning on consolidating its office accommodation—an enormous project entailing the relocation from three CBD buildings around Melbourne into a single Docklands building.

With this imperative, and a fast approaching deadline to be out of the building by the end of November, a team of us went into the basement and set about loading the records (documenting almost 140 years of insurance history in Melbourne and Australia) physically into boxes and intellectually into spreadsheets, for

the move to UMA. The records themselves date back to the origins of the National Mutual Life Assurance Company in 1869, and taper off in the late 1990s, shortly before AXA Asia Pacific Holdings took control of National Mutual and its holdings. The archive itself is important; it documents almost a century and a half of business activity in Melbourne and beyond, and fills an important gap in UMA's holdings, which until now did not extend its substantial business collections into the insurance arena.

In a business sense, the records reflect the remarkable success within Australia and internationally of AXA Asia Pacific since it was first established over 100 years ago. The company first began in Melbourne in 1869, founded by actuary John Montgomery Templeton.¹ During that time it was known as the National Mutual Life Association of Australasia.² The establishment of mutual societies was becoming more frequent throughout this period in Australia.

The Australasian Temperance and General Mutual Life Assurance Society Limited (known as T & G) began in Victoria in 1876. This society would later expand through its amalgamation with other smaller insurance societies from 1889 to

1890. These mergers came about through fluctuations within Australia's economy and the effects of the economic depression of the late 19th century.³ Despite this, the expansion of the National Mutual Life Association of Australasia reflected the continuing growth of life insurance in Australia. Between 1878 and 1886 branches were set up in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland, Western Australia and Tasmania as well as New Zealand.⁴ National Mutual merged with many different companies throughout this time but its amalgamation with the Mutual Assurance Society of Victoria in 1896 was of the most benefit, as it allowed for the establishment of international branches. Branches were created in South Africa as well as the United Kingdom within two years of the merger.⁵ By the turn of the century National Mutual had a strong establishment across Australia and overseas.

T & G had also established a strong Australia-wide presence by the early 1900s. The company had set up branches in each state by 1905, and in New Zealand in 1903.⁶ The company continued to grow throughout this period with the help of James Tuson Thompson. Thompson played a significant role in the company's success, starting out as an agent in



Left: Illuminated address presented to James Tuson Thompson on the occasion of his promotion to the role of General Manager and Secretary of the Australasian Temperance and General Mutual Life Assurance Society Ltd in November 1917, 49.0 x 36.0 cm. AXA Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

Below: Female employees at the National Mutual Life Association, possibly at Melbourne Branch, December 1940; top row, first from right stands Jean Hunt (later Mrs R.L. Bienvenu), gelatin silver print, 14.5 x 20.0 cm. AXA Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.

1899 and advancing to chairman and managing director by 1922. Thompson maintained T & G's focus on industrial insurance and was also influential in the style of the T & G buildings that were erected throughout the 1920s. Their distinctive neo-Renaissance architecture was part of Thompson's publicity strategy for the company. Between 1917 and 1949, T & G funds grew from £2.5 million to £63 million.⁷ In 1974 the company changed its name to T & G Mutual Life Society.⁸

National Mutual diversified throughout the 20th century. In 1957 the company opened a fire subsidiary known as the National Mutual Fire Insurance Co., while in 1961 the National Mutual Casualty Insurances Ltd was formed, providing accident and health insurance. As a result of its success National Mutual needed to accommodate a growing staff, so new office buildings were set up throughout the mid-1960s across Australia and internationally.⁹ Head office in Melbourne was relocated to 447 Collins Street, to a building completed in 1964 and inaugurated by the then Prime Minister Sir Robert Menzies.¹⁰

While the ins and outs of the pure business collection—ledgers, letter books, personnel cards, minute books,

policy registers, board minutes, company newsletters, details of mergers, photographs, artefacts and framed items—are important for the historian to understand the workings of a large and influential insurance business and its importance in the 19th and 20th centuries, the stories within the records are also fascinating, and largely forgotten. These records tell us not just about the inner workings of the business, but are also a mirror of society. Staff photographs from the 1940s, for example, document the gendered structure of the Melbourne workforce, with one picture taken of the men, and another of the women. Such segregation is also reflected in the superannuation

records of the time, which give us insight into the common employment tasks considered acceptable for women to undertake, and those acceptable for men.

Fascinating too are the personal lives reflected within the professional. R.L. Bienvenu is present in the men's staff photo for December 1940. Many years later there are repeated images of Bienvenu, as he rises through the ranks of the company to become a senior executive in Western Australia in 1954, moving to the senior executive team in Victoria in 1958, branch manager in 1959 and managing director in 1982.¹¹ More intriguing is the glimpse the records afford into Bienvenu's marriage. In



H.L. Orry & Co., National Mutual boardroom, Sydney Branch office, corner of Pitt Street and Bond Street, Sydney, c.1910, gelatin silver print, 30.0 x 38.0 cm. AXA Collection, University of Melbourne Archives.



the December 1940 women's photograph, Jean Hunt is present. In subsequent records she has become Mrs Bienvenu. The National Mutual records are therefore not only important for their documentation of a business history, but will also be a treasure-trove for genealogists in enabling them to piece together the stories of their ancestors, particularly as many staff began their working lives with the company, and often finished those working lives with the same employer, an alien concept for those entering the workforce in the 21st century.

The collection also documents

more than business and personal histories. The way in which National Mutual and T & G influenced the architectural landscape in most of Australia's capital cities has been mentioned already, and is also evident in the records. The buildings which housed the daily endeavours of hundreds of employees were meticulously planned and suitably documented. They were a symbol of pride and contributed enormously to the cityscape of the growing metropolis in the 19th century, and on into the 20th century. National Mutual's purchase of a site on the corner of Collins and Queen Streets

in Melbourne in 1881 was a significant step towards establishing the company in its own premises. The design competition for the new building, a common practice at the time,¹² stipulated a Gothic design. From the 43 entries received, seven finalists were selected. The Adelaide firm of Wrighton, Reed and Beaver was the winning entrant, and the construction tender was awarded to Robert Gamlin, a Melbourne-based builder. Works commenced in 1893 at the 395 Collins Street address. The importance of the occasion was marked by the commissioning of a silver trowel, and a time capsule placed under the ordinal stone contained coins and newspapers of the day, company prospectuses and reports, copies of *Banking and Insurance Record* and drawings of the building design.

The merger between National Mutual and T & G took place in 1983.¹³ This significant step for both businesses helped to influence the future success of the company, resulting in further expansion of National Mutual throughout the Asia Pacific region. In 1995 the company demutualised and AXA SA gained 51 per cent interest in the company. Further regional acquisitions included companies in Singapore, Thailand and the Philippines. National Mutual

W.M. Drummond & Co. (Melbourne), ceremonial spade. AXA Collection, University of Melbourne Archives. This spade was presented by the architects Wright, Reed & Beaver and the contractor Robert Gamlin to the Hon. Edward Langton, to commemorate his laying of the foundation stone for the new premises of the National Mutual Building on 28 July 1891.

changed its name to AXA Asia Pacific Holdings in 1999. The multiple businesses that were operating collectively with National Mutual at the time also altered their names to incorporate the AXA brand. By 2006 AXA Asia Pacific had established partnerships with companies in Malaysia, India, Indonesia and China.¹⁴ Today AXA's services include financial advice, funds management, superannuation, life insurance and income protection.¹⁵

Thanks to the move to new premises in Docklands, and AXA's recognition that the company history ought to be preserved, University of Melbourne Archives staff are now processing the collection to enable access for researchers.

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She has a Bachelor of Arts degree in history and anthropology and a Graduate Diploma in Information Management (Archives and Records), and has studied policy, leadership, management and change at masters level.

Notes

- 1 *AXA Asia Pacific Holdings: History*, http://www.axa-asiapacific.com.au/axaaph/axaaph.nsf/Content/Company_History, accessed 30 January 2008.
- 2 Ann-Mari Jordens, 'Templeton, John Montgomery (1840–1908)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 6, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1976, pp. 252–253, online at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A060269b.htm>, accessed 30 January 2008.
- 3 A.C. Gray, *Life insurance in Australia: An historical and descriptive account*, Melbourne: McCarron Bird, 1977, pp. 39, 101, 106–107.
- 4 L.L. Robison, 'Wider horizons', in National Mutual Life Association of Australasia, *A century of life: The story of the first one hundred*

years of the National Mutual Life, Melbourne: The Association, 1969, pp. 138–139.

- 5 Gray, *Life insurance in Australia*, pp. 107–108.
- 6 Gray, *Life insurance in Australia*, p. 54.
- 7 Geoff Browne, 'Thompson, James Tuson (1879–1954)', *Australian dictionary of biography*, vol. 16, Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 2002, pp. 381–382, online at <http://www.adb.online.anu.edu.au/biogs/A160463b.htm?hilit=T%3B%26%3B%3B> Society, accessed 30 January 2008.
- 8 Gray, *Life insurance in Australia*, p. 39.
- 9 Robison, 'Wider horizons', pp. 102–103.
- 10 *AXA Asia Pacific Holdings: History*.
- 11 Robison, 'Wider horizons'.
- 12 Susan Reidy, 'Prince's Bridge and John Grainger', in Brian Allison (ed.), *John Harry Grainger: Architect and civil engineer*, Parkville: University of Melbourne, 2007, p. 21.
- 13 Browne, 'Thompson, James Tuson'.
- 14 *AXA Asia Pacific Holdings: History*.
- 15 *AXA Asia Pacific Holdings: Vision and strategy*, http://www.axa-asiapacific.com.au/axaaph/axaaph.nsf/Content/Company_Vision, accessed 30 January 2008.