

Bolotenko's Siege Mentality

George Bolotenko's "Archives and Historians: Keepers of the Well" (*Archivaria* 16) is a very disturbing piece of work for two reasons. Not only do I find it a classic piece of dead-horse flogging, but I am not particularly taken by the way in which the poor beast is being flogged.

With regard to whether or not history, as a desirable prerequisite for archival training has fallen into disfavour (or, to précis Bolotenko, become anathema), I suggest that any simple survey of professional archivists would overwhelmingly assert that it has not! Clearly, sound training in history is an enormous asset to any archivist. It is by no means the only desirable training, but it is still the area which produces the great majority of incumbents for our profession and there is no reason to suppose that will change.

The author, in reading the mood of Canadian archivists, has made what is fast becoming a classic mistake by confusing two basic groups: keepers and users. The symbiosis implicit in his title (and explicit in his text) makes that confusion manifest. By way of an analogy, an American political commentator recently observed that "the problems with Ronald Reagan's Presidency stem not from the fact that he used to be an actor, but rather from the fact that he still is." If archivists have a problem with historians, it is with those few who believe they have some special right to dictate how archives might better be arranged or described to suit their research needs. If there are history-trained archivists in our institutions who believe that to be the case, then they have forgotten to change hats when they moved from one profession to another. That makes them bad archivists — nothing more and nothing less. That there are bad archivists goes without saying — as there are bad doctors, lawyers, and librarians — but to imply that good training in history will, by definition, produce good archivists is to say that good training in history will necessarily produce good historians. It may improve the odds, but it's far from a sure thing.

If I were to suggest a way to assuage Dr. Bolotenko's fears for the future of his discipline in the archival profession, it would be that he combine his obviously broad reading in the professional literature with some long conversations with those archivists across the country who are presently determining the directions in which the profession will go over the next decade. He would find himself as relieved as he would surprised.

There are, however, more serious and deep-seated problems inherent in the general tone and style of the piece. With his strident, ill-mannered dismissals of library science, records management, and technology (and even of a particular branch of his own discipline), Dr. Bolotenko is flying in the face of the very humanist traditions which he purports to cherish. Treating related and extremely useful knowledge as if it were a plague and the people who work with it as just so many "Typhoid Marys" hardly befits one who makes such a strong case for understanding and depth of learning. If humanist tradition, which the author so often cites as the salvation of "archivy," teaches anything, it is that knowledge, in and of itself, is neither good nor evil. It is the uses to which one puts knowledge that matter. The author sees the knowledge of library science or records management as perverse and

a corruption and this is silly. There is a tremendous amount to be learned from these and a dozen other disciplines and the better we learn to adapt that knowledge to our purposes, the better we will become at "well" management. It serves no one, least of all the archivist, to drive wedges of fear and mistrust between our work and that of administrators, technocrats, or record managers. It serves no one to take as a motto an out-of-context remark by Nietzsche (ironic or not) which glorifies the useless as an alternative to the scientific when neither should be acceptable.

My humanist training teaches me that the battle between science and art was fought in the mid-seventeenth century and that the Miltons and Donnes and Burtons and Brownes of that time demonstrated once and for all that the winners are those who can hold fast to both elements and, with them, create something new. It also teaches me that such battles are fought in public and not while hiding behind a desk in a basement stack. The future of this profession lies not in retreat and a siege mentality, but in synthesis and action. In the final analysis, Bolotenko would have me, and many of my colleagues, become less than we already are. He would have us quivering in "a small corner" and abandon much of what has been accomplished. One cannot develop a profession by hiding in corners; one can only suffocate it.

As a final comment, may I add a contribution to the apparently burgeoning field of archival poesy:

Archivist to Historian:

We've kept well these ancient waters
 For your succor and delight.
 So come on in and have a drink,
 The line forms to the right!

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A Wearisome Issue

It would appear that George Bolotenko ("Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16) sees archivists as a valiant little band of scholars besieged by a growing and faceless bureaucratic horde of professional information scientists. This perception of our profession clearly needs to be refuted, but I must confess the task is becoming a trifle wearisome.

The author's main proposition is, ostensibly, that archivists should be historians. First, I had trouble with the presentation of the argument which was so muddled as to resist my efforts either to comprehend or rebut it in any systematic way. Take, for example, the indiscriminate use of the term "historian." While the author's argument relies heavily on the meaning of this word, it is never defined. The results are most confusing. Mr. Bolotenko opens by announcing his intention to argue that the archivist must be an historian, but wait: not a real historian, only an historian "by inclination." (p. 6) Later, when Felix Hull claims that being an historian is very