

Letters to the Editor

Provenance Must Remain the Archival "Bottom Line"

It is a conceit which cannot be punctured. Some historians continue to assert that archives should "respond effectively to the changing needs of the historical profession." Peter Baskerville and Chad Gaffield are the latest, though the most reasonable and thoughtful, protagonists of this presumption. Archives, it cannot be said too often, exist for anyone's use, whatever their interest or pleasure. They cannot and should not be held ransom for the sake of the few. That is why archives, society's memory bank, stand upon a clutch of principles and procedures which allow archivists to provide equity to all their "clientele." Professional historians *per se* deserve no more special treatment than genealogists, water diviners, or playwrights. Doubtless, Baskerville and Gaffield do not see their observations on historical research and archival practice in this light, but a statement to the effect that "the content of their [archivists'] collections are increasingly out of synch with the demands of a major user group" prompts some response — if only to remind that historians are statistically being overtaken by other users and that archivists tend to flinch at the term "collection"!

The focus of the Vancouver Island Project article is, I believe, on the inadequacy of archival acquisition in the realms of locally generated records and of archival description of such records (and others) as long as the principle of provenance remains the guiding light. The project is put forward as a demonstration of how a machine-readable data base can reduce, and even eliminate, the tension which the authors perceive lying between control and access. In the process of arriving at this proposition, Baskerville and Gaffield make a number of statements which deserve comment; they are, in order of mention:

1. *The writing of history and the keeping of records have traditionally been closely related activities.* To the extent that history has been written because records have been kept, officially or more serendipitously, the statement is true enough. However, it is worth making the point, because it is so often overlooked, that records are not usually kept so that history may be written. This fact essentially governs the outlook and practice of the archivist whose first priority is not the writing of history but rather the protection of the integrity of the record, physically and intellectually.
2. *Until recently, archival training usually involved the study of history.* Baskerville-Gaffield provide no evidence to show that current archival training (or preferably, education) excludes the study of history. It is quite possible that some

“specific graduate programmes for archivists” (there is only one in Canada) do neglect history though I am not aware of these. I would regret it if it were so. That aside, the authors are on uncertain ground to believe that there was much archival training in the past, never mind history components. The plain fact is that archival training, in Canada at least, has until recently been extremely slight, narrowly-based, and essentially procedural. The theoretical and philosophical framework of the archival profession has received little articulation, though serious discussion has begun of which perhaps the Vancouver Island Project may be seen as an early *provocateur*. If anything, archival education will heal the sores that often seem to be irritated by yet another toss of salt.

3. *The disjuncture between research and archival practice.* Most of the emphasis at this point is on approaches and methods in the study of history. Colleagues are chided for overlooking “a significant part of the whole” in their pursuit of “a more ‘holistic’ history,” but archivists are to blame too because “archival practice has been slow to meet the demands placed upon them by the nature of historiographical change.” Slowness apparently means not bothering about records which reveal human behaviour and not developing descriptive systems which move beyond acknowledgement of provenance. There is some truth to both criticisms, and I can point to various places where “slim budgets, diminishing space, staff cuts or freezes” and adherence to “the traditional historiography” have affected the perceived insufficiencies. Nevertheless, I cannot accept the Baskerville-Gaffield assumption that neglect of local records is generally part of provincial archival practice in Canada nor a canon of archival theory. Indeed, it is far from reality to generalise as Richard Alcorn did in *The Landon Project* (1977) that locally generated sources are “an enigma for archivists.” Experience and practice across Canada’s provinces will not support this to any great extent. Would they have us believe that archivists are unaware of and see little value in the common records they cite in their article — municipal correspondence, bylaws, petitions to city councils, planning reports, district educational records, private papers of local settlers and shopkeepers? All provincial archives hold, in original form or in microformat, much of these and many other categories of local record or at very least know where they can be found. Further, Baskerville-Gaffield persist in quoting Kent Haworth’s cautionary notes on centralized repositories and William Ormsby’s listing of Ontario priorities as evidence of “the continuing neglect of local sources.” They do not cite Haworth’s advocacy of local institutional and organizational responsibility nor the *Wilson Report*’s concern that “the principle of provenance” (which aims at keeping the context of records intact) should be supplemented by “a principle of territoriality” (which envisages the locale or milieu of records as part of their context).
4. *What user groups benefit from organization and description according to the dictates of provenance?* The obvious answer is all users, though plainly improved descriptive systems would benefit more greatly. Baskerville-Gaffield claim that “to use archives effectively, one has to almost become a trained archivist.” They declare (citing Frederic Miller against contrasting arguments levied by the likes of Terry Cook, Richard Berner, and Richard Lytle) that there is too tight a relationship between arrangement and description. It must be loosened, they contend, if it begins “to interfere with the needs of archival users”. After a dramatic build-up, when the reader is summoning indignation at the inevitable

loss of provenance, Baskerville-Gaffield suddenly prick their balloon by advocating not that provenance is useless, but rather "it must be enriched rather than abandoned." After that admission, the rest of their article falls into place. It is subject access that is the real issue, all the rest is context!

5. *Archivists have been reluctant to construct finding aids "relevant" to contemporary research trends.* What irks historians and no doubt others more than anything else is the eternal problem of finding in archives exactly what they need. With this, I am more than sympathetic. Archival finding aids are often primitive ("preliminary" is the usual euphemistic term), at a provenance or control level only. The old habits, far less widespread that sometimes is thought, of calendaring (European style) and of indexing (library style) are pretty well obsolete. Time, money, staff are always in short supply, so few manually-prepared subject access tools get off the ground. It may seem that archivists are too provenance-bound and wish to be so in descriptive systems simply because more sophisticated informational tools do not exist. But it is going too far to suggest that archivists are not concerned with subject or content access. Indeed, Baskerville-Gaffield are sensitive enough, in a footnote, to admit as much when they lean on Terry Cook's "Clio" and "Tyranny" articles on the provenance issue.
6. *A system of subject access can bring hitherto unconnected and virtually unknown local holdings into an integrated whole.* I am not at all sure of the meaning of this statement — unless it only means that subject access provides (either through a fixed vocabulary or lexicon or random search mechanism) relationships which might not otherwise be seen. Agreed. There is nothing new here for archivists. The value of computerized finding aids is understood and where possible being explored, though not always with the benefit of hefty SSHRCC grants.
7. *A computerized research tool can be viewed as the first step in the creation of a regional/municipal archival network.* Can I presume from this statement that Baskerville-Gaffield are saying that an inventory in machine-readable form allows for subject entry and manipulation, as well as for control on the basis of a provenance entry? If this is the case, and I cannot see why it should not be done, then of course an informational network has been set up. As all such surveys show, more satisfactory decisions on disposition or ultimate locale for records can be made this way — producing a physical network too as necessary. If, on the other hand, the computerized research tool pays no heed to provenance in its organisation and arrangement (jurisdiction, custody, order, etc.), then it will be dismissed as merely a researcher's own descriptive tool not an archival one.

In short, my reply to Baskerville and Gaffield's description of the Vancouver Island Project is that if they have married provenance and subject access without diminishing the former principle, well and good. More power to them. It is what archivists should be, and some are, aiming towards. What does grate a little is the impression that I derive from the article to the effect that all this should be done because historians have demonstrated it, as if archivists had given no thought to such matters (with a few cited exceptions). The development of machine-readable finding aids will be carried through, not simply because of the likes of the Vancouver Island Project, but because archives are being affected by the same electronic technology and are gradually enabled to introduce the flexibility and power of automated

descriptive processes. I can, nonetheless, see no reason under these or any other circumstances to abandon the provenance principle as a bottom line of archival arrangement and description.

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Vancouver Island Project Fails to Grasp the Significance of Provenance

As a defender of archivists and provenance-based archival information systems against librarians and historians, I wish to respond to some of the issues raised by Peter A. Baskerville and Chad M. Gaffield in their article, "The Vancouver Island Project: Historical Research and Archival Practice," in *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84).

The first issue is the contention that "Archivists have not been collecting the kind of data that present day historians are becoming interested in — not the least of which is 'long data series' — the type that can be quantified and manipulated by modern automation techniques." This also is the kind of non-narrative data that lies closest to local history and common people — and I might add that, along with family papers and many corporate records, bear complementary relationships. The authors' analysis is faulty. In the United States, for example, archivists have for decades sought means of bringing local government records into archival custody, and they have made some headway as existing collections of local records will attest. Is there a Canadian parallel? Lacking political clout, archivists jointly with historians and other potential users share the failures that we all know full well. The problem is political influence to get attention to local records, and not a lack of awareness among archivists. Archivists are typically buried in larger bureaucracies that are usually indifferent or not congenial for archives programmes, thereby hampering archivists' effectiveness in the political process. Coupled with this predicament has been the weakness of their professional associations and those of their historian allies.

As to "public history," the "movement" started at least in the U.S. from a need to find non-academic employment for trained historians; the "public" designation originates from employment of historians by federal agencies. The public historians have gravitated toward local history, finding that much of the kind of data for social history they would like to use is not there. But don't blame the archivists; manuscript librarians and others should get equal billing. It's the political processes that have not been mastered and it is that which requires common effort.

The Vancouver Island Project (VIP) is creating a "research tool" by canvassing records for data on local history. Well and good, but unless these sources are transferred to archival custody, there is no guarantee that the data will still be on site when needed. The idea of creating a "sophisticated finding aid, rather than centralization of the material itself" (p. 30) is fanciful, showing little sense of how fragile is the existence of records that remain outside archival custody. The VIP is really a records survey and provides the requisite information to implement a general archival programme. Without the second step, the VIP will be as fruitless as the U.S. Historical Records Survey was.