

Archivists Should Not Be Tailor-Made for Specialized Historical Research

The paper by Bruce Bowden and Roger Hall (*Archivaria* 14, Summer 1982) seems to me an unreasonable request for “new” archivists who are tailor-made for the “new” social history. The authors’ argument arises from their research concerning death in Victorian Ontario. While I agree that the topic of death embraces a synthesis of evidence that is unusually varied and scattered, I am uneasy with the notion that archives should have to acknowledge this synthesis, or with the view that archivists should have to grasp its nuances of content or methodology. I also take issue with the authors’ apparently dim view of the genealogical orientation of Canada’s archivists.

Archivists will adapt to the needs of the social historian only to the extent that the latter can define his or her research requirements and goals. I would not and could not expect an archivist to anticipate the approaches an historical geographer brings to primary sources. My own experience, working on topics as disparate as nineteenth-century residential mobility, retail business, travel and communications, domestic architecture, and the celebration of death, has always been that a cogent description of my research interest has always elicited extraordinarily helpful and enthusiastic leads to relevant records. I would in fact be disturbed to encounter an *a priori* organization of such records catering to the brief half-life of a research orientation in a social science discipline, my own included.

To cite a specific example, my own interest in death in Victorian Ontario happens to focus on gravestones as exemplars of taste, class, culture, and an early industrial compromise of standardized and customized manufacture. Bowden and Hall’s article gives scant attention to work on the material culture of cemeteries by historical geographers, or the record linkage necessary if one wishes to associate status in life with the expression of status after death, for example by the scale and decoration of gravestones, and through relative location in the cemetery. I could wish for an archival cross-linkage of cemetery inventories, undertakers’ records, marble works account books, and manuscript census and assessment sources. But this task is clearly beyond the resources of archival staffing and, even if it were accomplished, the results would dismay a social historian, business historian, or genealogist. One researcher’s taxonomy and organization of material is another’s nightmare of obstacles and confusion.

As to the genealogical disposition of professional archivists and their records management, I would be surprised and fearful if matters were otherwise. Genealogical quests and the minutiae of local history hold no appeal for me, but these interests have characterized most of the patrons of the repositories I have visited, and most of the research questions I have overheard. Value judgements about the merits of such research ignore the unalterable fact that it sustains staff, collections, and structures which would otherwise be unjustifiable burdens on the public or institutional purse. Like Bowden and Hall, I am among the small minority of researchers that can be thankful for the grassroots interest that maintains local

archives throughout Canada and the United States. Unlike them, I harbour no criticism of necessary genealogical and local historical orientation which sustains these institutions.

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Canadian Archival Literature Revisited

It is indeed good to see Gordon Dodds in print again and I was much impressed by his lively and perceptive, if rather quirky review of Canadian archival literature; his conclusions in particular deserve careful attention. He would not expect me to agree with *all* he has written (no one could be expected to do *that!*) and I would like to add some points by way of clarification.

How should we define Canadian archival literature? The survey might perhaps have been more effective if contributions of Canadians to the *Journal of the Society of Archivists* (England) and *The American Archivist* (AA) had been taken into account. There were not many of them, but they were not unimportant. This leads me to my second point.

I have always believed that despite our shortcomings we have as Canadians much to offer the North American archival scene and this has been recognized since the days of Douglas Brymner. *The Canadian Archivist* (CA) when I was editor (compiler would be more accurate) was a very primitive affair and I was much concerned that our significant professional contributions should reach as wide an audience as possible via the AA which was at that time virtually "the only game in town." If I saw the CA as a regional publication with very local concerns, I believe that was the reality at the time. I know I overestimated the readership of the AA in Canada and I had the rather quaint notion of it as the organ of the North American archivists forming one society. This was not to be and I believe it was Gordon himself who quite properly led the move to have the Society of American Archivists treat us as a "foreign country" rather than as a Canadian region of the American whole. However, I would make a strong plea for the continuance of a vigorous SAA connection by Canadian archivists; much more unites than divides Canadians and Americans. We have a common language and documentary heritage; we all deal with the same media journal; our influence (in this field at least!) is out of all proportion to our numbers and I find that rather encouraging, for *Archivaria* is very highly regarded in the United States. When some of us become more involved for a while with the SAA, our papers at its conferences are published in the AA, but for all that they were no less Canadian. Conversely, I published what was in effect an unofficial minority report on Education by the SAA Committee of the Seventies in the *Canadian Archivist* (vol. 2, no. 3, pp. 30-35). The Taylor-Welch educational guidelines were presented to both the ACA and the SAA simultaneously, and the response of the former was very positive in contrast to the latter which found them unacceptable.