

## *Problems of Literary Archives: A Commentary*

by JEAN TENER

The two articles by Robin Skelton and Kathleen Garay raise a multitude of significant issues. When I began to read Dr. Skelton's paper I was disarmed by his modesty and when I saw that his notion of an ideal archivist was one with endless money, time, and space, I thought that here was a man after my own heart. He must, I thought, know archives and archivists well, for he has detected our prevailing occupational hazard — a strong tendency toward megalomania.

Alas, his modesty is fully justified. My first doubts arose with phrases like building up and constructing a comprehensive archive. I submit that the literary and personal papers of a writer are, like any other archival materials, a natural growth documenting his or her activities and interests. Repositories do not build or construct them; they receive them. Dr. Skelton is not really talking about the acquisition of literary archives at all. He is talking about something we all recognize, that is, an artificial collection. His goal is not the archival one of maintaining the evidential and informational values in the private papers of an individual writer, but one of providing the individual researcher with a convenient motherlode of gigantic proportions.

No doubt many of these things should be done, but they are not, nor should they be, an archival responsibility, even for an archivist in the miraculous circumstances of limitless money, space, and time. If clipping services and indexes to reviews are inadequate, the professionals concerned with these activities must be encouraged to improve their performance. Their activities should not be tacked on to those of the archivist.

His notion of archivists as literary patrons for the unappreciated author is, of course, appealing. It has such splendid connotations of grandeur and power — there goes that archival megalomania — but finally I questioned why we should assume this function any more than that of running clipping services. If there is no immediate market for an author's work, why should archives make themselves that market? In the absence of a reading public or critical attention by literary scholars, we are not likely to be better than anyone else in identifying the unrecognized Canadian Shakespeare and, apart from subjective judgments, it is difficult to see what criteria we could develop to do so. Such an attempt would surely stretch the archival responsibility for appraisal beyond reasonable limits.

Then there is what I call the Skelton principle of peripatetic provenance. The idea of chasing up the author's outgoing letters demonstrates an alarming lack of awareness of the integrity of a literary archive. It has been my experience, for instance, that writers' friends are frequently other writers, whose incoming mail is an integral part of their own archive. And although elsewhere Dr. Skelton seems to recognize that the records of publishing houses constitute an archive in their own right and that the complete file of the house would be a considerable asset to students of literary history, he is not averse to hiving off chunks of their operational correspondence to fill in perceived gaps somewhere else. The logistics of this exercise of returning everything, or copies of everything, to its source strike me as monumental and destined to failure. It may be possible to unravel the sweater, but you cannot put the wool back on the sheep.

This, of course, is a straw-man argument. Dr. Skelton knows that he is talking about an artificial collection. He himself says that he is dealing not with archives proper, but with gathering information. What his proposal requires is not an archivist, but a Boswell for every Johnson.

You may, however, be wondering why all this gathering, building, and constructing will be necessary, and why, in the modern context, archivists are the likeliest candidates to do it. In 1979, through the good offices of Dr. Skelton himself, I acquired a document entitled *Authors and Archives: A Short Guide*<sup>1</sup> which was distributed to members of the Writers' Union of Canada. And I think I am right in believing that Dr. Skelton had a hand in its composition. As can be seen from a couple of excerpts, if its recommendations are followed, there will be artificial collections only, because the literary archive proper will be dismantled before it reaches archivists. The *Guide* has the following advice for the writer "who is not concerned to ensure that the whole of his or her archive be deposited in one place"

1. Do not embarrass ... with large collections; offer small ones.... For example, you may succeed in selling all the papers relating to one novel, whereas you may not succeed in selling the papers relating to six.
2. ...it is the writer not the recipient who gives the material its value, and therefore collections of letters should be sold to ... [institutions] which have a particular interest in the writer of them.

There is a final suggestion which acknowledges that this approach might finally turn out to be self-defeating, for it points out that later material will not interest other institutions who do not wish to start a collection which cannot be completed.

It must be emphasized that this commentary is not intended to establish a buyer's market. Literary authors are undervalued and poorly rewarded members of our society, and without question they should be free to dispose of their personal papers how and where they wish and for the greatest return, but the *Guide's* approach to the disposal and acquisition of literary archives is surely of doubtful service not only to

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<sup>1</sup> Available for a nominal fee from the Writers' Union of Canada, 24 Ryerson Avenue, Toronto, Ontario, M5T 2P3.

archives and scholars, but to authors themselves. I propose, therefore, that before Dr. Skelton, disarming modesty and all, does any more damage, we enrol him with our blessing in UBC's archival studies programme.

Dr. Garay's paper addresses itself to problems after acquisition, and she has thoughtfully delineated for us the dilemmas faced by archivists over access and photoduplication. Access for private papers has no convenient closure rule. It is a negotiated item, and I doubt that we can produce uniformity. I personally have few problems with closing parts of the correspondence of a living author. Their vocation makes them public figures but that does not entitle the public, be it lay or scholarly, to invade every corner of their lives, and the lives of their friends and families as soon as a repository receives their papers. Other kinds of scholarly endeavour exist beside biography. There is hardly, for instance, an over-abundance of definitive texts in Canadian literature. The world of literary scholarship need not collapse because we wait a few years in order to allow contemporary authors some kind of personal privacy. This is the *quid pro quo* of institutionalizing living writers.

We all agree, I hope, with Dr. Garay that access to open material must be universal. The profession probably cannot afford any martyrs for the cause, but what would the profession think of a black list of repositories that give preferential access?

Photoduplication is another thorny problem. As Dr. Garay says, authorities and statutes are resolutely unhelpful, but I don't think that we can accept the expense of bulk copying as a safeguard. We have to have a principle, because sooner or later someone will have those resources and then we are simply back to square one. It is difficult to see where Dr. Skelton stands on this, because he seems to believe that a writer's friends will happily photocopy their incoming mail, while his *Guide* clearly instructs that "the value of an archive to the possessor is clearly diminished if copies of portions of it can be found elsewhere." And, of course, that doctoral scholar did have to come halfway around the world to examine those literary papers in Dr. Skelton's possession. That's two-to-one against photocopying, I think. There is, however, the argument that the more copies of a thing that exist, the more valuable becomes the original. How far does this profession agree with either of these viewpoints? Have we even examined and agreed on what "value" means in this context?

Since making the above comments following the oral presentations of Drs. Skelton and Garay at the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in June 1983, a postscript seems in order.

Judging from the response, my remarks then struck an archival chord, and to my professional ear one or two of the notes were off-key or, perhaps I might change the metaphor and say, off-target.

I have yet to discuss primary research with a serious scholar who, upon reflection, did not recognize that the intricacy of the links connecting one individual's activities with those of others makes the accumulation of all relevant documentation in one location unlikely, not to say impossible. So what has prompted Dr. Skelton to urge such a goal upon us? Perhaps the answer is that Canadian archivists have not successfully fulfilled a responsibility which, unlike the Boswellian role Dr. Skelton

would give us, does indeed sit squarely upon our shoulders, that is, the provision of adequate means for the scholar to feel confident that he or she has, in fact, located all relevant materials held in every archival repository. Too often our tendency is to hide behind the shibboleth of uniqueness to avoid not just standardization itself, but even the serious examination of the options for standardization. Each failure to grapple with standardized descriptive rules makes networking less achievable, and frustrates the researcher's attempts to utilize archival holdings as fully as he or she deserves.

And finally, it saddened me after the conference to see the Writers' Union *Guide* characterized in the *ACA Bulletin* as mischievous. It is not. Its recommendations are, in my view, misguided, but some of the blame for that lies with archivists. The survey on which it was based disclosed a horror-story of administrative bungling and dubious ethics. By setting up an Archives Committee and producing a *Guide*, the Writers' Union of Canada acknowledged that its membership needs advice about an issue of very real concern to authors. It is a pity that Canadian archivists have not explored the necessity of an organizational mechanism linking the ACA and the WUC. Such a mechanism could sustain a dialogue to ensure that literary archives develop in the best interests of all concerned. Since the collection impetus comes, in the main, from repositories, the absence of such a mechanism might be taken as a sign of professional negligence on the part of archivists. And before we congratulate ourselves too quickly on our rectitude, we would do well to ponder how it is that authors have the impression that it is not only acceptable, but advisable, to destroy the integrity of their personal papers. It should not be without significance to our profession that the WUC *Guide* claims that a writer of sufficient stature will always find a repository "happy to have a piece of the action."

In conclusion I would like to draw attention to a situation implied in both articles, and that is the interlocking effect archival collecting can have on the activities of contemporary writers. I'm sure that Dr. Skelton, as a noted author himself, will agree that the writer's first priority must always be to satisfy that creative urge. His second is to satisfy a readership. Whatever professional problems archivists identify and however we solve them, we have an obligation to ensure that our activities do not subvert the writer's first task, which is to create literature, not archives. If we fail in this, no matter how good our intentions, we will have served the cause of Canadian literature badly.