

Notices

The National Archives of Canada, 1872 – 1997. DANIELLE LACASSE and ANTONIO LECHASSEUR. Ottawa: The Canadian Historical Association, 1997. 39 p. ISBN 0-88798-194-1.

The publishing of institutional histories is fraught with difficulties. Publishers do not get excited by the prospect of producing them, institutions (or people in them) usually want some degree of editorial control, authors want both financial support and editorial freedom, and the general public does not have a large appetite for the product. As a consequence, institutional histories, at least good ones, do not often get published; this is particularly true when the institution is part of government. These are just a few of the reasons why a history of the National Archives of Canada has never made it to the printed page.

As a partial remedy, the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) in 1997 devoted number 58 of its Historical Booklet Series to a brief history of the National Archives in tribute to the 125th anniversary of its founding. The stated purpose of the publication was to present an “initial synthesis of the history of this institution.” Danielle Lacasse and Antonio Lechasseur, staff members of the National Archives (and also good historians), have succeeded admirably in producing in thirty-nine pages an overview of the history of the institution and its evolution from a very elemental copying office into one of the world’s most advanced national archives. Of necessity, the product is highly condensed, but the authors have succeeded in producing a readable and balanced presentation of the growth and development of the Archives and of the themes which have been an integral part of its development.

It is fascinating, particularly for someone who has been associated with the institution for some time, to see how the various themes have been replayed in succeeding generations: the struggle to determine if the institution has a role as a promoter of nationalism and an understanding of the nation’s history; the question of whether the Archives should strive to be a “cultural agency,” or whether it should focus its efforts primarily on the task of keeping the govern-

ment's corporate memory; the recurring debates over theories of arrangement and description, and over adoption of standard practices in the various areas of archival science; the constant problem of physical accommodation; the cyclical battles for recognition by government of the critical importance of the program to the fabric of a nation; the studies commissioned by governments (meaning politicians and bureaucrats) seeking, for themselves, an understanding of what the institution's role should be; and the ongoing search for that elusive line between the role of a library and that of an archives. Members of the present generation may be surprised to discover that they are not the first to deal with these issues and others; one of the more timely revelations is contained in a chart at the end of the booklet, which lists the names and tenures of the chief archivists. A quick perusal of this list indicates that each time a chief archivist has left office the government has delayed for a year and sometimes two years in making a new appointment. History does repeat itself!

The booklet makes a number of useful contributions. From my point of view, the most important is its succinct description of why Canada has an institution such as the National Archives and why it does not have the equivalent of France's Bibliothèque nationale, the United Kingdom's British Library, or the United States' Library of Congress. Commentators sometimes lament the fact that Canada does not have one of these equivalents. However, we cannot hope to understand the nature and character of our national institutions without a sound knowledge of our country's history; it is evident that such observations betray a lack of understanding of how our country developed. We have a National Archives and a National Library and these institutions have their mandates, not by accident or by default, but because of the distinctly Canadian way in which they developed. The authors make that point nicely.

Another very useful contribution which the authors make is the annotated bibliography at the end of the booklet. It is thoroughly done and reveals that a good deal of significant material has been published about the history of the Archives, the oldest of the federal cultural agencies. It is greatly to be hoped that someone will soon make use of this material to produce a full history of the National Archives. The Canadian Historical Association has given us the appetizer. Anyone who reads this booklet will have a taste for the full course meal.

As is the case with all the numbers of the CHA booklet series, this publication is available from the CHA office in Ottawa and is published in both English and French.

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