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ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY: AN ARCHIVISTS' NEED

By

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This is the age of "instant" archives. Government repositories are now set up and opened within a year, their shelves are filled with miles of paper, a records centre will probably feature in the operation, and an archives act will tie the whole package together and thereafter regulate the flow. The archivist, as he walks through his stacks, will see around him the minutes, registers, case papers, accounts and correspondence of a dozen departments, and will probably be congratulating himself on his grasp of record groups and the completeness of the various series which he has managed to reconstruct. A stranger, or even a historian, would perhaps imagine that the archivist was a person of great learning, so familiar with the organizations that created the records in his care that he is able unerringly to place them row upon row as they would have been arranged in their offices of origin. Nothing could be further from the truth.

For one thing, the archivist might be an émigré Englishman, marvelously ignorant of Canadian bureaucratic structures, but with a certain animal cunning acquired during years in his profession for recognizing similar handwriting or simply reading the designations of officials at the foot of correspondence files, and stringing out each series in date order. This works well enough with a great deal of record, but inevitably there will be those odd volumes listed rather opaquely under the title "miscellaneous", which someone must have created for a purpose too obvious at the time to be entered anywhere. **And there are those series of papers which once breathed and grew in live files but which are now so horribly dead and unbelievably mangled and dismembered on floors or tumbling from transfer cases, appearing to the archivist like bodies "half-moulderd in rotten coffins that would suddenly yawn wide open, filling his nostrils with a noisome stench and his eyes with the sight of nothing but crawling worms."** (From an account of the Great Plague in London, 1665). This kind of confusion is likely to make even the most seasoned archivist gently perspire, but again he attempts the same approach, and frantically studies endorsements for a clue to provenance and purpose.

In New Brunswick, we had three large groups like this. The docketts of the Supreme Court, the Legislative Assembly and the Provincial Secretary responsible to the Legislative Council. Apart from the Judgment Rolls which were numbered in series and totalled about 20,000, the remaining Supreme Court records were in no sort of order and had to be bundled annually by type of instrument which was basically a process of visual recognition by the part-time staff available for the task. **As regards the**

purpose of the various instruments and their inter-relationships, we were largely in ignorance. The papers of the other two groups presented a rather different problem, more like cutting out cattle on the hoof. The difficulty lay in distinguishing the "brands" in the form of archive marks which identified the owners, and then steering these into the correct record groups with only a very uncertain notion as to which group any particular document might have ended up in originally. Take for instance a petition directed to the Lieutenant Governor in Council. It might be laid before the Executive Council and endorsed "in Council"; it might then be passed to the Legislative Assembly and be found there, or it might never leave the Provincial Secretary's office and be buried amongst his own departmental paper. Where, in fact, did it end up? Whole sub-groups of records would also appear in this way, with no clear indication of departmental origin.

It could, I suppose, be argued that the records are now in fair shape, series have been recreated and chaos has been resolved through a sequence of more or less informed hunches by which a great deal of information is now organized in an orderly way. The trouble is that few of the records series are adequately articulated; the relationship between them may be largely unknown and their significance within the context of the whole record group may be lost. We need to know their administrative history, to be reminded that they were created by people to serve a particular purpose in the administration, and we should know the chain of command in any department and evaluate the records accordingly. In short, we cannot accurately arrange or assess the significance of a department's records until we understand thoroughly how it works. Many of our neat, archival reconstructions should be treated as hypotheses to be modified in the light of further knowledge. Too often, they may reflect all sorts of emphases which could deceive the unwary and even be taken for granted as an accurate representation of the administrative structure.

The study in depth of a department's records may perhaps be approached in two ways: as a history of the administration, in which the works are taken apart and the entire operation analysed in relation to its parts; and as administrative history, in which the impacts on the politics, power struggles, and the public at large is considered. This is often much more difficult and would have to include a great deal of time spent at the grass roots amongst the general correspondence. Both approaches are needed. The second is far more difficult; the first would be of greatest assistance to the archivist. Together, they might result in a number of historical revisions of, for instance, the efficacy of all sorts of major constitutional and statutory reforms. It is one thing to proclaim a statute, but it is quite another to expect that it will necessarily operate as intended. The administrative record will provide the answer. Again, there is the big question of departmental initiatives by civil servants in relation to their ministers and the politicians generally, but I need not dwell upon this point here. Rather, I would like to turn for a moment to the English scene, and show how the study of administrative history has affected our whole concept of government in the Middle Ages. This conveniently distances the problem by a few hundred years, and the position has been admirably summarized in a most lively way by Professor V. K. Galbraith in his "Studies in the Public Records", (Oxford, 1948).

Before about 1900, popular medieval English history had been written from the evidence of chronicles, common law, and parliamentary statutes;

historians tend to write a commentary on the past in terms of their own world in which heroes and villains trod the stage in that apparently dark and barbarous era which preceded renaissance and enlightenment. King John was a bad king both because the chronicler, Matthew Paris, said so shortly afterwards, and because he appeared morally bad to our great-grandfathers. All the elements of today's parliament were identified in the days of Simon De Montfort as democracy struggled with tyranny. It just wasn't like that.

Let us consider for a moment the medieval sources for this kind of history and their modern counterparts. For medieval chronicles we can substitute newspapers, political correspondence, and a great deal of parliamentary debate, all of which is essentially a commentary, one man's view, in which material is selected, presented and sometimes distorted for the purpose of entertaining or persuading an audience. **There may be** no modern counterpart for the study of common law, but as I have said earlier, statutes have their limitations as evidence of what happened and often embody a good deal of wishful thinking.

As for the administrative record, it had always been there but, then as now, the bulk was prodigious. Scholars first began to use this source in a search for constitutional niceties and that old chimera, absolute or scientific history. These men, the products of the late 19th century thought and learning, were themselves surrounded by an increasingly sophisticated bureaucracy and were developing a growing respect for the civil service which in turn produced a sympathy for its medieval counterparts.

A massive publishing programme produced calendars of the Chancery Rolls from 1199 in 100 volumes in addition to many other series of government records. This kind of source material recorded formal grants by the king, decisions of the courts and financial transactions of the Exchequer through which the impact of government on ordinary folk could be studied for the first time, since the chronicles were concerned almost solely with the more colourful and prominent figures of their period.

What did the historians find? Much of the answer lies in T. F. Tout's Chapters in Mediaeval Administrative History (1920-1925) which ran to six volumes and took 20 years to produce. He showed us that medieval government was efficiently and flexibly organized around the king. In Galbraith's works "the dynamic energy of the Royal household, whose administrative pressure set all in motion and whose direct activity, exercised through the Privy Seal and Signet, was the most persistent force in government." Apart from the substitution of a few terms, this could just as well apply to the Colonial Governor in pre-Confederation Canada. Medieval people required, above all, strong government and not freedom in an abstract sense, for they had extensive rights in custom and common law. For the king, good government meant efficiency and profit, but he was expected not only to reign but to rule, to take initiatives, to act. The complaints of the baronial opposition to King John was not that he governed badly or wickedly but that he refused to take the initiatives expected of him as King. **Weak government usually results in administrative oppression.** In every age, people are more governed than they like to admit. The impact of government, then as now, is not so much via the politician as via the bureaucrat, and their record is fully documented in the archives.

It must also be remembered that modern government bureaucracy emerged not only from the royal household but also from the royal courts of law, administering common law and statute. The lawyers of both canon and civil law were the top civil servants, and one cannot ~~but~~ grasp the true value of their records until this is understood. The petition, the writ, the judgment, the warrant; these are all embedded in later bureaucratic practices, no less in Canada than elsewhere. This is because all law and its implementation stems from the King in Council, or the Lieutenant Governor in Council which is its direct successor. Crown Land Office procedure reflects this ancient origin very well with its petitions, warrants for survey and grants by a Committee of the Council. It constituted, in effect, a court of record. Parliament itself was not in origin a democratically-elected debating and legislative body but a court, "the High Court of Parliament", presided over by the king and petitioned by those with grievances. The members of this court were all those from whom the king wished to seek advice or gain support. The decisions of the court would be implemented by the clerks in the royal household. Early colonial government can again clearly be recognized as being along these lines, and, had its opponents been aware of this, how they would have loved to have described it as medieval!

Then, as now, the administration was subject to "Parkinson's Law" and the king, as the chief executive of government, was forever seeking to get out from under the various departments which grew up from his increasingly varied activity. At first, he used only the Great Seal, held by the Chancellor, but when this became a cumbersome office of record, then he devised the Privy Seal, but that in turn "went out of court", as the saying is, and he then used the Secret Seal from which we get the word secretary today. Finally, as the secretary built up his own office and was concerned with state papers, the king used his signet or his signature as the most direct form of authentication and authority. This process of "going out of court" is still very much a part of the administrative process as departments spawn sub-departments and branches, which in turn become branches in themselves.

The need of the chief executive to be preserved from routine encumbrances is met in this way. The Provincial Secretary has, in most cases, moved some distance from being the servant of the Executive Council which was his original role, but he still keeps the seal of the province and thus becomes linked with very ancient tradition.

One of the valuable disciplines implicit in a study of medieval administrative history was the obligation to follow the threads of individual persons and problems and unravel them from the immensely technical and complicated procedures of the royal household and the courts. Such a study became identified with the impact on individuals outside the government as part of the whole historical process. It is significant that Tout, after volume one of his Chapters, ceased to separate administrative from general history and this was instinctively sound on his part. Moreover, medieval historians have always had to study most carefully the diplomatic of their sources as they grappled with the medieval mind. And I think this is a lesson which should be borne in mind today. Administrative phraseology is important and so its implications; as Professor Galbraith put it, "roughly speaking, the official mind, then as now, was concerned to minimize any elements of unusualness; to deny as far as possible the facts of change and to preserve at all costs the appearance of legality". This leads to a continual search for precedents and for

the "official" version of events as recorded in annual reports, and this legal approach of the administrator runs far back into history. It is therefore essential to know the status of any document, who is writing what and for whom, if we are to assess its historical value.

Unfortunately, it is becoming increasingly clear that the archivist of today, unlike his learned colleagues of a generation ago, will be unable to spend a lifetime of intensive study on a few basic series of papers. In "instant" archives, this is impossible. Yet, without a critical approach to diplomatic and a careful analysis of the administrative structure, we will not be able to assess with confidence the historical implications of our holdings for the historian. A well-planned M.A. programme in which a series of theses is written on the various departments of government in any one province could help a great deal, as archivist and historian work closely together on the problem. This discipline would be an admirable one for both parties, and in no sense parochial, since structures of government and administration have a universal application.

So far as I know, very few studies of this kind have been made, and the lack of them may be reflected in two outstanding works on the subject: Leonard B. White's administrative history of the United States government in four volumes, and his pupil, J. E. Hodgett's, Pioneer Public Service (1955). I do not wish in any way to belittle these works which cover a very broad field and have been most carefully researched. In Professor White's volume, the emphasis for the most part is on the politics and power struggles behind the evolution of United States' departments of government, the extent to which political theories are practiced, the constitutional implications - almost a political history of the administration, which although immensely important, is not the whole story. A brief examination of sources revealed in the footnotes reinforces this impression. A great many are from the private papers and diaries of politicians who became administrators and the official House reports to Congress, with almost no reference to departmental records at a lower level.

Professor Hodgett's book makes a similar approach to the United Provinces administration and again the footnotes reveal very little use of departmental material below the level of annual reports. Admittedly, he writes more from the standpoint of the political scientist than the historian. He explains in his preface that his aims are first "to provide a description of the evolution and structure of the administrative machine" including the "contributions of the public servant to the welfare of a pioneer community"; secondly, to examine "certain basic administrative issues" which are still with us; and thirdly, to show that responsible government was won politically before it was recognized at an administrative level. These are broad issues and they are finely handled, but there is, I maintain, a genuine need for a study of the administrators themselves biographically and relative to their social background; to see how they viewed the provision for public servants; what promotion they received and how they organized and modified their departments to meet pressure of work arising out of obligations to the citizen on the one hand, and policy changes at the ministerial level on the other.

Perhaps these two examples will have made my point. The active cooperation of historians and archivists in this field is essential. The archivist's ability to give a more informed appreciation of his resources will be greatly increased. It is high time for departmental records to be

studied from the "consumer" point of view. We have "consumed" (or been consumed by) a great deal of administration since the early days of government in Canada. It is now time for us to take a closer look at the product and stop taking the label for granted.

ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY - AN HISTORIAN'S OPPORTUNITY

By

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"The productions of historians may be thought of as a great file indispensable to all social science -- I believe this is a true and fruitful view. History as a discipline is also sometimes considered to contain all social science -- but only by a few misguided 'humanists'. More fundamental than either view is the idea that every social science -- or better, every well-considered social study -- requires an historical scope of conception and a full use of historical materials. This simple notion is the major idea for which I am arguing."

C. Wright Mills, The Sociological Imagination

The words of this brilliant American sociologist give ample testimony for the reason why I, an amateur historian at best, am here to address this august gathering today. The late C. Wright Mills was a persistent gadfly to us social scientists, and, more particularly, a trampelling bête noir within the intellectual cabbage patch known as sociology, for, it was one of his passionate convictions that the contemporary work of much social science had lost its moorings by its serious disregard of historical studies. This line of thought he reiterated throughout most of his writings: history must be conceived as much more than past political events, for it was the life of yesterday in the present.¹

It was Alfred North Whitehead who, many years ago, reminded us of a phenomenon called "historical foresight", not in the sense of scientific prediction, for man's behaviour is much too complex to be classified in the straight jacket of most universal physical laws, but a connotation much more germane to the human experience. Whitehead argues that even though the facts of history are complex and at times seemingly unintelligible, yet there is precious knowledge in the fact that we are informed as to how individual men behaved in the past, and consequently how they might behave in roughly similar situations in the future.² At the risk of oversimplifying the arguments of Mills and Whitehead, I believe that a good synopsis of both scholars' arguments is that historical knowledge encourages a widening of one's perspective in assessing events of critical importance in the development of social structures. It is my main thesis that in the study of administration the work of Canadian scholars is seriously hampered by the dearth of historical studies within this area of intellectual endeavour.

Perhaps a few caveats are in order concerning the manner in which I have interpreted my assignment. Firstly, my orientation is totally