

ARCHIVES 2002

The Editor of the Canadian Archivist felt that the journal should make its own contribution to the centennial of the Public Archives of Canada through a discussion that would look forward over the next thirty years and try to project future archival developments from the present state of the art. With this in mind, he gathered together a group drawn from the Public Archives but who would express their own personal opinions as individuals.

The group consisted of:	Jay Atherton	Betty May
	Richard Huyda	Dave Newton
	Léo LaClare	Lynn Ogden
	Claude Le Moine	Hugh Taylor

What follows is a freely adapted and revised précis of that discussion which unfolded in a lively fashion over two and a half hours and several beers. The words are not those used at the time by the contributors but the arguments, with some modifications, are. The tape will be preserved and will rate at least as a curiosity thirty years from now.

Ogden: I suggest that we might develop our discussion by looking at the future role of the archivist in relation to his archives and the ways in which archival media will be controlled. Then we might go on to consider the archivist in relation to the researcher and the general public. Who will use the archives and in what will the users be interested? As our role becomes more complex, we must concentrate on the establishment of professional standards through the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association or a more independent body.

Atherton: Agreed. Archivists will find greater fulfillment within the Section as it becomes more influential but it need not necessarily become independent to do this.

Ogden: It may be that the Section could undertake a vigorous publication programme by taking over the Union List of Manuscripts or the Register of Dissertations besides improving the Directory of Canadian Archives.

Taylor: The future professional, as an expert on information and where to find it, may be a combination of archivist and librarian. The Public Archives Library is working closer than ever with the other divisions in the Public Archives as partners in the human retrieval of information.

Ogden: The demand by the researcher for an effective subject classification as a finding aid is on the increase.

Le Moine: Archivists could probably learn a good deal about indices from the librarian, who has had long experience in this field.

Huyda: All this is true, but there may not be such a professional as an archivist in thirty years' time. Certainly, within the larger record-creating organizations, the future value of certain records will be

recognized and their preservation in good order assured by a sound records management programme, itself a thoroughly automated process.

In the pictorial field, this will be very much the case. Most early collections will have been acquired. Current accumulation will be well organized and automated out of commercial and economic necessity. Future managers of archives must be motivated by other priorities than preservation which will be taken for granted.

In thirty years' time, it will be economically feasible to preserve all material of the past through miniaturization and automation. Space will not be a problem.

Newton: Audiences will be able to make videotape recordings of any of a vast range of programmes beamed via satellites and these could include material in archives and libraries. With so much material so easily available, will the archivist's career be doomed to an increasingly narrow specialization?

Atherton: I do not see the archivist as a super-specialist locating thousands of specific fragments of information for the researcher. Historical research has never worked like this. It involves understanding and interpreting source material from a wide range of sources set within all kinds of contexts, not always directly related to the immediate field of study.

Taylor: Isn't this partly due to the inaccessibility of documentary content? Historiography is closely related to ways and means. One is at present forced to be highly selective, but once information becomes almost an extension of your own nervous system in its range, depth and sensitivity, then all your efforts as an historian can be bent toward the philosophical content, the judgmental side. One becomes more specifically a Doctor of Philosophy in the literal sense.

Atherton: But the historian may not know when he first hits his primary sources just what he is after. He may not at first be able to ask the right questions.

May: Yes, but we do not serve only historians but also geographers and many others who may not have this particular problem.

Ogden: At least the new technology will help to eliminate the erratic, hit-or-miss technique which at present is unavoidable.

Atherton: Then there are only two alternatives - either highly specialized archivists or ten thousand clerks who will index everything under every possible subject!

Taylor: On the other hand, the archivist of the future may not be a specialist, but a generalist, skilled in calling up information across a whole range of subject areas. This is particularly important in the environmental approach best illustrated in urban history studies which use media right across the board. At the heart of such studies is the map, a formalized mosaic of reality which typifies this kind of approach.

Huyda: If we assume that the space problem will cease to exist, surely we can dispense with appraisal. Even housekeeping records, if fully automated, may have a value to the quantifier. They have had to be destroyed

up to now because of space and the inability to handle them electronically.

Ogden: Then what will be the training of the archivist? Do we want a super-specialist in information retrieval? One man wearing many caps or many archivists? How do we keep everyone up-to-date in all areas?

Huyda: Perhaps we can leave all this kind of retrieval to the computer experts who can make it readily available. Thirty years from now the archivist may only be required to be able to convince the holders of valuable archives that they should be preserved. This rather than internal preservation may already have become our principal role. As we bring our backlog to order, we become the conscience of the nation in this respect.

Atherton: On a related point, do archivists communicate effectively with users, and learn to speak their language? For instance, we have no expert in quantification at the Public Archives of Canada.

Ogden: Which comes back to the need for diversification in recruitment.

Atherton: An archives advisory committee on the American model, made up of others besides historians might help to solve this problem.

Huyda: Do we then see the archivist as essentially a super-salesman, selling his products?

Ogden: Yes, very much so.

Taylor: The archivist could become a man of incredible power through his command of source data and where to locate it. But he must keep up with the times. Already the distinction between modern records and older records is becoming blurred. The archivist, through his control of the requirements of reports and forms, could ensure the keeping of a good record at the point of creation, with its retention period built into an automated programme.

Technology is making a nonsense of time as air travel demonstrates. Studies of the past may become increasingly in depth and lateral. This is the demand the archivist must learn to meet.

Atherton: Another off-shoot of the old system was that chronological Canadian history was taught in a vacuum and not in relation to events in the rest of the world. Even now little work has been done on the Progressive Era - (a relatively lateral study) in relation to such work in the United States for instance.

Taylor: There are indications then that the general public are becoming more interested in original eye-witness accounts and are tired of the historian getting in the way?

Le Moine: Yes, the Coles series is an indication. For librarians, the problem is what to collect now. Posters, for instance, is an important field.

Huyda: But in some fields, we are already limited in the quantity of paper records we can keep, especially business archives.

Ogden: How could we store the ten to twelve tons of Home Bank records

even if we acquired them? Yet the bank statements and cheques have much to say about the depositors. Were they all "little guys" as is alleged?

Huyda: In the light of new trends and technological capabilities, should not government records schedules be revised?

Ogden: We are judging records primarily as historians since this is our training. Do we really understand the needs of other disciplines?

Taylor: But in fairness these judgments have had to be made and some people are bound to find them faulty. We have to make these decisions partly on the basis of preservation costs now.

LaClare: Will people be interested in all the recorded material we have saved? Will not the most sought after material be then produced by 'underground' movements of which we have very little. This will not get into institutionalized information systems.

Newton: The 'underground' films, for instance.

Taylor: This is a very real danger. The staffs of most repositories were once conservative with a small and large "C". Little interest was taken in the archives of the left.

Huyda: Will the archivist continue to be too conservative? Will he be able to keep up in the next thirty years? It is often forgotten that he has a dangerous power to retard growth. In the late 1930's, a plan was prepared by a member of the Public Archives of Canada for a national film archives. It petered out and was only revived in the last few years. In 1914, a directive required that all motion pictures from World War I should go to the Dominion Archivist. It arrived in 1921, and he didn't know what to do with it. It was sent elsewhere and eventually cut to shreds. Periods of dynamic growth seem often to be followed by a disastrous impotence.

Taylor: At least we now have a more open mind about what constitutes archives. It is the knowledge of this range which is tending to the impotence you describe.

Newton: One of the media that will still be with us in 2002 will be paper, despite what has been said.

Taylor: Yes, but how do you preserve it? Most modern papers have a relatively short life. Shall we save all this at vast expense, and I am thinking of such valuable series as the Prime Minister's papers? I am not saying we shouldn't. But we will have to cost it out. We have already opted for microfilm as a more stable base for modern newspapers quite apart from other considerations.

Huyda: In terms of ecology, there may be a demand for recycling at all levels, with heavy pressure to recycle old paper. Will the archivist again become impotent? Microfilm requires silver, and the world's silver supplies are being depleted. Already motion picture film has been lost in this way. Will microfilm be threatened?

Newton: In the area of sound archives, telephone recordings are likely to become very prevalent. Many agreements may never reach paper.

Huyda: The authentication of voice "signatures" is already far advanced.

Atherton: Do you mean no one will read any books or write any letters?

Huyda: More people will keep tape-recorded diaries.

Newton: Families already exchange taped letters, but they are usually "wiped".

Taylor: Will there be such a thing as literature as a form of communication?

Ogden: Yes, but books will more and more be miniaturized via the hologram, and then magnified for reading on a screen. The hologram could condense a library of one hundred thousand books into a small cabinet. Already books are being projected via videotape cassettes. We already teach children to read on television.

Taylor: Even so, you could go through life with a minimum of reading and a maximum use of signs and symbols. Literacy could become an optional extra.

Huyda: So what will an archives as an institution be like in thirty years from now? Will it be at a national level only and feed the client through the terminal in his home? Or will it exist must as it does now?

Ogden: We know that leisure will greatly increase, and a wholly centralized system would not be able to cope with the increased demand, quite apart from the pleasure of talking directly to people in the archives (and even this might be done on the television screen!). By then, there should be a complete capability of interchange of information between the Provincial repositories, for example, and the Public Archives of Canada. There will be a great saving in travel grants alone.

Le Moine: Already the genealogists' inquiries are a forecast of the future.

Huyda: But will not travel become cheap enough to make journeys to the capital easier?

Ogden: Maybe, but we are faced either way with dealing with a much larger clientele. Anyway, the public may not want the trouble of coming to Ottawa, no matter how cheap it is.

Newton: Is there not a danger that we will finally be by-passed by the computer - others will provide access, and not necessarily archivists.

May: But people hate using microfilm, especially for maps.

Newton: The image can be greatly improved and VTR may be the route. You can already purchase a cassette worth one hour of images for \$30., which could be stopped at each image like a microfilm reel if necessary. Programmes can also be chosen for television display in the home by using the dial telephone.

Le Moine: Yet more and more people want to see the original, if possible, and not even an offset facsimile.

Taylor: Yes. Because they have to endure so much copy, confrontation with the original is a rich experience engaging all the senses.

Huyda: Even this piece in the Canadian Archivist! This quest for an experience of the original is in some measure being met by facsimiles of famous museum artifacts which can be handled. But, of course, the total experience is still absent.

Taylor: We will have to think in terms of archival museums attached to the archives where a few precious originals will be preserved for all time like the Declaration of Independence in its inert gas. But this is not likely to be a problem by the end of the century.

Ogden: Even at present the archives is regarded by many as a kind of museum; some records managers regard it as a convenient garbage dump where they can offload valuable early material and be absolved from further responsibility, if it is ever needed again. American firms can receive for their firm the accolade of good Canadian corporate citizens besides. What we have is a good alternative to the waste basket at no increased expense! However, we have to be there to present the option to the businessman in the first place.

Huyda: Film-makers also take this approach with their unused film which is all to the good. On another topic, will we have the same role in publications and exhibitions?

Ogden: Because of the new media, our role will expand.

Atherton: Many exhibitions will be via television broadcasts.

Huyda: But the PR people, not the archivist, are doing this.

Taylor: The archivist will become more involved in this as he is freed from more traditional archival functions which in many cases have become chores. His role as a consultant should increase, and with it, his understanding of the television producer's problems and requirements. We must avoid hiding behind comfortable, secure, established patterns and roles as an escape from the future.

Ogden: So archivists should be released from elementary archival tasks?

Taylor: Yes, but it is essential that an archivist, early in his training, should have some experience of these tasks such as physical arrangement indexing and listing as he may never again get quite so close to the record or quite so immersed in a collection, and he will be more patient and understanding of his clerical and support staff as a result.

Huyda: There is a danger of archives becoming topheavy with archivists in relation to clerical and support staff.

Taylor: The true archivist must increasingly use his initiative and take more responsibility in decision-making, otherwise he may become only an archival support person in disguise. We must learn to master technology and spring ourselves loose for creative activity that only a human being and a thoroughly professional archivist can accomplish.