

Minding our own Business

by ROGER HALL

The business of Canadian archivists is not business or, at least, not business records. There have been occasional flickers of interest over the years, but regrettably schemes of business archives councils, of central repositories, of comprehensive surveys, now seem fully extinguished. In fact, in certain of the principal archives of this country there has been an actual retrenchment, a withdrawal from even the piecemeal plans advanced for listing commercial records, not to mention their collection.

Most readers of this journal are aware of the general eagerness of business firms, both successful and failed, to destroy their files and records at the earliest opportunity. Too frequently archivists use this commercial laxity as a screen to excuse their own inactivity. Archival administrations have a responsibility to locate and to conserve these records for, as any sophomore can explain, Canada is a country which owes its existence more than most to the efforts of business firms. Nor should the effort be restricted to Canada, for much of the understanding of Canadian business has always been abroad, mostly in the United States and Great Britain. And if the Canadian business records scene is dismal on the home front, it is virtually non-existent abroad. With a little effort, however, and relatively small expense, we could locate, assess, and publicize archival materials relating to Canada held in foreign repositories. What follows is a brief assessment of British opportunities with some observations and recommendations based on British experience which could be useful in encouraging a more progressive approach to collecting business records in this country.

A common complaint of students of Canadian business history is an apparent paucity of resources. Nowhere is this inadequacy more clearly felt than in the period of Pre-Confederation business studies, particularly during the commercially eventful years between the War of 1812 and the coming of reciprocity with the United States. Beyond the range of a number of selected railways, the timber trade, and the Hudson's Bay Company, few close commercial analyses have been undertaken, although some scholars have shown no reluctance to devise (without sufficient spadework) elaborate theoretical explanations of that period of our economic development. In reality, we know little of the mechanisms of the staples trade, less of its extent, virtually nothing about the size of general capital investment in the Canadas, and scarcely more of the sources for funding government loans. Neither do we understand much about the individuals involved in early Canadian trade, nor the mercantile houses which they formed or represented, except in a most impressionistic fashion.

The records do exist. We simply have not exerted ourselves sufficiently in locating them. Canada's status as a British colony made Britain the source of all economic bounty. Thus any understanding of Canadian business in the first half of the nineteenth century demands a clear comprehension of the British economy and capital market. Further, any appreciation of Canadian trade should be fashioned within an imperial context, except for local or regional matters. Ironically, Canadian scholars and archivists never have systematically combed British repositories for resources relating to Canadian business. Although the Public Archives of Canada has secured copies of certain public records, the collection and identification of private materials has been, and remains haphazard. These facts suggest a logical field in which an approach to the identification of useful source materials may be attempted.

The starting point for any canvass of sources in Great Britain is at the National Register of Archives (N.R.A.) in London. The N.R.A. was established in 1945 as part of a venerable Victorian institution, the Historical Manuscripts Commission. It functions as a central collection agency for information about manuscript materials in England and Wales. The Register is composed of a numbered series of reports with related indexes. At present more than 17,000 surveys have been completed on various archives and on collections held by libraries, legal or business firms, religious institutions, private hands and so on. Since the descriptions in the reports are submitted by the contributing repositories the format is greatly varied. Some are scanty, skeletal lists; others give full descriptions of contents. Various indexes are provided according to locations, personalities, short titles, subjects, topography, and N.R.A. reference numbers. Locations of the collections and special instructions, if any, are recorded at the beginning of each report. In order to view privately-held papers, application first must be made in writing to the particular keeper or agency.

The Canadian business researcher should examine not only these standard indexes but also six splendid published lists giving sources for British business history in N.R.A. reports. Basically the reports are lists of the names of firms and, though there is some subject cross-referencing and an effort has been made to give the scope, date and type of business activity, the researcher must know the name of the individual business or company in which he is interested. Occasionally there will be specific references to Canadian trade in these compilations, and these should be followed up in the N.R.A. reports where fuller descriptions are given. It must be stressed that fishing for Canadian references at the N.R.A. is rather unrewarding unless the name of a relevant individual or firm is known. Otherwise it is laborious guesswork to check for firms which likely had Canadian connections, or for firms which were just too big not to have had Canadian associations.

A second source of information for the enquiring researcher is the Business Archives Council founded in 1934. Despite underfunding, the Council has made two important contributions to the study of British business history. Its journal, *Business Archives*, is first-rate and includes not only scholarly articles in the field and news items but also lists of accessions of business archives and of published business histories. In addition, the Council has sponsored the compilation of an extensive register of business records in Britain more than 100 years old. Through the years, with the help of the British Records Association and the N.R.A., this work has advanced to the point at which these indexes should be searched for Canadian references. Recently a check list of shipping company records has been published and surveys of banking and insurance records are in progress. Once more, however, little use can be made of such resources unless the researcher has names.

The Scottish system is similar to that of England and Wales. The Scottish Record Office in Edinburgh (SRO), besides having Scotland's public records, maintains extensive deposits of private materials. This year the SRO has produced, to celebrate the American Bicentennial, a list of American references in their private collections. During its preparation it was discovered that a great deal of the material listed related directly or indirectly to Canada. Consequently, it was decided to publish an additional *Source List of Manuscripts Relating to Canada in Private Archives Preserved in the Scottish Record Office*. This should be available for purchase late in 1976. A new guide to Scottish public records is also being prepared, fortunately, for the last one was published in 1905. Details of accessions, however, can be traced in the *Annual Reports of the Keeper of the Records in Scotland*. The Scottish National Registry of Archives, or more simply the N.R.A.,S., is similar in organization to the English operation although on a smaller scale. A variety of source lists organized under various subject categories has been prepared and relates, as in London, to a series of reports. One particular list refers generally to business and there are specific references to textiles, banking, science and technology, naval and marine-mercantile, transport and communications, and a category for North America is included. Again, a knowledge of names is necessary to make full use of the listings. Unlike in England if a researcher wishes to contact any of the archives in person, it is necessary first to apply to the N.R.A.,S.

The Business Archives Council of Scotland has been in existence since 1960 and functions in a manner similar to the English body. Intermittently it publishes a *Newsletter* which is a model of its kind. News and views of the Council are recorded here as one would expect. Every issue of the newsletter contains short substantive articles on various aspects of business history in Scotland and, most important, extensive lists of various business archives. The newsletter is a very simple and useful device which could

well be copied in Canada. Frequently the list of sources is introduced with a few lines by a researcher or an archivist suggesting possible directions for research or links with other materials.

The most extensive centre of Scottish business records is the Colquhoun Collection of Business Records at the University of Glasgow, which houses almost a hundred collections, many of which relate to North American trade. Much of the substance of this fine collection derives from an extensive survey of privately-held business records in the West of Scotland (hence dubbed "the Western Survey"). The effort was funded by a Treasury grant to the University of Glasgow and administered by the N.R.A.,S. and the University through a Joint Committee. The surveyor was Michael Moss who is now Glasgow University Archivist and who supervises the Colquhoun holdings. Other surveys are underway and include the work of Richard F. Dell of the Strathclyde Regional Archives in Glasgow who has examined huge quantities of Scottish tobacco trade records housed in America. These initiatives could profitably be repeated in Canada and at relatively small expense.

The Northern Irish situation is somewhat different. The Public Record Office of Northern Ireland handles all inquiries and maintains a list of business records placed in its custody, but there is no equivalent of a Business Archives Council. A series of *Annual Reports* has been published by the Record Office since 1924 which lists and describes accessions.

Despite the admirable work done by the various Record Offices and Business Archives Councils, the possibility exists that there are substantial finds to be made by Canadian scholars beyond the official lists, sources and repositories. Just as the Colonial Office had suzerainty over dozens of different colonies with varying problems, so the business community in the City of London faced many distinct colonial variations on mercantile themes. In the basements of these financial, trading and manufacturing houses, the business scholar might expect to find useful information relating to the economic history of Australia or South Africa as well as Canada. Yet many of these commercial archives remain unnoticed in Britain. Some effort is being made to remedy this deficiency. Dr. Charles Jones of the University of London's Institute of Commonwealth Studies is preparing a "Commonwealth Business Records Survey" in which he hopes to provide a fundamental listing of all prominent business archives housed in Britain relating to the Empire-Commonwealth. This is a mammoth undertaking and, as Dr. Jones admits, cannot be comprehensive but it will serve as a starting point for various forms of comparative studies. Canada represents only a part of his undertaking, and he feels that most of his Canadian references split into one of two categories: Newfoundland fishing or Hudson's Bay Company. Jones concedes he is not a Canadian specialist and misses much because of a consequent

inability to recognize certain names and events. He expects publishable results by the end of 1977.

Still, there will be considerable room for private scholarly initiative. Experience suggests that significant holdings of Canadian materials can be identified by personal inquiries. It should be pointed out that only visits by Canadian scholars or archivists can pinpoint much of the material already listed. The British are not familiar with Canadian affairs. Many good references and even collections are mislabelled or misunderstood. Besides, much Canadian material is more or less hidden in general collections of British firms and can only be found by using extensive lists of names of firms and individuals engaged in Canadian affairs. For example, Pilkington Glass's holdings relating to the Upper Canadian potash trade become apparent only upon examination. Moreover, a concerted effort is required to organize an analysis of holdings in the vaults of solicitors whose trade has reached back through the centuries.

In an attempt to gauge the results that could be achieved by individual source searching, I undertook a preliminary mail survey in the spring of 1976. More than one hundred letters of inquiry were sent to various British archives asking about Canadian business records dating from the first half of the nineteenth century and also about Canadian holdings generally. No specific mention was made of names of firms or individuals. The institutions were chosen from the Historical Manuscripts Commission's list, *Record Repositories in Great Britain*, and reflected certain areas of Britain which have traded with Canada; for example, Lancashire with its industrial centres of Manchester and Liverpool. Responses were swift. Of 106 inquiries mailed, positive replies of some holdings relating to Canadian business were received from 33 respondents. Twenty-three claimed to house materials relating specifically to the period 1812-1854. Thirteen responses were uncertain of opportunities in their holdings or suggested other possibilities. Forty-five identified nothing at all; seven thought there might be something but probably not; only eight agencies, including the Bank of England, failed to respond at all. During the following summer personal visits were made to some of the positive respondents.

The results have been extremely encouraging. University archives and private businesses or banking corporations are the most useful repositories. Substantial holdings relating to the pot and pearl ash trade in British North America, especially with Upper Canada during the Napoleonic Wars and immediately after were identified. Extensive correspondence relating to the failure of the Bank of Upper Canada was uncovered, as was considerable material explaining the capitalization of various other early Canadian banks. Business records relating to trade ranging from steam engines to stained glass windows and monumental brasses came to light.

As far as merchants and mercantile houses were concerned, a good many names were noted, and correspondence of both a personal and a professional nature with familiar agencies and individuals was discovered.

The results of this initial investigation underscore the need for a comprehensive survey of Canadian sources in Britain and elsewhere. But this task is far beyond the range of a brief project and equally beyond the scope of an individual. The work is necessarily slow, and the successes are greatly outnumbered by disappointments. An organized effort by archival institutions must be undertaken to do what individuals are unable to accomplish. Before that can happen, there will have to be some radical changes in the posture of Canadian archives and administrators.

Meanwhile our attitudes towards business archives remain as vacuous as our research resources remain poor. A Canadian Business Studies Council seems as remote now as it ever has been. Bold and helpful plans have been advanced from time to time, but all have ended as paper projections. Perhaps the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) can provide a stronger platform. Any survey of Canadian business records abroad should be part of a larger study of Canadian business records in this country. If the Scots can undertake such a project, why not Canadians? Funding could come from a Canada Council grant administered jointly by the ACA and the Canadian Historical Association. Preferably, however, the administration would come from a revitalized Business Archives Council whose members would include not only archivists and historians but also the business community. In undertaking the project, benefit could be derived from British advice. But there have been meritorious local efforts whose collective experience could be used as well. One such is a promising enumeration of Montreal business sources being prepared by Professors Brian Young and Richard Rice of McGill University.

But, again, some sort of change of attitude will be necessary. Canvassing of business record holdings inevitably leads to acquisitions. Few Canadian archives, including the most senior, adequately maintain, let alone actively solicit, business or commercial records. The ACA, either alone or more desirably in concert with a Business Archives Council, should act quickly to remind archival administrators of their professional responsibilities. After all, archivists as well as historians must be held responsible for the death of the past.