

Counterpoint

A Forum for Archival Debate and Discussion

Do We Need New and Improved Archivists?

Recently a graduate student from the University of Saskatchewan visited the Public Archives of Canada to do some research for his M.A. thesis. He, like many others, talked to the archivist on duty in the reference room and looked at the various indexes and finding aids. Unfortunately adequate finding aids do not exist for some of the materials relevant to his particular topic of study. The student had not discussed his research project in detail with his thesis supervisor before departing for Ottawa and no one in the reference room provided him with advice and information about materials not covered by the so-called logical sources and indexes. The result was that this student missed some of the more important materials relevant to his study. He did not have the funding necessary to make a second trip and the thesis was consequently less complete than it might have been.

The Public Archives of Canada has long enjoyed an excellent and well-earned reputation among Canadian scholars. Researchers who have made extensive use of archival collections are generally well aware of the help they can obtain from an archivist who really knows the collections in his custody, their provenance, organization, content and the limitations of available finding aids. Similarly inventories and finding aids which clearly indicate how a particular collection was created, how it is organized, the sort of information to be found, and any peculiarities of the collection, are of great value. Elsewhere in this issue I have written a review of an inventory prepared by the staff at the Public Archives of Canada which I regard as a model of its kind.

It is because the Public Archives of Canada has done its work so well in the past that some concern must be expressed about some recent developments and changes. Two are of particular concern: the centralized reference room and the computerized indexes.

As already indicated, an archivist who really knows the collections entrusted to his care can provide invaluable aid to researchers. Modern archival institutions, of course, house enormous collections and no archivist can possibly get to know well all the collections at the PAC. Each

archivist, however, can and should get to know some collections very well. It should be the objective of the PAC to ensure that researchers are placed in contact with an archivist who understands and appreciates the relevant collection. Since the PAC has established the central reference room, however, the researcher will first encounter the archivist who happens to be on duty at the time. That archivist may know little about the researcher's specific topic of study but, surrounded by seemingly impressive banks of filing cards and indexes, will try to help as best he can.

It is true that scholars visiting the archives can be referred by the archivist on the reference desk to the archivist who specializes in the materials of interest to the scholar. Experienced researchers often ask for such assistance, but many of the younger and less experienced researchers do not get beyond whatever indexes, finding aids, and archival counsel happen to be available in the reference room. This can lead to unfortunate incidents such as that referred to at the beginning of this piece.

A second innovation increases the problems of the uninitiated researcher. Some of the finding aids and even inventories now in use tell the researcher little or nothing of how the collections were created, how they are arranged, or what kinds of information can or cannot be found in them. The archival profession has long recognized, accepted and sometimes worshipped the principle of provenance. That principle is still accepted insofar as the arrangement of the archival materials is concerned, but it is being abandoned when preparing some kinds of finding aids in order to accommodate the computer. The computer processed indexes which have been prepared for the Prime Ministers' papers can produce myriad disconnected factual bits and pieces at a moment's notice. If a researcher wants to know how many of the letters to Sir Wilfrid Laurier mentioned a particular railway all he has to do is turn to the correct location under the alphabet. But if the researcher is concerned with the Prime Minister's railway policy, rather than with specific references to particular companies, he will soon find the indexes inadequate. Any scholar looking up a subject such as railway policy or patronage is likely to be served no better by these computerized indexes than a literary critic would be consulting the word **love** in a concordance of the works of Shakespeare. The scholar must understand the entire collection, not an assortment of factual bits and pieces. An archival collection, like any other significant creation of human intellect, is more than a mere aggregation of detailed factual tidbits.

The computer and computerized indexes can certainly have a place in a modern archives. Some collections such as the records of Statistics Canada were expressly created for and can only be used with the help of a computer. It does not follow from this, however, that computerized

indexes should be prepared for archival collections created in a more conventional way.

The computerized indexes are sometimes also justified on the grounds that among the rapidly increasing number of researchers visiting the archives there are more and more who are doing what can best be described as hit and run research. These researchers want a few facts quickly, preferably colourful or, even better, scandalous, to provide the basic materials for another potboiler for the popular press, complete with respectable-looking footnotes. The computerized indexes can accommodate large numbers of people quickly, providing researchers with quick and specific references to subjects of interest to them. Those intent on justifying the next archival budget submission feel vindicated by pointing to the increased number of researchers coming to the archives.

A distinction should be made, however, between this sort of thing and sound scholarship. Sound scholarship, in my opinion, will best be served in the future, as it has been in the past, by archivists who really know their collections, and by finding aids and inventories which clearly indicate the provenance, internal arrangement and content of archival collections. Archivists must be careful lest, in their effort to learn new techniques, they forget old virtues and principles. It would be sad if archivists ceased to regard scholarship as their highest priority and became instead very efficient technical officers who, with the help of the computer, daily manipulate mountains of detailed but uninterpreted factual material for the convenience of superficial researchers.

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The Historical Photograph

Perhaps no record is more consistently misused than the historical photograph. It is not that photographs are neglected—quite the reverse. Users are plentiful and tend to be wildly enthusiastic. But how often does the archivist find himself helping to compile a portfolio of “historic” scenes for the nostalgia market or selecting illustrations for a text which is in all other respects ready for the printer? Concerned archivists across the country must have appreciated, therefore, the appearance in *Archivaria*, Volume 1, No. 2, of two substantial items which address themselves to the use of historical photographs.

Archivists enjoy a symbiotic relationship with researchers and historical documents which, while it is for many the most satisfying aspect