

## **NRC: Historical/Archival Activities**

In 1975 the National Research Council (NRC) of Canada initiated a comprehensive review of its archival holdings and policies, an undertaking that was formalized in June 1976 with the appointment of Dr. A.W. Tickner as Senior Archival Officer. His numerous responsibilities include the review of records disposal policies of the NRC, collection of oral histories and other historical material from NRC staff and associates, promotion of and assistance to historical work by or on behalf of the NRC, liaison with federal government collections related to the history of science (such as the Public Archives of Canada and the National Museums of Canada) and liaison with historians of science.

The current work began in 1975 when the Biological Sciences Division commissioned Dr. Norman T. Gridgeman to write a history of NRC biological research for the years 1918-1939. Research for the history included taped interviews with all surviving researchers of the period. The oral history approach was successful in two respects: personal reminiscences provided a wealth of information about the social environment and the personal relationships in the research community in Canada, and the accompanying field work brought to light documents of considerable importance including the NRC Chairman's confidential correspondence, 1918-1928, as well as an unpublished "social" history of the Dominion Rust Research Laboratory in Winnipeg.

Oral history interviews were also used when Dr. W.E. Knowles Middleton was commissioned to write a history of NRC physics research, 1929-1952. This project revealed some of the defects of the NRC records system and Canadian scientific archives in general. It was discovered that some NRC project files which had been destroyed as useless, were later sought by both historians and working scientists. In another instance, the diary of an NRC scientist, offered to the Council after his death, was declined and subsequently destroyed by his widow. Liaison with museums was also found to be defective: the first magnetron brought to North America by the Tizard Committee in 1940 had been given by NRC to the National Museum of Science and Technology and was simply stored with other electronic components without being identified as a memorable object.

In the past, scientific records have received little attention. Canadian archivists, through no fault of their own, have probably lacked the necessary knowledge to identify correctly scientific records of historical importance. Universities too have neglected the history of science in Canada, but attitudes are beginning to change. This is particularly true among scientists reaching retirement age who look back over their careers and realize that almost the whole of their discipline has been created in their own lifetimes, and that, in many cases, Canadians have made notable contributions.

Many of these scientists believe that Canadians outside the scientific community now know significantly less about how science and scientific research affect their lives than did earlier generations of Canadians who, for example, lived during the Depression or the industrial boom which followed World War II. With its new archival programme, the Council hopes to ensure the preservation of a genuinely coherent and comprehensive archive of scientific and related records of its own history, which is closely linked to that of the wider scientific community in Canada. The serious research which this programme should encourage will focus new attention on the history of science in Canada, the ignoring of which the Symons Commission has recently pointed out to be a serious cultural loss.

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