

# Counterpoint

## Archives and Religious Records

James Lambert's articles on religious archives in *Archivaria*<sup>1</sup> have probably provoked more than one church archivist. If business and association archivists applied Lambert's recommendations to their settings, they too might be equally irritated. Lambert, who has left the employ of the Public Archives of Canada, offers only a personal, theoretical view, but I suspect that his views are held by most archivists. My reaction results from a serious concern that institutional archives are misunderstood, that their rights are not always acknowledged, and that they are seen as second-rate operations if they are considered at all.

Canada's national archives justifiably pursues an acquisition strategy aimed at documenting more completely this country's history. The Public Archives of Canada has long attempted to ensure a record more complete than would simply the preservation of government records; no one can deny that this institution, the provincial archives and other public institutions such as university archives have rendered a great service in preserving and making available for research non-governmental records. However, these public institutions have at times encroached on the territory of institutional archives through unfair competition and by promising services they knew they could not provide. And these institutions have done little to encourage the establishment of church, labour, business, and association archives.

The Public Archives of Canada recently announced the acquisition of the Canadian Council of Churches records. It would be unfair to say that the press release<sup>2</sup> issued by the

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1 James Lambert, "Public Archives and Religious Records: Marriage Proposals," *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975-76): 48-66; "But What is Caesar's and What is God's? Toward a Religious Archives Programme for the Public Archives of Canada," *Archivaria* 3 (Winter 1976-77): 40-56.

2 The following is an excerpt of the Public Archives of Canada news release: "The acquisition of these records is a very significant step in the development of the religious archives programme of the Public Archives. In the past, many records of early missionary activity were microfilmed and brought to Ottawa, but these documented only a small proportion of the early religious and social history of Canada. In view of the rapidly expanding interest in religious sources and of recent historiographical trends toward the comparison of all denominations and of religious and secular records, the Public Archives has asked the church organizations to work toward systematization and

PAC will be responsible for attracting papers that should go to denominational archives or will cause a church administrator to terminate support for a church archives on the understanding that the PAC has taken matters in hand. However, the press release does publicize a comprehensive acquisition programme of which church archivists were not previously aware. In the present re-examination of its acquisition policy, the PAC would be more than tactful if it consulted archivists of institutions. The national archives might discover that institutional archivists have something to communicate — they certainly have information about their own situations.

A problem linked to the lack of communication among archives is the perception which some archivists have of institutional archives. The picture Lambert paints of the archives of religious bodies — although he admits the inadequacy of his knowledge on this point — is not flattering. True, these archives do run the gamut from the well-funded, comprehensive programme of the United Church, with a separate building, a staff which includes four professionals, provision for the deposit of current records, cooperation with its conference archives, microfilming and oral history programmes, to the small volunteer programmes of parish churches operating with but one person and a small vault. But the United Church example does show what any major denomination can accomplish. Lambert, who discredits church archives with the criticism of H.H. Walsh, a historian who researched in church archives in 1954, has not taken into account such programmes as those of the Mennonites, Lutherans, Grey Nuns, Ursulines and Oblates. The national archives of the Anglican Church, established in 1955, had by 1975 grown into a full-time programme. During the summer of 1976, the Pentecostal Church engaged a historian to investigate the feasibility of an archives programme for that church. His recommendations include the creation of a central archives to function as a modified records management operation. Archivists of religious bodies are active members of regional associations of archivists. The situation can hardly be described as static. The PAC might do well to allow its co-ordinating archivists to visit institutional archives; being better informed would aid both groups of archivists in formulating policies and in advising researchers.

Lambert's recommendations are not as distressing as is his overview of the situation of church archives but there are implicit difficulties. For example, he suggests that church archives should not attempt to collect the records of other denominations or of non-denominational and interdenominational groups. Certainly the first two acquisition fields should be avoided except where some relationship is found, such as a group uniting with or withdrawing from a church. Advising church archives not to collect interdenominational records may seem reasonable, but the work of a number of denominations in the last fifty years, and particularly in the last ten, has been heavily interdenominational. A substantial portion of the salaries paid to the national church staffs of the Lutheran, Anglican, United, Presbyterian, Baptist, and, more recently, the Roman Catholic churches is for work done through interdenominational groups.<sup>3</sup> These groups usually have their headquarters in the national office of one of the denominations or in the office of the group chairman who is often on the national staff of one of the churches. The records of the groups find their way into the papers of the denominations' personnel. Some duplication will occur as records generally are distributed to all the members of the group,

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centralization of religious archives. The Canadian Council of Churches was quick to answer the call." "Church Records Tell a Story," *Living Message*, Anglican Church of Canada, vol. 87, no. 1 (January 1976): 30.

3 Some examples are GATT-Fly (General Agreement on Trade and Tariffs), Project North, CULPT (Canadian Urban Training Project), Canada China Program, ICPOP (Interchurch Project on Population), Church Council on Justice and Corrections, Taskforce on the Churches and Corporate Responsibility, and the Ecumenical Forum.

and gaps will be created by changes in chairmen. However, church archives can copy, loan, or transfer material to ensure complete series. It is difficult to see how an outside collector could improve this situation. In the case of the Canadian Council of Churches, an organization in which the United, Anglican, Presbyterian, and Baptist Churches have been vitally involved since its formation, the records are very much the records of the participating churches. These churches would not have competed for these records as only the United Church Archives is sufficiently large and established to deal with them. Much of Lambert's article is spent lamenting the physical dispersal of religious records; yet presumably he would have approved the transfer to Ottawa of these religious records from Toronto, where the Archives of the Anglican, United, and Presbyterian churches are in proximity, though this transfer is a clear example of the dispersal of records.

Lambert also suggests that archivists of religious bodies come together in a national association (for the blind to lead the blind?). Although church archivists share common problems, they are the problems of all archivists. As Father Scollard, Archivist of St. Michael's College in Toronto stated, "We would have to count on all the good will and on all the competences of a region: Government archivists, diocesan archivists, the archivists of religious congregations and the like. It is by uniting all our strengths that we shall reach worthwhile solutions to the problems; not by forming a separate association for the archivists of religious congregations."<sup>4</sup> The Association of Canadian Archivists, the Association des archivistes du Québec, and the regional associations of archivists are the best forums for the discussion of archival problems. It might be advantageous to form a committee of archivists of religious bodies within the ACA, especially if this would attract more of these archivists to the association. Although such a committee within the Association des archivistes du Québec has apparently met with success, the Society of American Archivists' committee on religious archives has existed for more than twenty years but still seems removed from the mainstream of archival development.

The suggestion that the PAC might fulfil a useful role in collecting religious sources by continuing its microfilming projects abroad is commendable. Much valuable material, such as the records of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel and the Church Missionary Society, has been made available to researchers in this way. Since a number of the main mission records have already been copied and since some denominations may be contemplating copying programmes of their own, it would be wise for the PAC to consult with Canadian church archivists before reopening the programme. In some cases it might also be politic to make contacts through the denomination concerned.

Lambert's most contentious point is that institutionality is not an accepted principle of archival theory.<sup>5</sup> What do such sages of archives as Muller, Feith, and Fruin, and Jenkinson teach if not institutionality? Archives are:

the whole of the written documents, drawings, and printed matter, officially received or produced by an administrative body or one of its officials, in so far as these documents were intended to remain in the custody of that body or of that official.<sup>6</sup>

A document . . . which was drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which itself formed a part; and

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4 "Round Table Discussion on Religious Archives," *In Seminar on Religious Archives*, Ottawa, 1972. *Report of Proceedings* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, Research Department, 1972?), p. 71.

5 Lambert, "Public Archives and Religious Records," p. 59.

6 S. Muller, J.A. Feith and R. Fruin, *Manual for the Arrangement and Description of Archives*, 2nd ed., trans. A.H. Leavitt (New York: H.W. Wilson, 1940), p. 13.

subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.<sup>7</sup>

What are the Public Record Office, the National Archives, the various American state archives, and our own national and provincial archives if not the archives of an institution, government? Are not church, bank and board of trade archives parallel operations?<sup>8</sup> I cannot find a satisfactory statement or discussion by a Canadian archivist on the definition of an archives, but despite the tedium of Jenkinson and the feeling that Americans do not understand our total archives system, Canadian archivists should take care when claiming something better exists here.

What Lambert fears about institutionality is institutions, and even individuals, retaining their records and creating for the researcher a nightmare of scattered sources. Yet institutionality, properly practised, could be the ideal solution with every institution and person scheduling, weeding, and retaining the papers of enduring value. I am distressed by the alternative to institutionality: a monolithic research centre containing all the records deemed of permanent worth. While acknowledging the facetiousness of the two extreme positions and the reality that a considerable amount of material is not covered by strict adherence to Jenkinson's definition, I must say that Jenkinson's interpretation is a comfort to Lambert's "tenacious practitioners of institutionality"<sup>9</sup> be they archivists of churches, businesses, or other corporate entities. It justifies their establishment, and provides them with some defence.

But such archives have merit beyond this. An institution needs certain of its records for administrative, legal, and financial reasons. It should also see the enduring value of its records for interpreting past policies, programmes, successes, and mistakes, as well as for new developments. Historical records can also be used in such obvious ways as in public relations and promotion.

A grave danger in transferring institutional records to a public archives is that the collection becomes static and additional records which have lost their functional value are not added to the collection. The best means of avoiding this is a records management programme. An archivist working in proximity to the creators and users of the records and to printed materials relating to the records will be the most knowledgeable and sensitive in discerning the value of the records, and will best be able to organize and process them. An acquisition programme intended to bring in records that have strayed and to add related materials works best through such channels as institutional publications and gatherings and is aided by the knowledge the donor has that papers are staying within the institution. Aspects of an archives programme such as oral history, exhibitions, and publications can be more easily and satisfactorily carried out by the institution itself. Most researchers turn to the institution early in their work; this contact cannot but broaden and enlighten the study. An institution may also be more amenable than a general public archives to serve the

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7 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, 2nd ed. (London: P. Lund, Humphries, 1937), p. 11.

8 A recent report on the central records of the Church of England expressed the hope that the church will be able "to attract State funds to Lambeth rather than attract Church records into a broadened Public Record Office. We believe that the library at Lambeth needs greatly enlarged resources for the protection of all its holdings, actual and potential, and that in happier circumstances than those of today the state must play its part in providing these resources." *The Central Records of the Church of England: A Report and Survey Presented to the Pilgrim and Radcliffe Trustees*, (London: CIO Publishing, 1976), p. 6.

9 Lambert, "But What is Caesar's and What is God's?" p. 48.

average person who may be a constituent with a right to service or an individual with whom it is well to promote a good image. I hope that an institution would not set unreasonable restrictions on the use of its material, but if the institution is secretive, a public archives would have had no chance of acquiring its records.

In addition to records being useful to the life and progress of an institution, they are its heritage and its responsibility. As the outline of his own family captivates the genealogist and the story of his locality intrigues the local historian, so the history of an institution can become a stimulus to its members. Most institutions have persons willing to accept the responsibility of caring for their records, but this willingness is undermined if public archives and universities offer facilities to house institutional archives or actively compete for the materials. For public archives to forego such activities and to promote the establishment of institutional archives requires a strong commitment to the concept of institutional archives. A predilection such as that held by Bernard Weilbrenner, the Assistant Dominion Archivist, who when giving a paper before representatives of Roman Catholic religious congregations suggested they could best administer their archives by integrating their records in federal and provincial archives,<sup>10</sup> will not do.

There are other means by which public archives can assist institutional archives with their programmes. Lambert mentions several which were expressed in the Public Archives brief to the Commission on Canadian Studies: advice, training programmes, exchanges, copying, and the employment of liaison people to aid small archives in processing and describing records. Archives at the federal, provincial, and municipal levels already have a good record in this area. Perhaps funding for an effective programme of this kind will be an outcome of the Public Archives' current self-examination.

Assistance to institutional archives might also be part of the regional network systems that are now being considered by some archives. Regional repositories with proper physical conditions might be set up in which institutions could rent space to house records relating to that region. Conservation, microfilming, processing, and research facilities could be available to interested institutions on a shared-cost basis. Ownership of the records would remain with the institution, but the physical requirements of the documents, the needs of researchers, and the demands of regionalism would be met. For records such as those of dioceses and parishes in the Anglican Church, this system would be useful and would likely interest businesses and associations that are national in scope.

In several areas, commitments are being made for the support of institutional archives. At a 1976 Society of American Archivists session, "The Corporate Image: Creating a Historical Perspective," the consensus among panelists was that ideally businesses should support their own archival programmes. One panelist, Gary Saretzky, archivist of Educational Testing Services, revealed the results of a survey of businesses which showed an encouraging number supporting or willing to support archives. Another panelist, Gerald Ham, Director of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin, was unimpressed, referring to his discouraging experience in attempting for more than twenty years to persuade businesses to run archival programmes. He spoke, however, of a programme projected for Wisconsin in which the State Historical Society would advise, microfilm, and provide services including the release of an archivist from the State Historical Society to business archives. He felt a natural extension would be to offer this programme to churches and associations.

In 1972, when there was talk of government money for non-government archives in Canada, Bernard Weilbrenner was not enthusiastic. At the 1972 Round Table on Religious Archives he said "there is hope that the Public Archives, if the new law now in preparation

10 Bernard Weilbrenner, "For a General Policy in Establishing Archives," *In Seminar on Religious Archives*, Ottawa, 1972. *Report of Proceedings* (Ottawa: Canadian Religious Conference, Research Department, 1972?), p. 41.

is approved, will be in a position to distribute some grants; but governmental archives will more easily absorb the costs of new programs relating to religious archives than be likely to assist financially private organizations to do it themselves."<sup>11</sup> If the government cannot see its way to assist institutions directly, there are other means of easing the operation of institutional archives. Institutions which open their archives for public research could be exempted from sales tax and duty on equipment and other supplies equivalent to what is allowed for public institutions, and could be made eligible for Canada Council and other federal and provincial grants that aid cultural programmes. It seems that Caesar is so intent on keeping what is his separate from what is God's that religious archives are not allowed any of these benefits. The Cultural Properties Act may correct the existing inequality. At present, donors giving papers to non-public archives can claim only partial value as an income tax deduction, whereas donors to a public archives may deduct full value for gifts. Credit must be given to PAC personnel who were involved in the preparation of this law.

The arguments against institutional archives seem to be cost, a history of poorly-run institutional programmes, the physical separation of materials, and the fear that institutions once assisted in establishing archives might not maintain the necessary support. I would counter briefly with the following points. First, I question whether government-run archival programmes are always more economical. Second, had some of the effort that has gone into acquiring the papers of institutions been directed toward encouraging administrators to establish archives for their institutions and into advising them on how to do it properly, institutional archives would not be in such poor shape. Advice and assistance will go a long way in bringing about better programmes in private institutions, as will a reserve of trained archivists from which institutions can select directors for their programmes. Physical separation of records can be compensated for by copying exchanges and by such comprehensive guides as the *Union List of Manuscripts*.

Perhaps I am naive in what I think possible from government and in what I am asking archivists of public institutions to support. A time of retrenchment is not the time for personal whims and gratifications or for needless division and duplication of effort. The number of institutions willing to support respectable programmes may be very small, but there is a larger number which do not wish to place their records in public archives and which might be persuaded to begin their own programmes if the advantages were effectively pointed out to them. My final argument for institutional archives might be considered reactionary, but institutions might prefer private endeavours in a time of increasing government control, might employ those worn virtues of personal dedication and private pride, might allow records to retain their individuality and be enhanced by direct association with the creating people and institution. If I am wrong in my estimate of the state's ability to provide the ultimate, efficient, comprehensive programme for the nation's records, leaving no room for other archives, credit it to human inadequacy which also may be allowed to persist in some corner.

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## Do We Need New and Improved Researchers?

Few readers will quarrel with the good intentions and concern expressed by Professor Regehr in his short note concerning computerized finding aids in the last issue of

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<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*