

. . . or Both?

In response to T.D. Regehr's item in Counterpoint in the last issue of *Archivaria*, ('Do We Need New and Improved Archivists?'), I wish to make a few observations which may be relevant to reference services in archives generally. Researchers who are planning to visit the Public Archives of Canada would be well advised to consult available printed and other sources first so that they might be as specific as possible in outlining their requirements. The researcher should send a letter to the appropriate division at least three or four weeks before leaving for Ottawa, which should leave sufficient time for a proper reply. Most written inquiries are answered by archivists who outline various sources as well as restricted access regulations, photoduplication services, availability of certain material on microfilm through interlibrary loan, and so on. The discussion of a research project by a student with his thesis supervisor will certainly be useful, but should not supplant direct communication with the national archives where new sources are being acquired frequently and old systems being modified regularly to provide better service.

The matter of the quality of reference room consultant services is of serious concern to me, for it is extremely important that such assistance be more than simply adequate. For some years now, the consultant has been drawn from Manuscript Division archivists on a rotating basis. These individuals are expected to respond to queries relating to the descriptive instruments in the Reference Room, to general questions pertaining to archival holdings and procedures, and to requests which fall within that archivist's own area of specialization. Questions which can be best answered by other members of the staff are to be referred by the archivist on duty to the appropriate division, section or individual. However, an archivist cannot be expected to undertake the researcher's research, and any researcher arriving at the archives without having undertaken adequate preliminary study of his topic may have difficulty conveying his requirements to the archivist on duty. On the other hand, a researcher who feels that he has received inadequate service should communicate the complaint, in writing if necessary, to the appropriate division with a careful description of the problem.

As for the quality and type of finding aids available in the Reference Room, I would mention that all these research tools are gradually being brought to a common standard which will more than meet Professor Regehr's suggestions. This process will take time because of the large number of finding aids, many of the most inadequate of which were prepared decades ago. All new finding aids must meet recently established standards before being placed in the Reference Room. Perhaps it need not be pointed out that finding aids are just that; they are not complete replacements for thorough and dedicated research. They should facilitate research and eliminate nuisance time lost by researchers and archivists alike on questions which should not have to be asked and answered repeatedly.

Finally, I do not think that computerized indexes and sound scholarship are incompatible, nor is it fair to suggest that such indexes simply facilitate the processing and attraction of larger numbers of researchers in order to justify the next archival budget. In fact, such efforts are undertaken to accommodate the increasing number of researchers as efficiently and effectively as possible, in the interests of sound scholarship on the part of both researchers and archivists. The Reference Room itself has undergone a physical reorganization to permit the researcher to proceed logically from the main entry catalogue, to the general inventories, to the findings aids and indexes in the room with or without the assistance of the reference desk and genealogical desk consultants. Such measures have been instituted to improve research and archival control, and it is hoped that they will succeed in saving time on either side of the reference system.

Judith Cumming
Public Archives of Canada