

Counterpoint

A Forum for Archival Debate and Discussion

A Conspirator Replies

Dr. Bernard Amtmann is doing it to us again. He is questioning some of the comfortable assumptions of our "total" archives system. His arguments impugn our stewardship of Canada's documentary heritage. How dare he? He is not a professional archivist; ergo, he cannot understand what we are about. His rhetoric carries the baggage of manuscripts he has sold or is attempting to sell. He is a businessman confronting a profession which by its very nature is dominated by employees of governments and large public institutions. His viewpoint seems strange to the archival mind and it would be simple, as conference chatter has done, to dismiss his comments out of hand. To do so would, I suggest, be a disservice as much to ourselves as to him. In emphasizing the basic relationship between archives and the human search to know ourselves, he echoes John Stuart Mill, Sir Arthur Doughty, and most recently Professor T.H.B. Symons. He is a strong ally of archives in our struggle for public recognition and, though we may be tempted to cry out "Lord, save us from our friends," his arguments deserve full discussion.

Four years ago, Dr. John H. Archer, then Principal of the Regina Campus of the University of Saskatchewan, introduced Bernard Amtmann to convocation and to the Chancellor, the Rt. Hon. John G. Diefenbaker.

Bernard Amtmann is and has been something of a champion of lonely, if not lost, causes. He numbers librarians and archivists among his chiefest friends and yet he berates these for smugness, tunnel vision, and timidity. He scolds his fellow Canadians for lack of concern for their written heritage. He is impatient to get on with his latest and greatest work and he cannot do it alone. You, Sir, will appreciate the metal of this man. You will appreciate him as a citizen soldier who dared to live for an ideal. You will share his passion for the written evidences of our Canadian identity. You may laud him as he scolds Ottawa for paying so little heed to the Canadian heritage.

Canadian archivists are quite familiar with these scoldings and many await each new Montreal Book Auctions Ltd. catalogue to read the latest installment. In 1973, Dr. Amtmann's "Open Letter to Canadian Archivists" disputed the basis of our evaluation of manuscript materials, condemned the tendency of archives to consult amongst themselves before bidding competitively with public funds, and concluded by indicting all of us as "enemy no. 1 of the Canadian booktrade."¹ These and related issues have since been debated periodically in exchanges between Dr. Amtmann and members of the National Archival Appraisal Board. This past year, however, Dr. Amtmann has

¹ *Canadian Archivist* 2, no. 4 (1973): 42-47.

broadened his argument to condemn the Canadian academic community: "Indeed, it is the ongoing conspiracy of the Canadian academic establishment that has retarded and delayed the discovery of the Canadian identity."² Subsequent postscripts to his catalogues have enlarged on this theme, drawing strength from the Symons Report³ and letters received in response to his original article.⁴

The gauntlet has been thrown, the challenge reiterated, but the field of honour is difficult to find in the mists of romanticism. Bernard Amtmann is the most frustrating partner in discussion: he weaves refreshing insights into Canadian cultural priorities with the commonplaces of the current debate on national unity; his arguments shift with breathless alacrity from the specific to the universal, from the economic to the romantic, from apparent self-interest to high national ideals. In one sentence he leaps from "the solitary low offer" for one archival collection to the conclusion "that Canadians are essentially uninterested in the history of their country."⁵ In these times of doubt about our national purpose, such sentiments appear to have struck a responsive chord in some of his readers. Indeed, his arguments seem framed in a way that to take issue with his appraisal of one collection is to cast doubt upon one's own credentials as a Canadian. Given such argumentative profusion, it is difficult to pass through these woods without becoming entangled in the undergrowth.

Dr. Amtmann builds his case for the conspiracy on the apparent lack of interest on the part of Canadian archives in purchasing the papers of Canadian statesmen and political figures. Arguing from the immediate example of the papers of Sir James R. Gowan, he eventually concludes that in not offering a sufficient price for "2000 letters written by Sir John A. Macdonald and his contemporaries, we reject our heritage and we reject our identity." Along the way Dr. Amtmann draws various parallels between the papers of political figures and other heritage forms: historic sites, antiques, paintings and literary manuscripts. But while these are commonly grouped together as cultural property, the parallels overlook certain differences both in kind and in the nature of the market. There is a definite distinction to be made between literary manuscripts and paintings on the one hand, and political papers on the other. The former are the direct result, the intended product, of the creative endeavours of a writer or painter. These are the tangible, saleable results of his labours and as such, their creator should be compensated if society deems the work worthy of preservation. Political papers are, however, the by-product of a career which has other goals. The correspondence, memoranda and reports are accumulated incidentally while pursuing other aims. Many such papers, certainly in modern times, are created by individuals while on the public payroll, with the assistance of publicly paid secretaries, in publicly owned offices on public stationery. And, regardless of the era, society's rewards for its political leaders differ. For Sir James Gowan, recognition was given by a judgeship, a seat in the Senate and a knighthood. A political leader in a democratic society is successful to the extent that he articulates or molds the opinion of the majority. His papers express this, documenting the interaction between the leader and his society. Created jointly by the leader and the members of his society, collections of political papers often have as their bulk letters written by others. The papers gain their cultural value

2 "A Conspiracy Against the Canadian Identity," first published in Montreal Book Auctions Ltd. Catalogue no. 101 (25 May 1977).

3 T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, 2 vols. (Ottawa, 1975).

4 Bernard Amtmann "A Postscript to 'A Conspiracy Against the Canadian Identity'," Montreal Book Auctions Ltd. Catalogue no. 103 (15-16 September 1977), pp. 75-78; "Sir John A. Who? or Education for Identity," Montreal Book Auctions Ltd. Catalogue no. 105 (15 December 1977), pp. 43-46.

5 Bernard Amtmann, "Conspiracy," p. 194.

through the role they fulfill in expressing the concerns of society. To the extent that a leader was successful, such essential cultural papers already belong to his society. To suggest that papers relating to public affairs can be separated from the society which produced them, or to allow one individual to bar public access to this part of the social memory, is to do violence to the representative nature of leadership in a democratic society.

Political papers differ no less from the other parallels Dr. Amtmann employs: historic buildings and antiques. Archival documents, usually by their very nature, are unique. In many instances with private papers, simply one or two letters cannot be preserved as representative of the collection. With antiques, there are frequently various examples of the same item from a period, style or craftsman available, and only a sampling need be publicly accessible. Most objects now viewed as antiques were originally made for sale and the market simply continues. Similar considerations apply in the case of heritage buildings but save in a few rare instances, such buildings derive their monetary value from their value as ordinary real estate. Cultural considerations seldom seem to affect the price of a building.

The one apt parallel Dr. Amtmann does not explore is that between political papers and archaeological artifacts. Such artifacts, being the newly discovered records of earlier cultures, are equally an essential part of our collective memory. This is being recognized by several provinces which have, or are contemplating, legislation defining all archaeological artifacts found in the province as Crown property and limiting trade in such cultural objects. Lawyers will draw a fine distinction between forgotten artifacts uncovered in the ground and forgotten papers uncovered in an attic or law office, but society's interest and rights should outweigh the concept of private property in dealing with unique materials so necessary to an understanding of ourselves.

Dr. Amtmann admits that the Canadian market is weak for political papers but rather than accepting the judgement of the marketplace, he substitutes his own appraisal criteria linking market value to cultural value. The Gowan Papers are no longer a commodity to be marketed, but become "distinctive national treasures," or "a splendid manifestation of real national heritage." This equation in turn rests upon his interpretation of "the Canadian identity" and the relationship which the Gowan, Molson, Laurier—Lavergne, Riel and similar manuscripts have to his concept of Canada. He does not admit the possibility that a different perception of Canada would substantially deflate the monetary value of the manuscripts of his heroes in Canadian history.

High prices and excited competition for letters and diaries of public figures are a very clear manifestation of the great man theory of history. Dr. Amtmann advises us "to build shrines for the men who made this country." He compares the national pride of Quebec, rooted in the historiography of *la survivance*, with the alleged cultural complacency of the rest of Canada. However, as Ramsay Cook has demonstrated, the historiography of English Canada is as much concerned with cultural survival as that of Quebec, but focusses less on heroes than on economic factors, geography, relations with the United States, and the United Kingdom, and the actions of large groups.⁶ The emphasis has been on the evolution of a democratic society in which the lives, the shared experience of every man—the typical—has significance. This emphasis is increasing with histories concentrating on urban, regional and social studies, and with quantitative analyses of information. Sidney Hook has argued that in a democratic society, leadership is valued to the extent it is representative. Heroes are a threat.

6 "La Survivance English Canadian Style" in Ramsay Cook, *The Maple Leaf Forever* (Toronto, 1977), pp. 123-47.

A hero is any individual who does his work well and makes a unique contribution to the public good. It is sheer prejudice to believe that the grandeur and nobility associated with the heroic life can be found only in careers that reck little of human blood and suffering. Daily toil on any level has its own occasions of struggle, victory, and quiet death. A democracy should contrive its affairs, not to give one or a few the chance to reach heroic stature, but rather to take as a regulative ideal the slogan, "every man a hero."

While social philosophers can debate the nature of society, archivists in public institutions daily make decisions based on their view of society. In moving beyond their formal role in preserving the official records of their institutions, public archivists assume a broad social responsibility to document the community they serve. A public archives is the mirror of society in which citizens can see themselves in the context of the continuous images of earlier generations. An archives documents not just the rights of citizens, nor is its only goal research, but it has a basic duty to preserve the documentary forms of its community's cultural heritage. Whether legalistic or not, whether used or not, a public archives has this duty. What we seek or accept for the archives is the tangible manifestation of our perception of the nature of our society, its activities, priorities, and self-image. While we can share Dr. Amtmann's plea for additional funding for archival acquisitions, we must oppose the notion that an inordinate portion of such funds be spent on manuscripts of the great men. What is more important—a letter representing a few minutes in the life of one man, or its budget equivalents: the microfilming of seven decades of a community newspaper, tape recording the reminiscences of twenty "ordinary" citizens, or travelling to receive the donation of an "unknown" family's accumulated diaries and letters? In some instances, this dichotomy needs qualification. Balance and proportion are necessary. It does suggest, though, that even in not submitting high bids for papers of Canadian public figures, archivists are still fulfilling their duty to Canadian society. Views on the Canadian identity differ. The position of many Canadian repositories was expressed in the fourth report of the Saskatchewan Archives Board (1948-50):

The concept that the *only* valuable records are those which tell of cyclones, rebellions, floods, hangings, "first" things, "oldest" things, "biggest" things, and similar unusual phenomena is still too common. It is a concept which has produced and is producing a widespread destruction of significant records and reflects a false sense of values—for it denies that there is significance and worth in the life and labour of the mass of mankind. The historian's interests are as varied and inclusive as the problems and concerns of everyday life; the archivist's interests cannot be less comprehensive.

The papers of great men are interesting and derive their importance from the social context, but they do not represent the full extent of our identity and cannot be allowed to dominate either archivists' acquisition priorities or the public impression of what archives preserve. The unique papers of Canadian statesmen are a facet of our cultural heritage, and while custodians should receive some compensation for their foresight in acting as public trustees, monetary value and cultural value cannot be equated. Such manuscripts must be preserved in the society to which they belong and they must be evaluated in the context of democracy, according value to the life of each individual.

To conclude where Dr. Amtmann began: "Among those articles which comprise the heritage of a nation, the papers of people who have played a role in shaping its history are of the greatest importance." In many senses we agree entirely. We differ, though, on just who has shaped our history. For my part, I trust that archivists will continue to

7 Sidney Hook, *The Hero in History* (Boston, 1955), p. 239.

conspire, proudly and unabashedly, against Dr. Amtmann's interpretation of the Canadian identity.

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The Conspiracy Question: Inflation or Development?

Bernard Amtmann's article will have alarmed many archivists, particularly those who work in tax-supported institutions. We should all be disturbed by the suggestion that we accept Mr. Amtmann's arbitrary evaluation of the Gowan Papers at \$250,000. Equally unsettling is his attempt to intimidate archivists into endorsing the expenditure of huge amounts of public funds to purchase icons for the shrines he would have us erect. If mistakes have been made in the past by overspending on deposits to our national art bank, such errors should not be seen as examples to be followed in the document field. Our indignation should perhaps be greatest over the issues of ownership and rights raised by the auctioning of the Gowan Papers.

The material in question consists largely of the correspondence of James R. Gowan who was, among other things, a nineteenth-century County Court Judge in Simcoe County. The collection had been part of Judge Gowan's legacy to his nephew H.H. Ardagh, who, along with another relative named Strathy, was an executor of the Judge's estate and his "official" biographer. Although A.H. Colquhoun wrote a minor biography of Gowan in 1894, it was not until 1911 that Ardagh dutifully completed his, a laudatory effort which reputedly marked the last time the letters were brought to light for about half a century. During this time, the Gowan papers were deposited with the law firm of Strathy and Esten, forerunner of Stewart, Esten and McTurk from whose vault in Barrie the documents were removed in the early 1960s to begin a series of journeys leading to Amtmann's auction block. Along the way the collection was microfilmed by the Public Archives of Canada (with what proviso is not known), and formed the basis of a Master's thesis accepted at the University of New Brunswick in 1971. Now, seven years later, the collection is being offered for a quarter of a million dollars by Amtmann on behalf of, one assumes, members of the McTurk family who were until recently connected with the old Barrie law firm.

In recent months the press, radio, and professional publications have featured items on the prices commanded by historical and literary papers. The Society of American Archivists *Newsletter* of March 1978 noted that \$73,000 was paid for some of Wordsworth's papers. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carried numerous stories about the two-million-dollar Gutenberg Bible auctioned recently in New York. Mr. Amtmann has himself pointed out that McMaster University paid about half a million dollars for the Russell Papers some years ago. Into this milieu Mr. Amtmann would thrust the Gowan Papers!

In an attempt to justify a very high figure for the Gowan Papers, Amtmann talks of the "development of the art market to permit a fair evaluation." Might one not substitute the word "inflation" for "development"? Archivists should play no part in encouraging astronomical prices for the documents for our "Disraelis and Russells." It is our duty to make the most advantageous arrangements possible on behalf of our publicly supported institutions. Fulfilling this duty does not mean indifference or lack of