

Counterpoint

The Tyranny of Tradition*

In the last issue of *Archivaria*,¹ Terry Cook questioned the effect of the adoption of “total archives” as a principle governing archival collecting, averring that the division of collections according to medium led to the erosion of the principle of provenance. He concluded by stating that archivists must articulate their first principles anew, and with that few of us would argue. However, I feel that he is stating little anew, but suggesting rather that we adhere even more rigidly to the principle of provenance. What he has seen as a growing erosion of a sanctified tradition is merely a practical difficulty of operation as we expand our concepts of what constitutes archives. He has accurately pinpointed several problems, but mistakenly assumed that the principle of provenance was at stake.

Before turning my attention to some of the specific evils he accuses division according to medium of creating, he should look at the theoretical basis on which he founds his argument, namely, the archival principle of provenance. Provenance dictates according to Schellenberg, that “an archivist should not disperse records from a particular group or sub-group, among subject or other kinds of classes.” What we must be aware of is that provenance was enunciated as a principle to differentiate between the proper handling of archival materials as opposed to library materials. To a certain extent it is the echo of a distant war. Furthermore, it was fashioned to answer the needs of textual records which are found in a chronological sequence. What are we to do with records that do not fit this approach?² As far as Schellenberg is concerned, it does not matter if archival materials are physically separated as long as the principle of provenance is observed in the medium. Even here though, he is casual. Of maps, he states, “Large accumulations of maps can be handled more easily if kept by provenance than if classified by area.” But he also says, “The principle of original order may be applied with considerable latitude to cartographic records.”³ He goes even further with pictorial records, teetering on the brink of archival heresy for those who place their faith in the principle of provenance: “Information on the provenance of pictorial records . . . is relatively unimportant. . . . Information on the functional origins of pictorial records is also relatively unimportant.”⁴

* This commentary is a revised version of an address given before the Eastern Ontario Archivists Association on 16 January 1980 in Ottawa.

1 Terry Cook, “The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on Total Archives”, *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80): 141-9.

2 Hugh Taylor has pointed out, “that archival principles, as we know them, were formulated and developed by scholarly bureaucrats from a careful study of textual public records based on the registry and filing cabinet.” Hugh Taylor, “Documentary Art and the Role of the Archivist,” *The American Archivist* 42, no. 4 (October 1979): 419.

3 T.R. Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York, 1965), pp. 312-313.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 325.

Schellenberg thus believes that the “universally venerated” principle of provenance in some cases is unimportant and in others need only be loosely applied. He plainly accepts that different media should be maintained, arranged and indexed separately. Similarly, the quotation from the Association of Canadian Archivists states only that functional integrity takes precedence over form. As long as the functional integrity is maintained, the principle of provenance is followed. This, of course, does not preclude separation by medium. The problem is not inherent in such separation and, with this, Cook readily agrees. For him, the problems lie in the fragmentation caused by separation according to medium.

Cook points to several areas where there are within the Public Archives of Canada some inconsistencies in the way in which collections are sometimes divided. These, I think can be rectified fairly easily without having to change the concept of separation. He has raised other issues having nothing to do with provenance which are quite erroneous and seem to be founded on a narrow view of what constitutes history and what archives should be collecting. These require further attention. Cook cites examples from three media—maps, photographs and paintings—where the emphasis is, he asserts, on collection of the medium as a medium instead of on collecting “significant material”. Apparently the two are contradictory. He objects that “maps are sometimes acquired more to demonstrate cartographic technique . . . or to document the *oeuvre* of individual cartographers, rather than to obtain any previously unknown historical information . . .”; that photographic acquisition is “oriented to documenting the history of the medium . . . rather than historical significance . . .”;⁵ and that abstract works of art, even if they illuminate the career of a painter, provide “no documentary evidence about the history of the country . . .”

We are confronted with such a restricted view of historical significance and the proper areas of interest for an archive that Cook surely cannot himself believe what he writes. Whatever has happened to cultural and intellectual history? To take only the last example, we must ask what is this abstract concept, “the history of a country”, that controls his notion of what should be collected? Surely it is the careers, the ideas, the actions of *people* that make up human history. If a painter is recognized and influential, of course his career should be documented. His paintings, regardless of their content, are *in themselves* documentary of his career and, by extension, of his country’s history. The work of art by a reputable artist, whether major or minor, is evidence of cultural and intellectual beliefs frequently shared by large segments of society. Ideas and ideals, like the belief in “Progress”, for example, can be found influencing art, literature, science, technology and religion within a society. Only collections embracing a wide area will be able to provide evidence of these connections. Picasso’s “Guernica” furnishes a good example. Here is a classic abstract work of art which is at the same time a passionate statement against war, a reflection on society that mirrored the feelings of many at the time, and a document about Picasso himself. To deny it a place as historical evidence outside the confines of art history would be a mistake. Similarly, it is possible to show that maps and photographs contain more information that may appear on their surfaces. It is here that specialization has an advantage over generalization, for the medium specialist acquires an expertise and comprehension that would be denied if we were always to concentrate on becoming a “compleat” archivist.

We must also ask what comprises documentary evidence in the visual media. If Cook is looking for a mirror image of reality or “factual” information it is little wonder that he is unable to comprehend the activities of the visual media. Nothing, not words, not photo-

5 The instance is given of the National Photography Collection at PAC refusing photographs transferred from the Public Records Division “because they were not aesthetically pleasing nor the handiwork of significant photographers.” While they may have been refused it was emphatically not for lack of aesthetic beauty. This is never an issue in such a situation.

graphy, not even motion pictures, can give us such a view on the past. Everything comes to us through the filter of another mind.⁶ Such misunderstanding about how non-textual media acquire material is compounded by a false analogy, suggesting that concentration on medium would lead in the case of the textual medium to documenting the history of quills, typewriters and the like. All archival media are concerned primarily with the product of the mind behind the instrument, not with the mute instrument that was used, be it pen, typewriter, paintbrush, press or camera. To suggest otherwise is, to say the least, very naughty.

We are invited to consider, also, that division according to medium leads to isolation and concentration on the medium "at the expense of the functional unity of the original record." This is not nor need be the case. The statement itself is, however, evidence of a somewhat blinkered outlook. It is based on the assumption that most of the records in the various media collections have a textual origin, that they come from a manuscript or public records group. In fact, in the Public Archives and, I suspect, in most other archives transfers from these sources constitute a very small part of the holdings of the non-textual media. Cook's criticism and his suggestion that one archivist can care for all media in an administrative unit is tailored only to public records collections which are predominantly textual. What would he do with the newspaper negative collections, with fire insurance atlases, or with film and painting collections? They exist in one medium only and those held in archives are usually documentary in the most rudimentary sense. Their existence in archives is the result of division according to medium; their acquisition and their care require an expertise unlikely to be attained by the multi-media *fonds*-oriented archivist that he suggests. In adopting a multi-media approach (i.e. total archives), we must also be aware that new methods are required. Not all media can fit the textual tradition of archival handling. Active collecting, as opposed to passive accepting, demands a specialist not a generalist.

We are told that separation by medium has led to fragmentation of intellectual control. If this is true, it need not be, since non-textual records can quite readily be handled according to the principle of provenance. Intellectual control resides not in one archivist's having an overview of a whole record group, but rather in having proper finding aids and accession data which will provide an effective entrance into a collection for the researcher. As far as research aids are concerned, different media demand different forms of finding aids and indexes. It is impossible, for example in the Geological Survey of Canada records, to treat the 30,000 negatives in the same way that the letters, diaries and filed books are handled. In the case of such large collections, it is just as easily argued that intellectual control is enhanced by media division rather than destroyed or impaired.

Another matter worth considering is the clientele which uses our holdings. It is suggested that fragmentation retards scholarship in most Canadian studies. The fact is that most traditional historians, because of their bondage to textual literacy, are interested primarily in textual records. The majority are quite simply at a loss to know how to use non-textual records as primary sources. As a result there is probably very little overlapping in the clientele of the textual, visual and computerized media. It is, however, obvious that our society is no longer dominated by the written word, which has rather taken its place alongside a variety of visual and electronic media. We will seriously retard scholarship in the future if we fail to recognize that there are inherent differences in the various media of communication, that they are better handled separately, and that in the long run the public will be best served this way. This does not mean, of course, that we should work in complete isolation from one another.

6 Again, as Hugh Taylor has stated, "There are those who would still argue that art and fact are in conflict, but this is true only if one restricts fact to a mirror image of reality, a goal as unattainable as that of 'what actually happened' in historical research." *Op. cit.*, p. 422.

Separation by medium is in no way inimical to the principle of provenance. The problems attributed to separation are based on a caricature of reality, on false analogy, and on an attenuated view of what constitutes historical significance and documentary evidence. By all means, let's articulate our first principles anew, but let this articulation not be a tyrannical and fundamentalist application of the principle of provenance.

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