

## Welfare for Archives and the Will of Archivists\*

In 1976 at the first formal meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists, I presented a paper on local archives which was later published in *Archivaria*, Number 2. I recall that the substance of my remarks was called treacherous by some and revolutionary by others. On the one hand, I later learned, someone had asked why I was allowed to suggest local records might be better off in the care of the organizations that created them. On the other hand, I can remember several others endorsing my remarks as if they were some major breakthrough for the development of local archives.

In my paper, I was wrestling with my own frustration as an archivist in the Provincial Archives of British Columbia who had to act on an impossible mandate, that is, to preserve the province's entire documentary heritage, for virtually anything related to the province's history might be eligible for preservation by the Provincial Archives. The mandate was impossible to serve first of all because it had no precise definition, at least no precise archival definition. So, I was trying to come to a precise definition of the mandate of local archives, which in British Columbia and many other provinces had been almost completely neglected by our public and archival authorities. I proposed some possible approaches to the problem based on the experience of Great Britain and New Zealand and the experiences of librarians in our own country faced with analogous problems. At the end of the paper, I repeated sentiments articulated a few years before by Michael Swift. "What is needed," he said, "to overcome our long history of neglect . . . is the *will* among Canadian archivists, particularly those at the provincial level, to act." The will to act. I must confess that at the time I really did not have a prescription for action based on a clear notion of will. I did outline some alternatives for action, mainly legislative initiatives that might be taken, but legislation does not effect initiative. I do not know if Michael Swift had a clear notion of what he meant by will, but I think I do now.

Before all else, I believe archivists must learn to say no, in a positive way. Let me explain. They must say no to being all things to all people, to bringing all archives to their doorstep, which is an impossible burden to bear. Indeed, I suspect that much of the uneasiness we feel in and about the profession may be attributed to the fact that archivists are beginning to realize the implications of that no but many others in the history community do not.

To expand my ideas, I want to turn to the text leading up to the first recommendations of the Consultative Group Report on *Canadian Archives*. I believe Ian Wilson carefully chose to quote this same passage last year at the ACA meetings because much of Report hangs on this argument.

It is the opinion of the Consultative Group that the emergence of a true system of Canadian archives depends on a reinterpretation of the broad legislated mandates given each of the publicly funded archives. These archives have been given a responsibility by society to ensure the preservation of all records bearing on the history of that society. The responsibility must remain. But, in fulfilling it, the public archives must recognize that today far more is implied than simply gathering all available archival material in one repository. This responsibility can also be fulfilled by fostering the development of appropriate institutional, corporate or local archives. In so doing, a much broader spectrum of historically important materials can be preserved, the full financial burden does not fall directly on the public purse, and the archives remain a living part of their institutional or local community. The existence of such archives is fully justified by basic archival principles.

\*A revised version of the author's presidential address to the Association of Canadian Archivists held in Halifax, Nova Scotia, in June 1981.

To achieve an appropriate balance among major public, institutional and local archives, it seems to me all public archives will perforce have to declare positively no to the acquisition of archives of bodies that can well afford and ought to manage their own records and archives but who feign that they cannot do so. While this may be fine to suggest in theory, is it responsible and possible in practice? Let me suggest that it is, with a concrete example.

At ACA's Annual meeting in Saskatoon in 1979, I showed architectural drawings for a proposed archives for the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia, which consists of some fifty-seven parishes on Vancouver Island. I am pleased to say that the sketches have become reality. A properly constructed, fully equipped archives record centre has been added to a restored Bishop's chapel, long unused, but now to be used as a reading room for the archives and as a committee room. I believed when I first got involved in the project that the Diocese, a non-profit organization with assets in excess of \$1 million and an annual budget of nearly \$400,000, could invest in an archives, if only it understood the importance of archives.

Originally, I became involved as an archivist at the Provincial Archives when I was asked to examine some records stored in the Synod office vault. The Synod offices of the Diocese were located just four blocks from the Provincial Archives. It would have been a simple matter to transfer the records to the Provincial Archives. But, if we are true to our principles, that would not have been the end of the acquisition. Surely, as a responsible archivist, I would have had to assist the church in the establishment of a programme to transfer records regularly to the Provincial Archives and write up an agreement with the Diocese for custody of its archives and parish archives as well. The question I asked then and I ask more loudly now is: could the Provincial Archives afford to act as the archives of the church for all time? Should the taxpayers of the province be asked to foot the bill forever? The Diocese had the resources and a good reason to do the job. With some prodding in the form of financial assistance for capital costs from the private and public sectors, the archives of the Diocese had its official opening in November 1980. The Diocese is now committed to a continuing archival programme.

There is a notion abroad in this country that if archivists in government archives do not look after records no one will and those records will inevitably be lost or destroyed. Moreover, there is also a fear that archives in private repositories will be less accessible than those in public repositories. Is this really true? Have we tested the hypothesis that there is less scope for private initiative to develop archives in this country than in the United States where there is a healthier balance between private and public support for archives? Or are we merely prisoners of our past? The Diocese of British Columbia did establish an archives and continues to invest in it after its initial cost of \$105,000. Only \$15,000 of that was public money in the form of a grant from the Heritage Trust of British Columbia. The rest came from the Diocese's own budget, from parishes, and the National Church, but mostly from the pockets of individual members of the Church.

One last reflection on the will of archivists and the welfare of archives. In a recent article in the *American Archivist* (Fall 1980) H.G. Jones endeavours to provide answers to the question, "why it is that a handful of states are willing to support comprehensive archival and records management programs while many others, some with greater wealth, remain archivally retarded?" I would ask, is it sensible for a handful of public archives to try to act as the archival agency not only for their sponsor but for the whole society about them? Jones sees many people giving way to the "increasing temptation to slip through the revolving door on someone else's push — or more particularly, the use of someone else's tax money to accomplish what the beneficiaries refuse to provide for themselves. . . . With the understanding that the inability to pay is not the cause of archival backwardness, we must confront the real culprit; absence or failure of will." As Jones and the SSHRCC Report reveal, money is needed, but it is not the whole answer. Any grant programme that is established in Canada should serve only as an incentive for archival development, not as a solution. Keep in mind

that the federal government, in announcing the formation of its committee to review cultural policy, indicated that it expected some support for cultural programmes from the provinces and the private sector. For archivists, there is more in this than fiscal politics. Archives have a value to their creators, and in a good many cases the creators, whether public or private, ought to be prodded by archivists to look after their archives properly. We can demonstrate to large organizations the profitability (not just in the monetary sense) and wisdom of their looking after their own archives, but it takes effort. Are we prepared to make an effort, to summon the will to say, NO, we in government archives cannot look after your archives, you must do it. Every time we convince another organization to care for its own archives, we have won a victory for archives, for the users of archives and for the profession of archivists because more human and financial resources will be available to share the burden of preserving our nation's archival heritage.

Kent Haworth  
Provincial Archives of British Columbia

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