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Archives and Social History

This issue of *Archivaria* is devoted to an examination of the developments in the field of social history generally and the social history of Canada in particular. Most of the writers featured here are historians, who explain either the aims and preoccupations in the field generally or describe their own area of research in particular, with special emphasis on the problems they encounter in using archival sources. The rationale for such a special issue is perhaps not self-evident. As several of the writers argue or imply, social historians have both extended the range of archives that historians have traditionally employed in their studies and reexamined familiar archival sources in the light of the new questions they are attempting to answer. In this context, much still depends on the availability of the sources, but perhaps more hangs on a critical analysis of the value of the sources for the purposes of historical study. Historians have always been concerned to evaluate their evidence, but recent social history presents us with a number of questions about the character and value of whole bodies or classes of archival record. How were they created? How do they relate to other documentation in the same area? How may they be used? These are questions that have a bearing on the basic archival functions of appraisal and selection, arrangement, description, and reference service. Few of the writers here offer direct counsel to archivists, who are left to puzzle out the meaning of all the recent ferment in social history for themselves, but there is a strong suggestion throughout the volume, whether explicitly or implicitly, that historians are looking for rather different support from archivists than they have often required in the past. Their own critical approach to archival sources makes historians see that archivists, who are responsible for ensuring that records are preserved and made available for research, must inevitably bring critical skills to their own work.

The so-called new social history is a manifestation of intellectual activity in the historical profession and allied disciplines over the last two decades or so. Historians of the 1960s and 1970s formed their own preoccupations and ideas, as have historians in every age, at least in part out of their own experience of their own age. Archivists are often perplexed by injunctions that they keep up-to-date on the trends in historical research because the fashion apparently changes as rapidly as the social fabric of our times. What we perhaps fail to see is that archivists operate in similar circumstances. They and the records they keep are subject to the subtle influences of social change, to say nothing of the institutions archivists work in. In this context, social history offers avenues of analysis that may be especially valuable to archivists. If Theodore Schellinberg was correct in his judgement that the basic tasks of the archivist are essentially analytical, we can learn from the new social history ways of looking at and judging the value of archival records. Unless archivists develop their critical skills, they will be open to the accusation that they fly by the seat of their pants. Just as professional historians critical skills distinguish them from popularizers and everyman as historian, so archivists critical skills distinguish them from antiquarian collectors and everyman as archivist.

Terry Eastwood
General Editor

