writing would indeed be bleak. A sharper reading of what I wrote will reveal the
exact opposite of her claims of harsh criticism and unsuitable evaluative criteria.
Nowhere did I ask for perfection, nor would I of any book. Apart from some
concerns I had of a technical nature, which I thought disserved the manual's
purpose, my chief observation was that it generally needed livening up. I found it
heavy and dull in style and presentation — as I do the Manuel d'archivistique and
Schellenberg's classics. As for “perversity,” Ms. Boulet-Wernham might note that
the term was being applied, not to the book, but to the reviewer's own naughtiness in
requesting a lighter, spritelier treatment. Her citation of recent sales success hardly
depresses that wish. I see no good reason for not expecting archival writing (manual
or otherwise) to be engaging and useful, though I would probably draw the line at
so strong and highly pitched a word as “thrilling.”

Gordon Dodds
Provincial Archives of Manitoba

Data Base Management Systems to Access Archives

The article “Toward Intelligent Databases” by Sunden and Winchester in Archivaria
14 was a welcome sight for two reasons. Not only does it demonstrate the increasing
interest in the use of the computer as an historical tool, but it will perhaps also serve
to stimulate greater interest.

The distinction between databases and other conglomerations of computerized
data is well made. Differences of terminology can be a rich source of misunder-
standing in communication between humanists and computer scientists. However, it
should perhaps be pointed out that the technical people tend toward a range of
definitions for the term “database” even more restricted than that sketched by the
authors. Although there are many definitions, the concept of “database” is broadly
held to refer to a fairly large and complex quantity of data stored on-line (i.e., upon a
storage device which can be accessed by the computer without having a human move
something) and managed by a complex and sophisticated “software” package called
a Data Base Management System (DBMS).

It is in the DBMS that we shall see increased “intelligence” and more powerful and
easily used tools to access the databases of interest. Since Data Base Management
Systems are used for many administrative purposes, historians need not fear that the
development of such improved tools will depend solely upon the budgets of History
Departments and special grants. Of course, there have also been efforts to develop
software especially for the historian. A good example of this is provided by CLIO, a
DBMS developed at the Max-Planck-Institut für Geschichte. A noteworthy feature
of this DBMS is a command language based upon Latin.

This brings us to the potential of being able to address the DBMS using “natural”
language. Recent research suggests that the great inconsistency with which people
use words makes this an elusive goal. Not only will people use different words for one
particular thing, but one word to mean several different things. People seem to find it
easier to remember commands if the words have existing meanings which appear
related to the several tasks. However, the need for precision would discourage the
use of words which would have such broad meanings as to encourage inappropriate
use. The result of all this is that the historian, at least in the short term, will find
himself talking to the computer in a fairly precise jargon with specific meanings attached to words. The dialogue may look “natural” to an observer, but will require at least a modicum of learning effort on the part of the novice user.

All in all, as the authors point out, we are likely to see historians making increasing use of computer data bases by means of Data Base Management Systems which grow increasingly powerful and easy to use.

R.L. Schnarr
Machine Readable Archives
Public Archives of Canada