

From the Editor

ARCHIVAL NETWORKS AND CONGRESSES

Quite inadvertently, this issue of *Archivaria* has almost become a thematic one on archival networks. Many of the articles deal with different aspects of the question of networks, or closer relations, or better communications, between various components of the archival community in Canada. The Oxford English Dictionary defines a network as an arrangement of intersecting lines and interstices recalling those of a net, citing as examples the complex systems involved for railroads, canals, and broadcasting stations. A net, to return to basics, is a meshed fabric for catching fish or, more to the point, “for covering, confining, protecting, carrying” some interest or measure. Much discussion has been devoted in recent years to archival networks for Canada, but to date no substantial consensus has emerged from the profession as to their true nature and purpose.

Networks mean many things to many people. Quite probably, there are many vehicles sufficiently roadworthy to travel along the vista to archival utopia, and perhaps the idea of loading everybody into one huge bus to make the trip together in perfect harmony is not desirable anyway. There is room on the road for our Cadillacs as well as our Volkswagens, our motorcycles as well as our family campers, even for our joggers, walkers, and the odd hitchhiker. What is wanted, however, is a common professional vision of the goal towards which these various means of conveyance will lead us. Progress towards defining such a vision has unfortunately stalled.

Certainly, this issue of *Archivaria* looks implicitly at many of the vehicles that have been or could be used for the trip. In the lead article, Gordon Dodds gives a personal overview of the role archival scholarship and resultant archival literature have played in the last twenty years in bringing archivists to a heightened sense of their profession. Obviously every archivist cannot or will not spend his spare time researching, writing, and publishing about archival concerns (although every editor of this journal wishes more would!), just as every teacher, doctor, or architect does not. But equally obvious, the archival profession, like the educational, medical, or architectural ones, needs a scholarly beacon where new ideas are floated, tested, debated, and, from time to time, discredited. In this issue, for example, archivists will find the first articles ever carried by the journal on amateur photography or documentary art. While these pieces will not be relevant to the daily work of every archivist everywhere, they clearly should be helpful to our many colleagues who now work or will work with such media, and of course to a broader audience for the

general principles enunciated which have implications for all kinds of archival pursuits. Similarly, the seven contributors to our Special Feature on History and Archives, as well as the author of the lead article, debate the role of the archivist in society. Self-analysis should lead to self-understanding and thus to a better intellectual foundation for our profession. Until we begin to speak the same language on such central concerns, professional unity will only be skin-deep. The communication link of a journal like this one is also cumulative; the articles by Michael Moir and by Peter Baskerville and Chad Gaffield particularly demonstrate the ability to build on what has been written before here and elsewhere.

But a scholarly journal is only one strand in the mesh that combines archivists and archives together. The natural and growing link between archivists and records managers is dissected by Bryan Corbett and Eldon Frost in an abridged version of their acclaimed PAC report, and also discussed in two of our notes and several letters to the editor. The relationship of the archivist with the new “public history” movement, particularly in this case with the official institutional historian, is probed by Don Page. The connections between similarly-minded institutions, such as art galleries and art archives, are discussed sensitively by Greg Spurgeon. Michael Moir argues for better coordination between institutions, through the *Union List of Manuscripts* for example, in the description and indexing of archival collections; too often we tend to be narrowly Canadian in our focus and to forget that our holdings are a buried treasure — unfortunately, frequently “buried” by archivists — for researchers of other lands and cultures. In an amusing and well-researched piece, Don Macleod unravels an historical example of failed networking when the Public Archives of Canada attempted to launch regional branch offices in the Maritimes in the first third of the century. And finally, Baskerville and Gaffield and Michel Roberge deal with another aspect of networking: large automated data bases for records control and subject access. Roberge profiles the new SAPHIR system at the Archives nationales du Québec which involves both collection control and intellectual access. This is particularly impressive because all the regional archives of the ANQ are plugged into the system — a functioning network has been created. Baskerville and Gaffield’s Vancouver Island Project invites archivists’ input into the theoretical basis for the creation of a huge network to identify and to retrieve by subject *all* archival records on the Island; based on wide reading of archival literature, the authors vigorously throw down the gauntlet to archivists as being misguided in defending provenance as their basic organizing principle, that such a defence actually erodes the development of viable subject indexing and user access to our collections.

In all the ways demonstrated by our authors in this issue, and by many others — the *Bulletin*, the annual meetings, committee work, the new graduate programme — archivists are linked together in Canada. Relationships, coordination, links, cooperation — “networks” if you will — have sprung up in many such directions. All these ways and means should be encouraged. Further thinking, research, and writing should certainly continue to enhance our understanding of the relationships and connections that bind us to each other, and to creators, managers, and users of records, and that link our documents together by provenance, subject, theme, medium, or region. All this is suitable grist for the network mill.

Quite beyond the above considerations, however, there is a political aspect of archival networking which has dominated the Association of Canadian Archivists in

recent years. Here the prospect is far less happy, for in many ways the ACA has fumbled the ball just when the team appeared to be heading for a touchdown. The professional leadership needed to define the archival utopia, to chart the terrain of the archival landscape towards which our various vehicles are supposedly heading, has not risen to the challenge. *Ad hoc* decisions seem to rule the day; archival institutions or groupings of institutions seem to be taking the initiative away from the associations of professional archivists; much is happening, but little focus or direction seems to animate each new turn of events. As a result, the profession has not spoken clearly about archival priorities in Canada; we have no unifying vision or sense of mission towards which the new networking tools can be applied. We are thus often caught confusing means with ends. We constantly ask “how?” rather than “why?” What, indeed, do we wish to trap in our net? What measures or interests or priorities are worth “covering, confining, protecting, carrying” in our archival network if and when established?

Following on the Wilson Report in 1980, Kent Haworth as ACA President devised a proposal for an archival network based on a National Archival Records Commission (NARC). The NARC would be a structure (and organizational details could be worked out later) through which the pressing crises facing Canadian archives could be addressed, set in priority according to criteria developed by archivists unfettered by their institutional trappings, and funded through some system of grants. Alas, this advance to midfield petered out and the end zone now appears as far away as ever. The Haworth NARC initiative was pushed aside the following year for an abortive attempt to restructure the internal operations of the ACA. His proposals were never the focus of any extended discussion at the next ACA annual meeting. Indeed, I remember that Haworth and I had to sponsor a motion at the end of the 1982 annual general meeting, when past five o'clock most of the room had emptied out, simply to empower the ACA Executive to discuss NARC as an approved measure by the membership at various upcoming forums; needless to say, at that time of the day, our motion created no discussion and was routinely approved! Given this evolution of events since the appearance of the Wilson Report, many thought the NARC proposal was to be the focus of the Archival Congress held in Kingston in June 1982, but again the ball was fumbled. As an extraordinary meeting called to plan for the future of Canadian archives, the Kingston affair was a fiasco, a confirmation of motherhood statements which endorsed the idea of a network without adding any substance to it.¹ Indeed, as Keith Stotyn and Gordon Dodds note elsewhere in this issue, if the published proceedings of the Congress are a true indication of what transpired there, the meeting is a professional embarrassment best forgotten; with the exception of Terry Eastwood's paper on descriptive standards, there is nothing but pollyannish wishful thinking, user truisms, and fine opening statements never realized. Once again, from the Applebaum-Hébert Committee on Federal Cultural Policy, the NARC ideal has received the seal of approval, but the vital question remains: what does it mean? If archivists seriously think the federal or any other government will fund a NARC, through the proposed Heritage Council or the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council (SSHRC) or any other body, before the priorities of archives have been clearly

1 These remarks are not sour grapes from one not on the printed list of invitees for the Congress; I was invited but, given the organization and focus of the event, refused on principle to attend.

established by the profession, they live in a dream world. There is in this age of restraint no more writing of blank cheques. Archivists must decide for themselves what they want. They must do it in open forums, not closed congresses; they must come to such a forum well prepared with position papers, not the usual trading of clichés or passive listening to addresses; they must be prepared to spend several days, even a week, hammering out their future in round-table discussions, not the usual few minutes of an executive forum or annual general meeting each year. If they do not, the initiative for archival planning will pass to other hands.

This has already happened. Various SSHRCC programmes are up and running which fundamentally affect archives, in which we had and have very little influence. The Dominion-Provincial-Territorial Archivists conference, under instructions from Ministers of Culture and Communications, are doing much to put the initiative for networks back in the institutions rather than the associations, with all the threatened consequences that “protection of turf,” regional and linguistic balances, and *status quo ante* will override fresh initiatives and new ideas generated by professional archivists *qua* archivists. All these and doubtless other new programmes inject money into the archival system in Canada, which only a fool would reject. But money spent unwisely is still money poorly spent. As Terry Eastwood noted in the last *Archivaria*, “Without some planning structure ... it is foolish to expect we will ever wisely determine the terms on which we are going to spend any money that comes our way.... And the likelihood is that more money, for money will be spent, will go down the drain.”²

We have collectively as an Association, after considered study and debate, to face the basic question: what are our priorities? What is the archival goal towards which our various vehicles, our networks, our hoped-for grant money, will be aimed? Should it be the kind of linked data bases as Baskerville and Gaffield challenge us to consider? Do we seriously move towards common descriptive standards so that a user sitting down at a terminal in any archives can query on-line all the relevant references — or access points, as the jargon goes — for his research topic in all the collections in all media in our archives? Some say we do. Others say that descriptive standards are not our panacea, not even our priority when our archival heritage in this country is not even identified, let alone collected, understood in any depth, or conserved. Our older collections are disappearing almost as fast out one end of our institutions (as crumbling paper, erased tapes, vanishing letterbook ink) as new ones are arriving at the other end. For these new arrivals, we have not tried to ensure that all our archival jurisdictions work together in acquisition to guarantee that from the vast mountain of created records the few selected for archival preservation indeed best serve the broad interests of history. (How easy it would be to coordinate between archives collecting in such archival fields as women’s, business, labour, religious, or educational records if only the coordinating will was there, but everything proceeds by *ad hoc*ery.) Where then do we put our priorities: surveying and inventorying, collecting, describing, conserving? Which do we emphasize in our network once established? Which should get the money, or most of it? We don’t know precisely because the profession hasn’t been asked and, I venture to assert, hasn’t thought very deeply about it.

2 Terry Eastwood, Personal Observations on the Applebaum-Hébert Report, *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), p. 128.

If we don't change our ways, if we don't pick up the ball so well handled by Hawthorn some years ago, then archival networks will be a chimera. Oh yes, as Eastwood says, there will be money and there will be progress, but the money will go to those most skilled at grantsmanship, to those "in the know" or politically well connected, to those who squeak the loudest, to those with institutional clout, to those representing the "correct" regional, ethnic, or linguistic balance, and, dangerously enough, to those working in the areas seen as strategically important by government (this is the age of directed-research after all, and *1984*). The money will *not* go to solve the overall archival problems of this country in any rational, logical order of priority determined carefully, dispassionately, and after detailed reflection, study, and debate, by Canada's archivists operating as independent professionals rather than as employees of archival institutions. If so, we will find that any "networks" formed are hollow shells indeed. We will become the passive recipients of doubtless welcome and needed largesse, but we will not be the active designers of an holistic approach to the entire archival landscape in Canada. That, to my mind, is the challenge posed by the concept of "networks." Will we rise to it?

Terry Cook
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