

Special Feature

The Debate over History and Archives

EDITOR'S NOTE: *As was hoped, George Bolotenko's article in Archivaria 16, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," has generated a keen response. His strictures, coupled with the analysis in Tom Nesmith's "Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship" (Archivaria 14), go to the very heart of defining what an archivist should or should not be. As the following responses to these pieces make clear, there is no consensus in the archival profession on this issue. To help focus the debate therefore, all contributions received on the question of the proper role of history and historical scholarship in archival work — save Gordon Dodd's lead article which also in part addresses Bolotenko directly — have been grouped together in this Special Feature section. Three longer "Counterpoint" articles lead off, followed by several "Letters to the Editor." Future contributions to this important debate are invited.*

Archives and the Spectre of 1984: Bolotenko Applauded

by **PATRICK A. DUNAE**

George Bolotenko is to be applauded for his well-written, incisive article, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," in *Archivaria* 16. His argument, that archivists must maintain their humanistic traditions despite administrative trends and

bureaucratic demands, is convincing and compelling, and the article itself should serve as a clarion call to those archivists who are being pushed into the abyss of "information management." Bolotenko's timely article also reinforces Tom Nesmith's commendable essay in *Archivaria* 14, which called for a "scholarly base for archival work" and a "redefined partnership with academic history."¹

As Bolotenko and Nesmith indicate, it would be a great mistake for archivists to abandon their historical research interests and lose touch with the historical community. Only the archivist-historian can appreciate fully the significance of historical records; only the archivist-scholar, who is actively engaged in historical research and writing, can appreciate and anticipate scholarly interests. In other words, the "historian-scholar-archivist" (to use Bolotenko's term) is best able to serve academic researchers and other scholars who depend on archival institutions. Yet as both Bolotenko and Nesmith lament, many Canadian archivists have yielded their valued positions within the historical profession. A respected and competent group of professionals — which, in the past, was somehow confidently and securely "professional," without having to define or proclaim the fact — has lost sight of its *raison d'être*. How so?

Bolotenko mentions three influential writers who may have been instrumental in undermining the positions of the archivist-historian and the archivist-scholar: Sir Hilary Jenkinson, who decreed that the archivist ought not to be an historian; T.R. Schellenberg, who felt that archivists should be more like librarians; and Margaret Cross Norton, who believed that archivists should be administrators and bureaucrats.

Jenkinson, I think, may have been misunderstood and so may not deserve to be pilloried by those of us who believe in the archivist-historian. In fact, as Leslie Workman stated in a recent number of the *American Archivist*, Sir Hilary's dictum about archivists not being historians has been an unnecessary "stumbling-block" to our profession. Jenkinson first raised the question in 1922, when little had been written on the subject, and apparently he did not emphasize the point thereafter in his many lectures on archival administration. Further, Sir Hilary assumed that all archivists would have at least an Honours degree in History — a British degree which, as Workman points out, implied a greater knowledge of history "than an American master's degree today."² Similarly, Schellenberg may not be guilty of initiating some of the forces which now beset the archivist-historian. While he may have placed too much faith in the techniques of library science, some of the techniques — notably those pertaining to standardized descriptions and classification systems — have been useful to archivy. Moreover, the methodological basis of library science involves a degree of rigour and discipline which is certainly not incompatible with the practice of history or archives.

The real villains of the piece are Miss Norton and her disciples, who preached that an archivist's primary, if not sole, obligation was to facilitate the "business efficiency"

1 Tom Nesmith, "Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship," *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), pp. 5-26.

2 Leslie J. Workman, Letter to the Editor, *American Archivist* 46 (Summer 1983), p. 261.

of government.³ Nortonians, now allied with a new generation of public administrators and technocrats, have more than anyone else endeavoured to push archivy off its humanistic, historical, scholarly base. Their influence is particularly felt in government-sponsored archives, where archivist-historians are being transformed into “information managers.”

In his article, Bolotenko warned that archivists who are seduced by Nortonian notions, who turn away from their historical roots in favour of some “trendy” technologically oriented “professionalism,” are in danger of becoming “priest[s] of some new and artificial obscurantism or, even worse ... speaker[s] of barbarous bureaucratise which, once scraped away, leaves nothing” (p. 7). In many government archives, this has already happened: in fact, obscurantism and bureaucratise have developed to such an extent that archival associations, particularly those which embrace records managers, are constantly having to update their glossaries and their lists of acronyms. But obscurantism and bureaucratise are trivial compared to some of the other dangers that await the “archival-information manager.”

Quite simply, archivists who see themselves primarily as administrators, who feel (as Miss Norton evidently felt) that the most useful histories are histories of “governmental functions,”⁴ and who believe that their principal task is to promote bureaucratic efficiency, are archivists who are likely to become subservient to the state. Once subservient, such archivists are then likely to become subverted by the state. Driven by a belief that it is their express duty to protect and promote the interests of the bureaucracy at all costs, such archivists are apt to lose all sense of proportion, to say nothing of their historical and intellectual obligations. These archivist-administrators are, in fact, likely to find themselves in the position of Winston Smith, the central character in George Orwell’s *Nineteen Eighty-Four*.

Winston Smith, it may be remembered, was employed in the Records Department of the Ministry of Truth. He was an archivist, of sorts, in that he was responsible for the historical records of Oceania. But his duties were not simply to acquire and preserve significant documents; he was also required to “salt” and to “sanitize” the historical record in the interest of the state. “Who controls the past,” the government slogan ran, “controls the future: who controls the present controls the past.”⁵ And Winston Smith’s Records Department was in complete control.

Probably, few archivists envisage politicized archives. Certainly, few archivists — even the most zealous records managers — would see themselves in an Orwellian mould. Those who might reject the idea as being absurd, however, would do well to remember that modern archives, as we know them today, were established to ennoble the state and to ensure that the state’s successes were adequately documented for posterity.⁶ Those inclined to dismiss this disquieting view of

3 Thornton W. Mitchell, ed., *Norton on Archives: The Writings of Margaret Cross Norton on Archival and Records Management* (Chicago, 1979), p. 5. For a recent Canadian version of the Nortonian gospel, see Anthony L. Rees, “Masters in Our Own House?” *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 53-59.

4 Mitchell, *Norton on Archives*, p. 34.

5 George Orwell, *Nineteen Eighty-Four* (Penguin edition, 1983), p. 34.

6 Ernst Posner, “Some Aspects of Archival Development Since the French Revolution,” *American Archivist* 3 (July 1940), p. 166.

archives might also ponder the priorities and preoccupations of some of our municipal and provincial archives. A growing number of these repositories have forgotten the teachings of Brymner and Doughty, *viz.*, that it is the duty of publicly funded archives to collect and preserve records from *all* segments of society. Instead, these archives devote virtually all of their time, energy, and shelf-space to the records of the institutions which sponsor them; their main concern, in other words, is with government records. Archivists who see no evidence of the Orwellian spectre might, in addition, contemplate the erosion of reference services, the use of form letters in answering public enquiries, and, generally, the impersonalization of some of our institutional archives. Many of these repositories are not interested in serving the scholarly community or even the general public. They are more and more in business to serve government.

C.P. Stacey saw the writing on the wall ten years ago, when he expressed his concern that our national archives might become “just a cog in the Ottawa administrative machine.” “For the Public Archives of Canada to come to regard itself as a mere administrative convenience for the Government would be little short of a national disaster,” he said.⁷ Happily, the PAC includes archivists — like Messrs. Bolotenko and Nesmith — who obviously share Colonel Stacey’s concern. But our smaller, publicly supported institutions need such archivists too.

Archives at the municipal and provincial levels should be actively collecting a wide range of historical records pertinent to their region. They should be mounting historical exhibits and conducting workshops in order to foster an awareness and appreciation of history among the public. They should be publicizing their collections and should be involved with major research projects. They should be publishing, not just catalogues and inventories, but monographs and collections of documents, as well. Regrettably, many of our municipal and provincial archives view such activities as superfluous and peripheral to their main task. They are more interested in “managing” the records of other government departments and shepherding ever-increasing amounts of paper into cavernous records centres.

The long-term consequences of these archival policies are difficult to determine. Undoubtedly, though, our historical legacy, which archivists should be preserving, will be skewed and distorted in the future. When the history of the last quarter of this century is written, it will be written mainly from an official or bureaucratic perspective, for the simple reason that government records, safely ensconced in publicly supported archives, will be the only records available to the historian. Down the road, we may also find archivists, whose sole interest is “business efficiency,” being compelled to compromise their ethics for the sake of administrative or political convenience. It is a bleak and frightening prospect.

7 C.P. Stacey, “The Public Archives of Canada at the End of Its First Century,” Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1972), p. 22. The Orwellian spectre in Canada of government-directed scholarship was first raised by Roger Graham in “The Scholar and the State: A Word of Caution,” *Historical Papers*, (1971), pp. 1-12; and was recently reinforced by John Kendle in “The Scholar and the State Revisited: Further Words of Caution,” *Historical Papers*, (1982), pp. 1-10. Both papers were formal presidential addresses to the Canadian Historical Association.

If we are to minimize these risks and avoid the prospect of politicized archives, we must eschew the Nortonian model of the archivist-administrator, along with that more recent phenomenon, the archivist-technocrat. This is not to suggest, of course, that archivists should be disloyal or that they should shirk any of the administrative responsibilities. On the contrary, as members of the public service we have a duty to serve our employers faithfully and effectively; as members of large organizations, we must carry out those administrative functions which will allow the organization to operate efficiently. Nor is this to suggest that we should ignore or resist the technological advances which are being applied to our profession. We are not Luddites!

We must, nonetheless, distance ourselves to some degree from the bureaucracy. We must ensure that we do not become mere cogs in an administrative machine. We must remember that we are responsible not only to "the powers of funding and authority,"⁸ but to society and indeed to History itself. We should heed George Bolotenko's call and reaffirm the role of the archivist-historian — an individual who, by training and by inclination, is likely to be skeptical and objective, who will at least strive for impartiality when maintaining historical records. We should respond to Tom Nesmith's call, and return to an active role in research and scholarship. Above all, we should appreciate the importance of history in the archival profession, and recall the pronouncement Professor Shortt made seventy-five years ago: "The man who does not court the muse of history is fit for stratagem and spoils, or, to put it in a modern phrase, is the man who works a political pull and graft."⁹

In sum, Canadian archivists must realize that they occupy an unique and important position, both within the organizations that employ them and within the larger society that depends on them. They must recognize the value of the historically minded records-keeper. They must develop and maintain their place within the academic community. They must preserve the attitudes, activities, and interests which distinguish traditional archivists from "information managers." Archivists who do not fight to protect their intellectual integrity must inevitably be submerged by the bureaucracy. Such archivists will be first in line for Winston Smith's job in 1984.

8 Maynard Brichford, "Seven Sinful Thoughts," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980), p. 14.

9 Cited in Ian E. Wilson, "Shortt and Doughty: The Cultural Role of the Public Archives of Canada, 1904-1935," *The Canadian Archivist/L'Archiviste Canadien* (1973), p. 9.