

No Monopoly for "Archivist-Historians": Bolotenko Assailed

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Many archivists in Canada, in their search to systematize, to 'professionalize' their calling, are similarly inclined to see little value in the historical foundation of archivy. This, certainly, has much to do with the ethos of this age of technology, an age which lionizes technical services and technicians, an age which displays a discernible anti-humanist streak and a marked crassness towards scholarship in its own right. Society worships new gods, and so must the archivist.¹

Taken out of context, these remarks appear to be the rantings of a failed historian-turned-archivist who has found himself unable to cope with the implications and innovations of the electronic information revolution. Placed in context, the remarks are part of a series of polemical arguments put forward by Bolotenko in the vexing debate concerning archival education. Rejecting the archivist's search for a new professionalism and the role of archivist as associate of the records manager, librarian, and information scientist, he maintains that, first and foremost, "the archivist must be a historian, at least by inclination, and preferably by calling."²

I do not plan to give a detailed critical exposition of Bolotenko's article, for it should be examined in its entirety by the interested reader. Nonetheless, I will touch on three specific areas where I strongly disagree with his views: his allegation that "gibberish" in information science jeopardizes the current state of archival literature and practice; his characterization that librarians are rigidly tied to subject cataloguing within the boundaries of the print medium; and his main contention that the study of history is the foundation of archival work.

With respect to certain historians who regard history as a social science dependent on quantification and data processing, Edward Pessen, an authority on antebellum America, has written that "some practitioners of the 'new histories' of our era appear to delight in using a language incomprehensible not only to students and general readers but to most of their fellow scholars as well."³ Taking Pessen's criticism as his

1 George Bolotenko, "Archivist and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 15-16.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 6.

3 Pessen, "A Historian's Perspective," *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives* 7 (Winter 1975), p. 243.

cue, Bolonteko directs the same criticism to those archivists who are impressed by the jargon of the information age. Beguiled by the need for standards, systematization, and a scientific methodology, archivists have attempted to deny the relevance of history to their work and calling. It is a sad tale of professional deception, we are told, and those in the modernist camp (records management and library science) are chiefly to blame. Archivists are now in danger of speaking gibberish begotten from information science.

This theme is pervasive in Bolotenko's article. Pessen, at least, cited one example in support of his criticism. Bolotenko cites no examples except for a disparaging reference to the phrase "information control."⁴ So convinced is he of the truth of his allegation that he provides no evidence to support it. No doubt examples of gibberish can be found in the literature of information science and perhaps, on occasion, archivists have been guilty of this sort of sin. Yet what appears to be gibberish to the uninstructed often makes perfect sense to the cognoscenti. The truth of the matter appears to be simple: in the literature of information science — as in all forms of literature — there is good writing and bad writing, writing which is clear and writing which is not so clear. Whether we like it or not, the impact of information science on archival work has been tremendous. "We can no longer be content with the old and the arcane."⁵ Only if we are cognizant of new developments will we be able to understand the language of information science and to differentiate sense from gibberish. This does not imply that the archivist can turn to information science in the hope of panaceas. No computer can salvage an archive in a hopeless mess but, if our house is in order, the computer can facilitate description, retrieval, and cross-referencing of records. We must run the risk of occasional lapse into gibberish and, if Bolotenko will kindly point out to us any lapses, we will try to correct our speech habits accordingly. Otherwise we can justifiably regard his allegation as an exaggeration without empirical content.

In arguing the claim that historians make the best archivists, Bolotenko's method of argument is often *reductio ad absurdum*. If other positions can be shown to be weak or untenable, then Bolotenko considers this fact to strengthen his own claim. One of the targets of his attack is those who advocate the transfer of responsibility of archival education to the library school setting. Peace and Chudacoff, for example, who believe that the bias of training people to work with book collections is rapidly disappearing from most M.L.S. programmes, contend that the M.L.S. programme, with an increased archives component, is "the most effective education for archivists and librarians."⁶

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- 4 Bolotenko refers to "information control" as an example of "trendy words — perhaps Pessen's 'gibberish' " (p. 17 of Bolotenko's article). The phrase, however, has a definite meaning. Bibliographical control is an attempt to provide a means of access to all items which are published. Similarly, information control is an attempt to provide a means of access to all items which are communicated or recorded (spoken, written, etc.). The attainment of information control may be impossible and not wholly desirable, but the meaning of the phrase is quite clear.
 - 5 Hugh A. Taylor, "The Discipline of History and the Education of the Archivist," *American Archivist* 40 (October 1977), p. 395.
 - 6 Nancy E. Peace and Nancy Fisher Chudacoff, "Archivists and Librarians: A Common Mission. A Common Education," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979), p. 458.

The arguments, pro and con, about locating an archival programme at a library school have been much discussed and analysed for some time now. When Schellenberg defended the teaching of archival studies at library schools and challenged the basic philosophy of the Bemis report, he in turn was challenged by Jones who championed the cause of the historians.⁷ Although arguments have been refined on both sides, the outcome of this debate is still unresolved and there is little value in repeating these arguments *ad nauseam*.⁸ McCrank was no doubt right when he urged: "Instead of intensifying the polarization between historical and library science approaches to archives, a reconciliation should be sought as suggested in R. Clark's recent *Archive-Library Relations*."⁹

Not content with a reconciliation, Bolotenko maintains "that to go the way of library science is a potentially more dangerous route for the archivist."¹⁰ His arguments on this score, however, add nothing to the substantial literature already on this subject. Indeed, to a great extent, his arguments are either *ad hominem* in nature or else depend upon caricatures of library science. It is usually admitted, for example, that the archivist and the librarian share common concerns and, therefore, belong to the same family of information activity. To this Bolotenko responds: "How very facile. To be of the same family is not to be identical twins; and one and the same family can produce both an Einstein and a mongoloid."¹¹ Ordinarily one would not dignify such abuse with a reply. But, in Bolotenko's case, a rebuttal on this issue is warranted since his article is published in an important journal and, also, as it may be thought by some readers that his description of library work is actually accurate.

According to Bolotenko, library science has a well-defined methodology which applies strict rules of subject cataloguing to printed material. By contrast, archivy is more analytical in nature and is concerned to preserve and to describe records in their organic context in keeping with *provenance*. In Bolotenko's opinion, the separation between the archivist and the librarian is markedly pronounced from the type of material that each deals with to the kind of clientele that each serves. Moreover, not only is the preliminary training of the librarian and the archivist different, but, in addition, there is "in fact, in large degree ... an antithesis in mind-set, in disposition."¹² It follows, he argues, that it is unlikely that any benefits will accrue to the archivist if archival education occurs under the auspices of the library school.

7 S.F. Bemis, "The Training of Archivists in the United States," *American Archivist* 2 (1939), p. 157; T.R. Schellenberg, "Archival Training in Library Schools," *American Archivist* 31 (1963), pp. 155-65, and his *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956), pp. 17-25; H.G. Jones, "Archival Training in American Universities, 1938-1968," *American Archivist* 31 (1968), pp. 135-54. For an exposition of the arguments of Schellenberg and Jones, see Frank B. Evans, "Postappointment Archival Training: A Proposed Solution for a Basic Problem," *American Archivist* 40 (1977), pp. 60-64.

8 Trudy Huskamp Peterson, "Archives: Education and Research," in *ALA World Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science*, American Library Association, (Chicago, 1980), p. 55. "The debate was especially heated in the mid-1960s; as of 1979 it had not been resolved."

9 Lawrence J. McCrank, "Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies in Archival Education," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979), p. 450. See also Ian Ross, "Library-Archive Relations: The Question of Education," *Canadian Library Journal* 37 (February 1980), p. 44.

10 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 16.

11 *Ibid.*, p. 18.

12 *Ibid.*, p. 19.

Aside from the fact that Bolotenko minimizes the obvious similarities between library and archival work — similarities which have been frequently noted — his characterization of librarians is simplistic. Unless one were favourably disposed toward medieval physiology, the suggestion that there is an antithesis in mind-set between librarian and archivist is hardly credible. Librarians perform a variety of complex tasks, and libraries themselves are diverse in character. Even if one were to agree that the essential activity of the librarian is cataloguing, cataloguing itself is not simply an exercise restricted to subject description and classification.

Ever since Church¹³ foolishly told archivists that the principle of *provenance* is an impediment to research and that libraries with their subject approach are better sources for government history than archives, archivists have been suspicious of the methods of library science. No doubt this kind of suspicion has led some archivists to imagine that a librarian would arrange and describe an archive by having a copy of *Library of Congress Subject Headings* in one hand and a copy of *AACR* in the other hand. No self-respecting librarian today, even with a minimal knowledge of archival principles, would handle records or historical manuscripts in this way. The proof of this surely is contained in the special collections and archives housed in the many libraries of Canada and the United States.

Instead of promoting a sympathetic perception of common goals and objectives, Bolotenko's attack upon library science incites further misunderstanding and suspicion. It is somewhat ironical that in the same issue in which his article appears, the reader is told that Professor Roy Stokes, the former Director of the School of Librarianship at the University of British Columbia, was the first person who encouraged the establishment of a Master of Archival Studies Programme at that university and almost singlehandedly persuaded the University Senate to approve the programme.¹⁴ Given the current tensions between the historical and library science approaches to archives, the kind of archival programme now in progress at the University of British Columbia, is perhaps the best solution in terms of archival education. Nevertheless, the option of having archival education take place at a library school does not necessarily imply that this is a potentially dangerous route for the archivist, as Bolotenko argues. Indeed, the danger would probably be negligible if the course instructors were themselves archivists or had appropriate archival experience. Fyfe rightly points out: "The sharing of facilities by two academic disciplines, and mutual co-operation in developing and teaching those parts of their subject matters which overlap, does not imply any subordination of the one to the other."¹⁵

This leads us to Bolotenko's main contention. Does the historian make the best archivist? What Bolotenko has to say on this question at times approaches poetry:

The archivist and the historian are in fact in symbiosis; indeed, one might say that even as a good archivist needs to be, in some part, an historian, to know the world which interprets the facts in his keeping, the

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- 13 Randolph W. Church, "Relationships between Archival Agencies and Libraries," *American Archivist* 6 (July 1943), pp. 145-50. For a reply to Church, see Herman Kahn, "Librarians and Archivists: Some Aspects of Their Partnership," *American Archivist* 7 (October 1944), pp. 243-51.
- 14 Terry Eastwood, "The Origins and Aims of the Master of Archival Studies Programme at the University of British Columbia," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 37-38.
- 15 Janet Fyfe, "Archival Education," *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78), p. 184.

good historian must also be, in some part, an archivist, to understand the world which preserves for him the manna of his calling. Archivist and historian are obverse sides of the same coin which has currency in the same realm.¹⁶

Training in history, he believes, teaches respect for historical context (i.e., *provenance*) and the principle of *provenance* was first formulated by European archivist-historians. On this view, the historian takes to working in archives as naturally as a duck does to water.

Even if one were to concede that respect for historical context implies an understanding of the concept of *provenance* (a point which is surely debatable), there are many tasks which an archivist carries out that have little to do with the interests of the historian. The primary duties of the archivist are to organize, to preserve, and to make accessible to the public the records in our keeping. We also have a duty to know our collections so that we will be able to assist users. We are custodians and providers of information. If we are scholars, so much the better since we will be able to assist those who require in-depth reference service. But the scholarly function, contrary to Bolotenko, is incidental to actual archival work. It is not for us to interpret the significance of the records in our care. To echo the words of Margaret C. Norton, "there is somewhat of a conflict of interest between what historians want and archivists need."¹⁷

When Hull states his opposition to the archivist-historian and adds that the archivist must have a sense of history,¹⁸ Bolotenko complains that this is a *non sequitur*: "To have a sense of history, one might counter, is to be a historian, at least by disposition and in outlook if not by writing or teaching in the historian's vocation."¹⁹ Having failed to prove the claim that an archivist is a historian in the ordinary meaning of that term, Bolotenko thinks that the primacy of the historian can be established in a more general sense. The historian, having been ushered out of the front door of the archive, now appears at the back door. Hull, however, is not committing a *non sequitur* when he says that to have a sense of history is a very different matter from the archivist being a historian. What is meant by Hull was perhaps expressed by Taylor: "An experience of, and reverence for, life and knowledge relating to the organic nature of society, in whatever way this is obtained, will be of great value."²⁰

The question "Who makes the best archivist?" cannot be answered by pointing to one group rather than another. The historian does not bring a special insight to the treatment or the organization of records. Some historians make excellent archivists and others do not. It is very much a matter of individual performance rather than group performance. If archives reflect the diversity of recorded human activity, then the historian cannot insist that he alone has a monopoly on the archival profession.

16 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 20.

17 Quoted in William F. Birdsall, "The Two Sides of the Desk: The Archivist and the Historian, 1909-1935," *American Archivist* 38 (1975), p. 169.

18 Felix Hull, "The Archivist Should Not Be An Historian," *Journal of the Society* 6 (April 1980), p. 257.

19 Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians," p. 11.

20 Hugh A. Taylor, "The Discipline and the Education of the Archivist," p. 397.