

The Archivist as Historian: Towards a Broader Definition

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In his presidential address before the Society of American Archivists in 1939, Albert Ray Newsome noted a prevailing opinion among some academic circles in the United States and Europe that although archivists need some knowledge of history, they are not and should not be historians. Newsome criticized this narrow, restricted view of archivists by stressing that thorough graduate training in history was a major asset to archivists, for it increased appreciation of their own archives and improved their ability to handle the present and future scholarly interests of social scientists. Yet, although Newsome allowed that "a historian may well be an archivist," he did concur finally that "perhaps an archivist ought to be an historian."¹

The debate within the archival profession over the relationship between archivists and historians has not subsided since Newsome's address. Numerous articles have appeared in the last two decades that illustrate archivists are no more in agreement on the question than they were in 1939.² The argument over the issue continues today. In an article in *Archivaria* in the winter of 1977-78, Terry Cook noted the tendency within the Association of Canadian Archivists, and archivists in general, to dissociate themselves from the discipline of history in an effort to establish the credentials of their profession. The cost of this attitude was to deny the historical basis upon which many archival functions rest.³ George Bolotenko, writing in 1983 in *Archivaria*, also noted the ongoing debate between historians and archivists and stated bluntly that "melodramatic tocsins aside, the historian still makes the best archivist."⁴

1 Albert Ray Newsome, "The Archivist in American Scholarship," *The American Archivist* 2 (October 1939), pp. 217-20.

2 For a sampling of some of the many articles on the relationship between scholars and archivists, see Philip D. Jordan, "The Scholar and the Archivist — A Partnership," *American Archivist* 31 (January 1968), pp. 57-65; Alfred B. Rollins, Jr., "The Historian and the Archivist," *American Archivist* 32 (October 1969), pp. 369-74; W. Kaye Lamb, "The Archivist and the Historian," *American Historical Review* 68 (January 1963), pp. 385-91; Dwight L. Smith, "The Archivist and the Historian: First Cousins," *Illinois Libraries* 52 (February 1970), pp. 176-81; and Robert C. Sharman, "The Archivist and the Historian," *Archives and Manuscripts* 4 (February 1972), pp. 8-20.

3 Terry Cook, "Clio: The Archivist's Muse?," *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78), pp. 198-203.

4 George Bolotenko, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 5-25.

The debate over this issue continues among archivists in the United States as well. Frank Burke's 1981 article in the *American Archivist* deplored the tendency for archivists to confine their experience solely to the archival classroom and emphasized that archivists must realign themselves with academic historians and those in other disciplines if the archival profession is to progress.⁵ Richard J. Cox concurred with Burke by noting that archivists should employ all the best qualities of an historian in the selection, description, and interpretation of historical records.⁶

Other authors have addressed the question of the relationship between archivists and historians, but they have approached it from a different perspective. Instead of focusing on the question of whether an archivist should be trained as an historian or strictly as an archivist in carrying out basic archival duties, these authors have emphasized a different way for archivists to function as historians, namely through the pursuit of scholarly research and publication. As early as 1958, Lester Cappon noted the lack of scholarly activity among archivists, and it has been discussed by others even more recently. Writing in 1978, Wilcomb Washburn warned the archival profession about separating themselves from the historical profession and stated that "if the archivist is not identified as a scholar whose natural and instinctive commitment is to truth before administrative convenience, his word may not be taken seriously." Tom Nesmith advanced a similar argument in 1982, when he advocated greater involvement by archivists in academic historical research. He charged that more vigorous archival scholarship is necessary by the profession.⁷

It is the contention of this author that the archivist should function as an historian, most notably as researchers and scholars who publish the fruits of their efforts in the scholarly or popular community. Such a role does much to establish archivists as viable members of the scholarly or local communities which they serve and helps bring useful and positive publicity for their repositories.

With a few, notable exceptions, archivists have generally not functioned as historians or pursued historical research and publication, be it scholarly or popular. Many archivists today have extensive backgrounds and course work in history, but while some do pursue historical research, they are exceptions to the rule. The reasons for archivists' failure to function as historians are numerous and diverse. Archivists are frequently administrators with little free time to pursue research during summer months and the often extended vacations and sabbaticals enjoyed by members of the teaching faculty. When research is pursued, it is done more frequently on archival matters of interest to fellow archivists than on historical topics. Traditional beliefs that archivists should not research in their own collections, inadequate training and background, and lack of interest in pursuing such research are other reasons why archivists have not engaged in historical research.

5 Frank Burke, "The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 40-46.

6 Richard J. Cox, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs and Opportunities," *American Archivist* 46 (Winter 1983), pp. 31-41.

7 Lester Cappon, "Tardy Scholars Among the Archivists," *American Archivist* 21 (January 1958), pp. 3-16; Wilcomb Washburn, "The Archivist's Two Way Stretch," *Archivaria* 7 (Winter 1978), pp. 137-43; Tom Nesmith, "Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship," *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), pp. 5-26.

But historical research and publication can be a useful and important role for the archivist to assume. Publication and research offers an opportunity to publicize one's own archives and holdings, and it permits the archivist to experience first-hand the problems researchers face. By researching in other archival repositories, the archivist can acquaint himself with new ideas, methods of arrangement, and techniques used by other repositories. Researching in one's own collection, long considered a questionable practice, can be, if done within ethical guidelines, an opportunity to increase researcher interest in seldom used collections and generate more research activity for the archives. Since archivists know their material better than anyone, save the person or organization generating the collection, they can point out new areas for research, or questions and problems still unanswered.

For the purpose of this article, historical research is classified in two categories: scholarly, that is research intended for publication in scholarly journals or books, or presentation to academic audiences; and popular, that is research that appeals more to the non-academic community that may be published in local newspapers and newsletters, or presented to local civic groups and organizations. Both types of research are meaningful and while not all archivists may be capable of pursuing scholarly research, nearly all possess the ability to undertake popular historical research.

Scholarly research is difficult and demanding, but today's archivist is often well qualified to do such research, and the results can be rewarding. One benefit derived from scholarly research is the increased appreciation and perspective it provides archivists in dealing with historians and the problems confronted in historical research. An archivist who has undertaken historical research can better appreciate the researcher's incessant quest for supporting evidence, the concern for detail, precision, accurate documentation, and the imposing demands these goals put on the archivist. This is not to imply that archivists with no historical background or those who do not pursue such research cannot appreciate the historian's needs. But if historians and archivists do share a partnership, as some suggest, involvement in scholarly research can only increase the archivist's understanding and appreciation of researcher's needs.

A second advantage derived from scholarly research is the opportunity to view and use other repositories. Using another repository's finding aids and inventories, working in collections processed differently from the archivist's own, and observing how other archives are run can be a profitable experience. It provides an excellent opportunity to acquire new ideas on methods of arrangement, processing, and archival management. These ideas can be exchanged in other ways, at archival conferences and workshops, but by actually researching in another repository the archivist can better evaluate these techniques to see if they are usable and applicable to his or her repository.

In addition, scholarly research does much to strengthen the professional reputation of the archivist and the repository. It brings recognition from the scholarly community and enhances the archivist's academic credentials. This can be most useful in writing grant applications, attracting donors, and in other areas where the archivist must deal with the academic community.

In many instances, the best place to begin scholarly research is in the archivist's own holdings. For a long time, this has been viewed as poor practice. Certainly there

are ethical considerations. Archivists should not work in collections that have not been announced or are not available to others, and they must always be alert that equal access is given to all researchers, regardless if their work is superceded by that of their researchers. But publications that cite seldom-used collections, or present new avenues and topics of research, can be valuable to other scholars. Articles on research opportunities or important, but overlooked manuscript collections are examples of the type of research and publication projects archivists can pursue that do much to promote their archives and collections. The archivist who has processed a collection knows it better than anyone and he is the most qualified to write such articles that can be beneficial to other researchers. Historical or biographical articles that cite little-used collections are likewise helpful in stimulating further research.

Not all research done by archivists need be scholarly work intended for academic audiences. Often, the most beneficial research is popular research intended for the general public. This type of research requires less historical training and can be presented in a wider variety of ways. Like some scholarly research, it can also draw upon the archivist's own repository and holdings and is a good way to publicize collections.

One example of popular research well within the archivist's capacity is historical writing done for local newspapers. Especially popular are Sunday magazine sections that frequently feature articles relating to the city's or county's past. Such research and publication appeal to a large audience and is an excellent way to interest people in archives and history. Disasters, fires, and visits of historical personalities are only a few of the events that have historical interest and are often well documented in local archives or historical societies. Newsletters, bulletins, and magazines published by local organizations, industries, or civic groups provide other opportunities for popular historical publication.

Another more practical research project is an article or publication about the archivist's own holdings. A small leaflet or pamphlet pertaining to an archival exhibit or a brochure written in commemoration of a celebration or special event can offer other ways to promote archival holdings and interest people in the material housed in archives. As one author has noted, publishing bibliographical and historiographical essays and guides is one way archivists can avoid the dilemma of researching in their own collections, but still pursue research and publication.⁸

Publication is not the only means of making public current research. Popular as well as scholarly research can be presented in lectures, exhibits, or slide shows. Once again local community groups and organizations may provide the best audience. Presenting a slide show based on archival photograph holdings or delivering a talk on some aspect of history that is of interest to local groups are other ways to acquaint the public with the archives and to interest them in doing research.

The opportunities for archivists to function as historians are numerous and varied. Research provides an opportunity to publicize one's repository and holdings and offers a chance for the archivist to obtain a better appreciation of the problems historians, scholars, and researchers face. Researching in other archives allows

8 Richard J. Cox, "Bibliography and Reference for the Archivist," *American Archivist* 46 (Spring 1983), pp. 185-86.

archivists to acquaint themselves with new ideas concerning archival management. But there is an even larger advantage for the archivist who functions as an historian, and that is the increased prestige and professionalism such research brings the archivist's repository in the scholarly or local community. Today's archivist is better trained and qualified than ever before, but is often regarded merely as a custodian of dusty records, rather than a highly educated and competent member of the academic or local community. Research and publication is one way to shatter this misconception. Increased prestige among the academic or local community also has practical advantages. It may aid in attracting potential donors and worthwhile grant money.

The benefits of historical research can be useful and important if archivists broaden their role to become practising historians. Not all archivists may be adequately trained or capable of pursuing scholarly research, but most are competent enough to do some level of research that will increase their own perspective and bring increased benefits to themselves and their repositories. Contrary to what Alfred Ray Newsome stated some forty years ago and what many archivists continue to say today, perhaps an archivist ought to be an historian, for it is an important and worthwhile role to assume.