

Book Reviews

Planning for Canadian Archives: Proceedings of the First Congress on Archives, held at Kingston on June 3-4, 1982. MARION BEYEA and MARCEL CAYA, eds. Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1983, xxvi, 127 p. ISBN 0-7717-0098-9 \$3.00

Planning for Canadian Archives is the latest in a long line of reports, briefs, and studies which have been the main products of several years of thinking about the archival system in Canada. As most archivists are surely aware, the train of publications started in 1976 with *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*. Although the Commission recognized the primary role of archives in Canadian studies, it was not well informed about archives and so formulated many inappropriate recommendations. All the same, its attention to archives and recognition of the need for change proved salutary. Both its observations and recommendations provided a launching pad for further studies. Growing interest in the structures and activities of archives by outsiders was matched by the growing professional self-awareness among archivists which manifested itself in the formation of the Association of Canadian Archivists in 1975. *To Know Ourselves* offered an early opportunity to bring this new self-image to public attention. The Association has become the chief forum for archival debate since the publication of *To Know Ourselves*. Spurred by archivists and others to correct the deficiencies in *To Know Ourselves*, the Canada Council set up the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives to examine the state of Canadian archives. Its work generated several briefs and its 1980 report a host of responses. Since then the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee has spawned even more literature on the role and future of Canadian archives.

What, then, does *Planning for Canadian Archives* contribute to the evolution of thinking about archives in Canada? The answer is, unfortunately, not much. Although its title promises "planning," the papers and discussions seldom get down to plans. In fact, the introductory remarks prepare the reader for rather more modest goals. They speak of identifying common aims and establishing a consensus on directions — worthy objectives, but hardly nuts-and-bolts planning. The papers merely repeat the list of problems and possibilities which anyone familiar with recent literature has already read. First, there are a series of papers in which various interest groups set out what they expect of archives and archivists, presumably in an attempt to initiate dialogue. These papers fall into three categories: researchers and archives, governments and archives, and granting agencies and archives. In the second part of

the book, four archivists report their views on the present state of archives and their thoughts on future directions. The proceedings end with a series of resolutions which were approved at the Congress on Archives after the papers were presented and discussed.

These offerings are not significant contributions to Canadian archival literature. Most are prosaic reports on existing programmes and proposals. The effort to stimulate dialogue largely fails because those who are not archivists either do not clearly address the planning implications of their interests or make proposals which archivists are not prepared to accept. An example of the former comes from the genealogists who offer little more than pleas for archivists to be more responsive to their special needs. The reminder is welcome, but it does not advance the discussion of archival problems very far. Historian Jacques Mathieu is even more pressing. He makes a strongly-worded case for increased involvement by professional historians in selecting, handling, and making available archival material. The historians at the Congress were suspicious of the wisdom of placing the care of Canada's historical documents in the hands of "civil servants." Again, that concern has been raised before, though perhaps not so forcefully, and it meets predictable resistance. Hugh Taylor states rather bluntly that, while archivists are prepared to consult historians, "the final decision is the archivists' and they must face and live with the facts such as space limitations." The two papers on relations with government deal with the topic superficially. Neither contributor really gets past "motherhood" statements like George McBeath's plea for "a meaningful and effective working relationship between government's historical archives and its public records centre." The vital question of how to accomplish that important objective, that is to say, the planning element, is never addressed. In fact, the only occasion when the Congress got down to a substantive issue was in John Greer Nicholson's paper on the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. His observation that the SSHRCC is looking for archivists to make proposals for grants seems to offer opportunities for genuine planning. Ian Wilson, who chaired the Consultative Group, noted that the Group understood that the Council did not intend to fund archival projects. In light of Nicholson's comments, Wilson proposed that an advisory group be reactivated to address the question of the SSHRCC's funding role.

Planning for Canadian Archives concludes with presentations on that perennial favourite of archivists — networks. Once again, however, the papers merely contain restatements of a much discussed issue. This reviewer's final conclusion after reading all of the contributions is that archivists have talked and written enough about these matters. It is time to start planning. Archival programmes and the archival profession make little progress in meetings like the Congress on Archives. Committee work within the Association of Canadian Archivists, consultation with granting and governing agencies, donors and users, and the implementation of proposals within institutions hold out better prospects for development. The Congress on Archives seems to have been born out of a concern that archivists were not speaking with a common voice. Possibly the act of approving resolutions will provide the necessary appearance of unity on some basic issues, but if archivists seek enlightenment on those issues from the proceedings of the Congress they will be disappointed.

Keith Stotyn
Provincial Archives of Alberta