

descriptive processes. I can, nonetheless, see no reason under these or any other circumstances to abandon the provenance principle as a bottom line of archival arrangement and description.

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### ***Vancouver Island Project Fails to Grasp the Significance of Provenance***

As a defender of archivists and provenance-based archival information systems against librarians and historians, I wish to respond to some of the issues raised by Peter A. Baskerville and Chad M. Gaffield in their article, "The Vancouver Island Project: Historical Research and Archival Practice," in *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84).

The first issue is the contention that "Archivists have not been collecting the kind of data that present day historians are becoming interested in — not the least of which is 'long data series' — the type that can be quantified and manipulated by modern automation techniques." This also is the kind of non-narrative data that lies closest to local history and common people — and I might add that, along with family papers and many corporate records, bear complementary relationships. The authors' analysis is faulty. In the United States, for example, archivists have for decades sought means of bringing local government records into archival custody, and they have made some headway as existing collections of local records will attest. Is there a Canadian parallel? Lacking political clout, archivists jointly with historians and other potential users share the failures that we all know full well. The problem is political influence to get attention to local records, and not a lack of awareness among archivists. Archivists are typically buried in larger bureaucracies that are usually indifferent or not congenial for archives programmes, thereby hampering archivists' effectiveness in the political process. Coupled with this predicament has been the weakness of their professional associations and those of their historian allies.

As to "public history," the "movement" started at least in the U.S. from a need to find non-academic employment for trained historians; the "public" designation originates from employment of historians by federal agencies. The public historians have gravitated toward local history, finding that much of the kind of data for social history they would like to use is not there. But don't blame the archivists; manuscript librarians and others should get equal billing. It's the political processes that have not been mastered and it is that which requires common effort.

The Vancouver Island Project (VIP) is creating a "research tool" by canvassing records for data on local history. Well and good, but unless these sources are transferred to archival custody, there is no guarantee that the data will still be on site when needed. The idea of creating a "sophisticated finding aid, rather than centralization of the material itself" (p. 30) is fanciful, showing little sense of how fragile is the existence of records that remain outside archival custody. The VIP is really a records survey and provides the requisite information to implement a general archival programme. Without the second step, the VIP will be as fruitless as the U.S. Historical Records Survey was.

The next issue relates to the principle of provenance and original order. First, provenance relates to records origins; records are given meaning by being associated with the human agencies that generated them, maintained them, and used them for their own needs. They can later be made available to others who use them for different purposes. Original order is another matter, but it does not deserve the sanctity status it has been too often accorded. Provenance — yes; original order — no. If the latter obscures provenance, forget it.

The weakness in archival descriptive programmes generally is that they do not use all the information that is given by provenance before embarking on content analysis. At the file unit level, for example, there are file headings for proper names and topical subjects and all that is required to direct persons to the file units are index entries derived from them. Rarely has this ever been done in the field. Arrangement must be the basis of description, and the very index terms that are the basis for arrangement must be incorporated in the finding aid. The latter must be used as the controlled source indexing or cataloging information. All this can be done in a provenancially based system and unless it is done there is no justification for accusing provenance of being deficient. Provenancially given information has barely been tapped, but it should be tapped if the cost-benefits to be derived from the kind of content analysis done in the VIP can be justified.

At the file unit level of institutional records and personal papers, there will be found the kind of data that reflects what people are doing and how they are affected by the institutions they have created. This is the “informational value” in archival records that becomes more important than “evidential value” in the long run. Correspondingly, as evidential value declines, so, too, does the significance of original order. But the informational content in the institution’s records has bearing on the lives of people, directly or indirectly. To get at it, archivists must start with the records in their institutional context, be it tax assessment or census or immigration records, union or business records, family or personal papers. This institutional context represents their provenance, and their retention according to their origin is what gives them their original meaning. Added meaning occurs when the same proper names and topical terms are found in other contexts, other holdings.

What do the authors mean when they say the VIP survey form “attempts to combine archival description with extended qualitative assessment?” (p. 132) It seems to me that the authors fall into the traditional trap of trying to describe records in terms of user needs — current and anticipated — without first describing records as they are, with all of the index terms already existing as terms in file unit designations that make up records series. Such an orientation as they provide is in fact the traditional one, while provenance remains the truly novel one because it has so rarely been fully employed to extract the information that is inherent in provenancially given data.

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