

Counterpoint

Of Ends and Means: In Defence of the Archival Ideal

by **GEORGE BOLOTENKO**

Though somewhat surprised by the stridency of the spirited critique which my article elicited from a number of archivists, I am nonetheless grateful to them for their attention.¹ It allows me another opportunity to clarify that which requires clarification, to develop my position further, and to deal once again with a matter which I consider of no small import for archivists — the question of a vocational ethos. As set out in my original article, I feel strongly that the “keepers of the well” can arrive at an archival ethos only within the context of “historian-scholar-archivist,” and it is to this end that I direct what follows.

Unfortunately, all my critics seem to have misread my purpose. I find this a disturbing observation for the following reason. As set out in my first piece, the *sine qua non* of a good archivist (as also of a good historian) is his understanding of the context within which documents are created, words are written, things are said; and with all my detractors, who are also archivists, I find this sense of context missing, at least in so far as they directed their critical faculties at my essay. They all sprang heartily, with a gusto verging on the maudlin, at everything in my essay — word, phrase, clause, sentence — which ill-accommodated with their perception of the substance of archivy. They consequently distorted by inference and implication, they reduced illogically, they came to findings not even remotely suggested by my article — and all of this was occasioned, it seems to me, by their ahistorical, acontextual treatment of my essay.

I will give but one example of the many possible of their misuse of my article, and that concerns my “mistreatment,” as they see it, of library science — although I could point to similar distortions concerning my alleged mistreatment of records management or the new information revolution. I choose library science for two reasons: first, my critics ascribe the most unwarranted of statements to me as they

1 My original article was “Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well,” *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 5-25. My severest critics are Carl Spadoni, “No Monopoly for ‘Archivist-Historians’: Bolotenko Assailed,” Anthony L. Rees, “Bolotenko’s Siege Mentality,” R. Scott James, “A Wearisome Issue,” and Bob Taylor-Vaisey, “Archivist-Historians Ignore the Information Revolution,” all appearing in the Special Feature on “The Debate Over History and Archives” in *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 286-308. I welcome the support, from different perspectives, in that same Special Feature from Patrick Dunae, Thomas Spencer, and Ernest Dick.

play with my words on library science; secondly, if I do not err, it seems to me that it is with something like the tools, the means at the disposal of the library scientist, that they wish to define their “new” archivist, the archivist as “technician.”

First, Dr. Spadoni finds my assertion that library scientists and archivists have antithetical “mind-sets” disturbing and difficult to comprehend, and easy to ridicule. It is not really so complex a matter. If he so wishes, I can substitute other expressions in its place. Call it, for example, “acquired attitudinal values” (gibberish?); call it the result of “socialization” at the work site; call it a “methodological orientation” acquired through reading and on-site training. I do not see in this any association with mediaeval physiological determinism (phrenology, I believe, is the word). Why such virulence, from one who purportedly saw “ranting,” “abuse,” “polemical argument,” and ill-adjustment to the electronic information revolution in my article, I cannot comprehend. Even if I were guilty of all the above, would this be sufficient for Dr. Spadoni to bring so pathetic a charge against me?

In something akin to the foregoing, Mr. Taylor-Vaisey wonders “What archivist actually perceives library scientists as rather lowly in relation to the academic world? The answer must be the archivist who is a historian.” As a tautology, the proposition is nonsensical; as a distorted inference deduced from my writings, it is, if not presumptuous, certainly inaccurate. In the same vein, Mr. Rees writes that “the author sees the knowledge of library science and records management as perverse and a corruption and this is silly.” To this I can only respond by suggesting that Mr. Rees’ tailored inference merits his own qualifier, much more than anything I say on library science.

Furthermore, Messrs. Taylor-Vaisey and Spadoni have deduced that I either give an “inflexible definition” of, or “describe,” library science work. Those are self-serving distortions; in my treatment of library science, I address only the arguments proffered for *a close alliance* of library science and archives — and, to the best of my ability, I find them wanting. I am well aware of the excellence of library work; I have no antipathy to cataloguing and indexing, with a sophistication evolved by several hundred years of practice. At the same time, I do not see in this sufficient grounds for close linkage of archivy and library science. There is no question of lowly status or corruption, there is no pretence at description of library science — only a studied disagreement.

And it is this disagreement which mightily disturbs Dr. Spadoni. The fact that Peace and Chudacoff “contend” (i.e., present on the grounds of rational argument) that library schools are the best places for the education of archivists is simply that: a contention only; it does not invest their contention with infallibility. Why, then, should I be “content with reconciliation” if my “contentions” lead me to differing conclusions? (Interestingly, I don’t quite understand the usage of the term “reconciliation;” were library science and archivy once “conciliated”? Moreover, I don’t see it as a question of “conciliation,” “reconciliation,” or whatever, but as a question of cooperation and cross-fertilization — but that is another matter.)

As mentioned earlier, not one of these critics — Rees, Spadoni, James, or Taylor-Vaisey — has cared to subject my article to a systematic critique in root-and-branch, in its wholeness. That, incidentally, may be why not one of them grasped the direction in which I moved, the sub-units of general theme; and that is why none have understood my conclusion. Mr. James, particularly, seemed to have

difficulty grasping the meaning in all my muddling, perhaps especially in the matter of the archivist-historian-scholar. I hope, in what follows, to clarify whatever difficulties attended their perception of my essay in its various parts. And the best manner in which to do this is, I think, by a brief recapitulation of the key stages in the construction of my article and the motivation behind it.

When I took up archival work three years ago, I began reading intensively in the area and attended the Public Archives of Canada's Archives Course. I was struck, time and again, by what seemed to me a peculiarity — the vigorous drive to exorcize the historian from the role of archivist. I was intrigued generally by the search for an archival identity, and the course in which the vocation was moving: hence my article and its direction.

That direction, according to Messrs. Rees and James, is misguided. They suggest that I may be out of touch “with those archivists who are presently determining the directions in which the profession will go over the next decade;” Mr. James adds that the whole business of historian-archivist-scholar may only be an in-house PAC tempest. I doubt this for the following reasons. Anyone reading the *American Archivist*, *Archivaria*, *Archives and Manuscripts*, *Prologue et al.*, will see that the matter of an *archival ethos* (and the “historian” syndrome) is still very much alive. This was further confirmed by my experiences during the PAC Archives Course; one-half of the thirty attenders, incidentally, were from outside the PAC and were perhaps even more exercised by the question of archival identity and the archivist-historian nexus than were the PAC people. Out of deference to Mr. James, it *may* be that this question is most hotly debated at the PAC, but that may be because the PAC constitutes the single largest concentration of archivists in the land which, perhaps unhappily for him, does exert some influence on the course of events in archivy and “the directions in which the profession will go over the next decade.”

But, back to the article. I perceived a visceral drive to evict the historian from the role of archivist, to replace him, under the press of modernism, with something else, to seek out a professional identity uniquely “archival”: that was set out in my introductory pages (pp. 5-8). I found this incongruous, given the historically close — I repeat again, *generic* — connection between archivists and historians (pp. 8-9). Next, I questioned the validity of the arguments of the chief “separators” who strove to cast archivy in a new light, free of its historian link (pp. 9-12), and subsequently argued, from a historical context spanning several centuries and two continents, that this was both unwise and hardly possible (pp. 12-14). It is no small consideration that none of my critics addressed themselves in any substance to all of the above. That is why most of their criticisms are out of context — a sad state for keepers of the well. That is also why their critique is in leaf only, ignoring, as it does, the groundsoil, root, trunk and branch of my construction. That may account for their seizing upon my “historian-archivist-scholar” coupling.

First, in this regard, I quite agree with Dr. Spadoni when he writes that “some historians make excellent archivists and others do not. It is very much a matter of individual performance.” What elicited this truism I do not know; nowhere did I argue the contrary. What I did argue, when citing such authorities as Posner, Leland, Bemis, Buck, Doughty, Schellenger *et al.*, is that historians have made, and will probably continue to make, better archivists than those lacking such training.

The reasons for this are many and valid; those who wish can find them on pages written by the illustrious archivists above-named, who all set them forth much better than I could in the short space here.

There are, however, several things which must be said here. The chief attribute of an historian, because it accounts for the historian-archivist-scholar coupling, is his interest in man and society, in beginnings and evolution, in historical truth gleaned by the arduous process of subjection of all possible historical sources to the critical faculty in search of knowledge. It seems to me that such a person will make a better archivist than someone who does not have such an interest. And that is why I feel Felix Hull's "sense of history" is very much being an historian "in disposition." Many go through life unencumbered by any concern about the human past and evolution, with no concern for understanding it in context. They do not have an historical interest or disposition and, all methodological tools aside, will not make good archivists.

Contrary to what Dr. Spadoni says, I never argued that an historian, in any narrow sense (i.e., registration at a university department of history) had any monopoly on the archival calling. It matters not if the individual is a zoologist, musicologist, linguist, and so on. All of these disciplines have a particular history and also share in the history of mankind; those in these disciplines who have "a disposition" towards historical-evolutionary comprehension grounded upon the exercise of reason in search of truth can, if they so wish, become fine archivists.

It is also true, however, that a person with the above disposition, armed with the tools acquired in formal academic training in history, can become a finer archivist. Without the historical context, to what do preparatory archival studies alone at a university reduce? To techniques and methodologies alone. Technicians, I daresay, are not the ideal servants of a cultural end. Any historian can learn technique: I wonder if the obverse can be posited as axiomatically?

The above, I trust, accounts for the first hyphen in my coupling (i.e., the historian-archivist). The second coupling (i.e., the archivist-scholar) is directed against people like Messieurs James and Rees who, for no good reason, place it under ban. I do not at all understand Mr. James' categorical imperative that "those who do not want to look after records (and researchers) might give up the scholar's life." It seems to me that, given the historian's disposition and training, work in an archival capacity can lead naturally to scholarly activity. The tradition is very much alive in Europe, and, until several decades ago, was much the same in Canada. That is also my answer to his question about "how many of our best archivists are scholars?" How many are not?

In dealing with this question, I find it rather odd that Dr. Spadoni seems to march in the vanguard of the separators and technicians. He, after all, is schooled to the level of a doctorate in history and philosophy, and is himself a specialist on Bertrand Russell, whose records are in his care. I daresay Dr. Spadoni is doing a splendid job, and was hired for that position specifically because of his specialized academic expertise on the records in his purview. The matter of his library science qualifications is after the fact; again, this is not to denigrate the utility of library science methodologies, but simply to place them, and Dr. Spadoni, in proper context. Does he imagine that, had his first degree been Home Economics or Mediaeval Vernaculars or Sociology or French Literature, he (his Library Science

training notwithstanding) would be in his present position? He himself, by virtue of his training and his office, seemingly gives the lie to a position which he so volubly maintains in his critique of my essay. Indeed, it is precisely his background and training that I recommended for the ideal keepers of the well.

By way of finishing with this matter I would like to point out that I am not at all making a whole and binding prescription for proper conduct by all archivists. What I am doing is suggesting that the vocation, in its crystallization, remain fluid enough to allow for the scholarship which once did, and still naturally can, and does, attend it, and which gave it birth and nurtured it. I am also suggesting that it is in this that some *credo* or *ethos* can be found, and that all of this is in danger before the press of the “separators” who, in tuning into the sometimes tinny clanging of modern “professionalism,” are on the verge of diving into a colossal confusion between ends and means.

A word here on the purpose of archives might be in order, for it provides the general matrix which nourishes my motives and my comprehension of the calling of an archivist. I doubt very much that anyone can contend today that the areas of cultural endeavour are not receding. The overriding purpose which society has always found in archives is precisely cultural — a knowledge of self, of historical evolution, of whence and, perhaps to some small degree, whither. No other purpose (though there are many other useful and valid uses of archival material) is as central: social justice, administrative utility, financial and proprietary records, economic usefulness, scientific growth, personal rights — all these applied areas and more have been served pragmatically by material stored in archives. But, all this readily granted, is this sufficient ground to declare categorically that utility of records and able file clerks to retrieve them is all there is to archives? I would venture an unqualified “no.” It is an added benefit of no small significance, but it is not the sum of archives (unless, of course, one perceives archives solely as a business operation, which may be Mr. Taylor-Vaisey’s prejudice). In sum, there is a broad cultural dimension to archives which, like most things cultural today, is under assault. That also is perhaps why the traditional “archivist,” as historian and scholar, is also under assault. He, in the nature of the archival institution which he kept, is perceived as an anachronism ill-reconciled to the modernist forces of today which, to the exclusion of broad cultural content, stand largely on the twin foundations of utility and technique.

On pages 6-8 of my article, I set out what I perceive to be the modernist forces driving archivists toward a modern redefinition of themselves; on pages 15-23, I developed the consequences of this more fully. I fear a more precise definition of the “profession” to the detriment of its traditional association with history because, once the metaphysical heart is wrung out, the only thing that remains is technique — the archivist become technician.

Mr. James writes that, “I am disappointed that this tired issue of archivists and historians is still being used to denigrate the new, healthy, positive relationships which archivists have developed with other professional and client groups to the benefit of all.” While he may be disappointed, I am saddened to read the above, if that is what Mr. James extracted from my essay. That I reject too close an affiliation with library science is no indication of disrespect for that vocation; that I am wary of records managers is no sign of denigration; that I am suspicious of over-

bureaucratization of the archival profession is no signal of enmity towards bureaucrats; that I dislike gibberish is no indication of hostility to the advent of technology; that I believe in a close affiliation with scholarship is no elitist suggestion of disregard and contempt for a non-scholarly clientele.² I do not perceive how, in all of this, I am, in Mr. Rees' words, driving "wedges of fear and mistrust between our work and that of administrators, technocrats, or records managers." It seems that those who misinterpret and misrepresent my words do the driving. If denigration is to be found anywhere, it is in the critiques directed at my article, and thus implicitly at those to whom I have had recourse as authorities, at the present condition of the European archival vocation, and at the American and Canadian archival traditions of very recent memory.

Those traditions are worth saving wherever they exist, and reviving wherever they have fallen away. In them resides the spirit and the ethos of the archival calling. Records management, good library cataloguing and indexing, sound bureaucratic administration (which takes note of archives as a cultural-scholarly institution), and new technologies of information storage and retrieval are valuable new techniques or tools for the archivist, much like numismatics, paleography, Latin, and diplomatic once were. *But they are only that and nothing more; they cannot be held as anything more, nor can they come to define the archivist as some novel "information manager."* The archivist still remains as historian, the one who has an historical perception of either private or institutional records, the mode and context of their creation, the one who comprehends them in generality and nuance, who can do justice to their organic nature and often complex provenance, who can place them in the context of societal development as a whole — the one who, in a word, serves a cultural end.

This brings me to the matter of my Nietzschean citation and perhaps to the symbolic heart of my article. Mr. Rees found it out of context, although it is not clear whose context — Nietzsche's or mine. It is out of context in neither case, nor is it

2 I find hard to understand the intimation and thinly-disguised charge of snobbery directed at an archivist who is both historian and practising scholar. The level of erudition of an archivist is no barometer of corresponding elitism and condescension towards a non-scholarly clientele. In fact, it seems to be that the better schooled and learned an archivist, the better prepared he is to handle any query or consultation, regardless of whether he is dealing with an academic or a non-scholarly client. In fact, I find something distasteful in the above charge because it intimates quite the reverse of what it intends; rather than treating any man as simply any man searching for archival information, it suggests that the "non-scholarly" clientele is too obtuse to deal with a scholarly archivist. Interestingly, then, it is less the elitist scholar-archivist, and more the self-styled protagonist of the "ordinary people," who condescends and degrades the mind of the *demos*, and perceives them as the little people too slow-witted to deal with a scholar-archivist. Is there not something of reverse snobbery in this — the more unschooled, the nobler? Even if it were the case that the non-scholarly were so turbid of mind, that surely would not present any compelling argument that the archivist should sink into a similar condition. Consequently, I trust that the above will assuage Mr. James, who speaks as the self-styled consul of the *populus*, the conscience of the "little people," when he hears me "bemoan[ing]" the loss of some "old exclusive relationship" between archivists and historians. I know full well that the professional scholar is not, numerically, our main client. But I will maintain categorically that he is our most important one. He, after all, is the seminal user of primary source archival material: it is his interpretation and presentation which will shape the popular mind as his findings eventually percolate through society as general histories, historical novels and plays, school texts, popular magazine articles, films, and television and radio programmes, and so on. Regardless of whether he serves the scholar or the non-scholar, the more schooled and erudite the archivist, the more valuable he is to his clients.

ironic. Despite the outward flippancy of the statement, there is, as with everything Nietzsche wrote, a profound depth to it, and a meaning far from anarchic. It was a commentary which questioned too simple a rush to newness, to form without content, to means over ends. It was no nihilistic glorification of the useless, but a reaffirmation of the imperative for cultural, ethical content in the new age then dawning, and now with us coming to flower.

It is on the above grounds, to answer Mr. James, that I have discovered “an imminent threat” to the calling of the archivist. The nature of the critiques composed by my critics indicates that threat. There are many who rush to new forms; there are many who prescribe new means. In this there is no danger in and of itself to archivy. But when this is directed towards the archival calling, when the search for redefinition reduces to technique alone, and when this is wedded to the Nortonian “file-clerk: bingo! archivist!” — I do begin to fear unpleasant consequences. The best of library science cataloguing, indexation, and so on; the finest computer and video-disc system; the most rational of records and information management systems — what is this, and more, in the hands of a “professional” but hollow technique without something as ancient, ephemeral, and unquantifiable as an *ethos*. And that, however much some dislike it, must be grounded and immersed in the eye and mind of the historian.

That is why, it seems to me, the issue of what an archivist is — an historian-archivist-scholar in a cultural whole or a discretely separated information technician of a new age — is a relevant question for today. One of my critics has characterized my essay as “a classic piece of dead-horse flogging.” Now the best manner for dealing with dead horses, I think, is to quietly and quickly skirt them by, rather than leap headlong into the decomposing carcass. Might it be that the late-lamented equine still has sufficient life in its entrails to disturb Mr. Rees and rouse him to vigorous rage. In a similar vein, Mr. James, “tired and wearied” though he was by my piece, summoned up enough reserve of bodily strength to respond to it. I would like to think that he did so not only out of pique, but because, behind all my words, there was an idea which moved him in some direction or other.

I would like to offer the following conclusion. Modern archives were born as a correlative of modern history: nothing can alter that. The position of archivist, as a keeper of the cultural and historical heritage, has long been staffed by historians in the broad sense of the historian-archivist-scholar linkage: nothing should change that. The mind of the historian remains the substance, the seed crystal of archivy — all the rest (library science techniques, automated information retrieval systems, records management tools, bureaucratic administrative sciences, and so forth), while desirable and of extraordinary utility, remain only tools, only means. There must be an end design, an *ethos*, in whose service these tools are employed.

There was until recently in North America, and is to this day in Europe, an end, a purpose to archives and archivists, and that purpose is participation in the great cultural adventure of history — in its study and its writing and its dissemination. It is a grand tradition under assault by technicians and separators posing as the cutting edge of modernity. In speaking of their newness, and while brandishing fresh swords, they forget that to their use of weapons there should be some purpose. Or is it sufficient simply to glorify the novel tool, to set it up as an idol, to deify it in its own right? I would still prefer to think that it is the idea, the end purpose, and not the means at the disposal of the blind which fires the archivist and defines his calling.