

A Guinea Pig's Perspective on the UBC Master of Archival Studies Programme

by SHELLEY SWEENEY

We are at a turning point in our profession. From this point we can forge ahead by continuing to support advanced education for the archivist, we can dither in indecision and go nowhere, or we can languish and begin to regress by lowering our standards. The "advanced education" I refer to is the Master of Archival Studies (MAS) programme currently offered by the University of British Columbia. I myself am in the process of fulfilling its requirements, being one of the first class of archival aspirants, and I therefore offer a different perspective from that of Professor Eastwood in his recent commentary.¹

When I began the MAS programme, I had little idea of the myriad issues that were tangled up with such a course of action. The further I got, however, the more I learned, heard, and absorbed from the archival community. I found myself delicately picking my way through an almost bewildering mixture of suspicion, confusion, wariness, and delight, suddenly aware that I, with my eight colleagues, was under the archival community's eye as everyone watched to see whether we would put a foot wrong, or reveal something dazzling and unexpected. With a smile plastered on my face, I moved carefully, storing up everything that was said. Now I am ready to answer those expectations.

It would seem to me that no one would take exception to the idea that advanced education for the archivist is necessary. Indeed, the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA) commissioned their Education Committee to study the whole question of archival education and in 1976 adopted the document the committee presented which outlined a curriculum and established guidelines for a master's degree in archival science. Yet the whole matter was shelved and allowed to fade out of sight. Were it not for the impetus provided by a member of the University of British Columbia's Library School, Professor Roy Stokes, we still, to this day, might not have a Master of Archival Studies programme.

Amazing! On the one hand we have the tacit approval of the Association; on the other hand we have the total disinterest or unwillingness to act on that approval. This curious ambivalence may be explained in part, I believe, by the confusion that arises over the question of education. While archivists argue the merits of practicums

1 Terry Eastwood, "The Origins and Aims of the Master of Archival Studies Programme at the University of British Columbia," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 35-52.

and debate the necessity of theses, they miss the point: education is merely a means to an end. Can we agree on what that end is; in other words, can we answer the question, "What is an archivist?" Once we define the end product, we shall know better how to go about achieving our goal.

At the 1983 conference of the Society of American Archivists held in Minneapolis, a good reason for defining what we are arose in discussions concerning education and professional certification. Problems with cutbacks encountered from the federal government stemmed, some felt, from a basic misunderstanding on the government's part of what archives and archivists were all about. Archivists had to find some way to communicate their mandates and raise their profiles to rid themselves of the distressing vulnerability that had haunted them up to now. David Gracy's speech at the final luncheon summed the situation up. To paraphrase his words: "You can be an Orchidvist, or activist, or whatever you want, but it is time that we, as a profession, decide on who we are and then inform the world of our decision."

Everyone could appreciate the ironic humour of his speech because practically everyone had had just such an experience of being confused with some similar sounding profession, whether activist, anarchist, or archaeologist. Is it not time, then, to decide what we are once and for all? Are we historians? Librarians? Managers? Little old men with dust on our shoulders? In Canada there are conflicting opinions. There are those who feel that archives are merely an adjunct to librarianship that can easily be covered by an extra course or so, taken during the librarianship programme. Then there is a large element of historian/archivists who sneer at all librarian/archivists and frankly cringe at the thought of descending to the levels of "mere civil servants." In this regard, even the Public Archives of Canada has held that only those with history degrees can be deemed "archivist." The latter attitude springs up partly, I think, in response to the respective images of the two fields: librarianship as professional and history as academic. Professor Eastwood explained the resistance to professionalism: "Our profession in North America has resisted rigorous professional education based on a study of the practice of archival administration, because it was feared we would lose the intellectual substance and status we derive from our roots in historical study."²

Yet some of the most valuable things our profession has to learn comes from the field of librarianship. Instead of "reinventing the wheel," we can study the advances librarianship has made and how it has made them, and apply the techniques it has used to our own field. The techniques of cataloguing and indexing offer examples for us to study and utilize. The concepts of networking, already far advanced in the library world, are applicable, with some adaptation, to our own and indeed are slowly gaining acceptance. As well, librarianship has made great progress utilizing computers in controlling bibliographic information; archives can learn from this.

That is not to say that history is "so much velvet." An appreciation of history, the use of historical perspective, and the knowledge of methods of inquiry and interpretation of the historian are all valuable elements that make up the archivist. But there is a difference between one having an *appreciation* for history and being an

2 *Ibid.*, p. 40.

historian, yearning to write the inside story, to produce the “true” version of some incident, to somehow “correct” the view the world has of the past. As Hilary Jenkinson rightly said, “The Archivist is not and ought not to be an Historian.”³

There is a potential conflict of interest for the historian/archivist. One example that immediately springs to mind is the historian who is tempted to hold back archival material while he writes a sensational historical exposé. Are we archivists to serve others or to serve ourselves? Another problem that can easily arise is the running of an unbalanced acquisition programme by the historian-in-disguise. The inclination to anticipate historiographical fluctuations and collect accordingly is more likely to be present in one who is thinking of what material they personally would like to be working on than one who is concerned about meeting the needs of all researchers. As well, the production of specialist guides and exhibitions for a select, favoured audience at the expense of the enormous group of researchers who fill the ranks of the “other” category on user questionnaires (the genealogists, for example), is more likely to occur with the historian/archivist.⁴

Thus we should not be historians. We certainly are not librarians, however closely affiliated the field, since dealing with the great amorphous masses of archival material presents whole series of problems that discrete units such as books, for example, do not. This merely tells us what an archivist is not, however, and does not bring us any closer to settling the question of what an archivist is. Our American colleagues cannot give us the answer because they face an even greater conflict stemming from their traditional separation of manuscripts, which are kept by historical societies, and archives, normally maintained by different levels of government. Thus we have come to a standstill, and this is where we would have stayed had not the University of British Columbia gone ahead, without waiting for us to finally make up our minds, and provided in the new Master of Archival Studies programme the answer to “what is an archivist?”

The MAS programme aims to produce the generic “archivist,” one who is foremost a generalist, but who may specialize if desirous of doing so. It does this first of all by attempting to resolve the conflict between librarianship and history. Although for reasons of practicality, the programme is physically located in the School of Librarianship, it is under the joint supervision of the Library School and History Department. Next, it offers a number of core courses which explore the facets of the well-rounded “archivist,” such as archival science, records management, automation and archives, historiography, and conservation. These courses provide a stable foundation upon which one may build. Elective courses in management, cataloguing, history, and so forth aim at broadening one’s abilities and sensibilities. One can choose from a broad selection any course which may aid in one’s chosen specialization, such as a geography course in mapping for the budding cartographic archivist, or the film appreciation course for the future film archivist.

The programme really revolves around the two archival science courses taught by Professor Eastwood, however. What do these classes offer to sharpen our definition of the “archivist?” They maintain that the student must have a thorough grounding

3 Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration* (London, 1937), p. 123.

4 The fact that historians and students did not make up the great part of archival researchers was underlined at the Society of American Archivists Conference.

in archival principles, so in these classes one *reads*: Jenkinson, Schellenberg, Cross-Norton, Posner, and my favourites, Muller, Feith, and Fruin. These are a few of the older archival scientists. I refer to them as scientists because their writings amount to a science, and I speak of science here as “knowledge amassed ... tested, co-ordinated, and systematized,” which draws on a body of truths, or laws, generally leading to the formulation of principles.⁵ These principles, gleaned from their writings, carry one through one’s archival career. However much techniques may change and be updated, the reasons for doing things stays the same. Such concepts as provenance, l’ordre primitif, organic growth, evidential and informational values, impartiality, and authenticity help shape one’s attitudes and one’s thoughts, and leave one able to find appropriate responses to the ever-changing archival world.

Next, these classes maintain that the student should be thoroughly familiar with the current archival scene, with all of its problems, and with the archival personalities of today. So, one reads what archivists and others have to say on such contemporary issues as the Canadian concept of “total archives” and its significance for the question of separation by media, or on access to public records, or on the concepts of regionalism *versus* centralism, to name a few. The principles that one discusses in the first round of inquiry help one through the tangled maze of the second. At the same time, one explores all the practical demands of the profession, considering the merits of as many solutions as offer themselves. One also explores what it means to be a “professional,” to adhere to a code of ethics that guide one’s actions. One learns the archival world as it once was, as it is today, and what it could be in the future. In short, one learns to observe, to absorb, to balance, and to weigh what already exists in preparation for future actions. The most important thing to note is that with these classes one is not entering the profession *blind* and, although one does not have all the answers and would not claim to have, one knows where to look for the answers, and can judge those answers against the principles one has learned. Thus, instead of trying on the job to learn from scratch, one can work on *refining*, so important for a profession as young as ours.

While the course provides the limits of the definition of “archivist,” it also performs a service for the archival community by asking that its graduates produce a thesis. These theses will provide a base from which the archival community may collectively build, defining and refining a number of subjects which receive little or no attention at the present time. Slowly these contributions will help create a body of scholarly work. The thesis is equally important for the student, however. It provides an opportunity for in-depth research and analysis. The student can take a specific subject and concentrate on it, learning to appreciate the intricacies of working with raw data, experiencing contemporary real-life archival situations, and contributing his effort in the end to the archival world. As one may gather by counting units and hours and dividing by semesters, however, there are only four months in which to begin and complete this thesis. Four months to produce the full-blown, scholarly exposition that not only is expected by the university community, but also is demanded by the students of themselves, is not simply enough time. This is one aspect of the programme that needs rethinking.

5 *Webster’s Dictionary* (Cleveland, 1950).

From one extreme of those critics who claim that the MAS programme is not scholarly enough, I turn to the other, as personified by Bob Woadden, who told his audience at the ACA Conference in 1982 that with only a three-month summer practicum, the programme was not practical enough! I would simply say this: it is easier to learn something and then explore it through a full-time job than to dabble with extended practicums, fumbling in inexperience and ignorance, picking up theory in bits and pieces, and learning through brief courses crammed into a few weeks or through night classes. The purpose of the practicum, sandwiched into the summer between first and second years, is actually to show prospective archivists what the real archival world can be like and to give them a broad cross-cut of different experiences and points of view, such as is provided by the Public Archives of Canada as a sponsor institution. Students, in turn, can provide willing and eager hands for tasks the sponsoring body wishes done. The practicum, filling the gap between the years, also succeeds in making the students feel more than ever that they eat, drink, breath, and live archives. It has led some of us to the conclusion that "where two or more archivists are gathered, so shall archives be discussed among them."

People have asked me what I think of the programme now that I am working. I feel as adequately prepared as any *course* could make me. That it could be improved slightly with some additions, some deletions, and some fine-tuning, I have not a doubt. I have wished, for example, that more attention had been paid to forms management and to the designing of the interior of an archives, but I was not totally unprepared when I had to tackle those two endeavours here at the University of Regina Archives. There could also have been a finer blending of archives, records management, computer science, and general management. This will only take place, however, when UBC faculty members are available who have experience in both archives and these allied fields. In this developmental stage, the programme will obviously be altered as input filters back from former students, employers, and outside members of the profession.

What does all this mean for our profession? Ernst Posner, in his essay on archives in Europe, said that the *École des Chartes* in France was so successful because it could offer its archival graduates a closed job market which would ensure their employment in return for their time and money.⁶ While in Canada such a thing would not be possible, or even desirable, this points out how dependent the MAS programme is on the support of the archival community. Since each of the first class of MAS candidates is presently employed, it would seem that the first round has been played out successfully. It is now up to the Association of Canadian Archivists to continue its support in the years to come, and to communicate its willingness to do so to the University of British Columbia to ensure that the life-blood of the programme continues to flow. As a profession, we can do no less.

6 Ken Munden, *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Washington, 1967).