

## *Letters to the Editor*

### *“Two Solitudes” in Archives?*

I have been following the exchange of views about history and archives. Of course, the debate has an important bearing on the educational preparation of archivists, and so greatly interests me. Given my own situation, I am deeply interested in developing a rationale for archives as a field of study. Although archivists in North America have manifestly failed to develop archives as a field of study, I do not see how it helps remedy the problem (which is becoming, finally, widely acknowledged) by casting stones in our glass house. As much as we might depend on insights from other fields, my own view is that a distinctive archival discipline with its own focus and sphere will never arise from a synthesis of the perspectives of other disciplines. We must develop our own based on the nature of archives, their institutional care, and their use by society.

As I stated in my account of the Master of Archival Studies Programme in *Archivaria* 16, neither the profession nor we at UBC have elaborated just what the precise curricular relationship between historical and archival studies ought to be. It is not enough to say that archivists must be well grounded in historical study because that completely avoids asking what the archivist's own study is to be. I cannot help feeling that George Bolotenko in *Archivaria* 16 and 18, like many of the archivists he calls upon for support, believes there is no basis for the academic study of archives. In that case, there is no profession, just a job to be done by anyone who comes along, with employers deciding who qualifies to do the job. The result, it seems to me, is far from satisfactory, even at the PAC. Not that I think the course of studies we offer at UBC can set us right in one stroke. Frankly, the quality of education we give to aspiring and practising archivists depends directly on our own intellectual resourcefulness as a profession. One of our primary objectives ought to be to raise the quality of our thinking about archives and thereby, one hopes, the practical execution of our work. Surely, our scholarship and writing ought to have some relationship to what we do, which alone distinguishes it from historical scholarship.

Strangely, Bolotenko actually undersells the role of historical study in the making of archivists because he does not identify and *illustrate* the ways in which historical study informs the daily work of the archivist. Strident pleading for historical perspective on the part of archivists is unlikely to convince any but those already committed to the cause. If there is a drift away from the archivist as a species of historical scholar, and I agree with Bolotenko that there is, it is probably the inevitable result of the growing complexity and contemporary

orientation of archives. The task is to integrate elements of our traditional perspective into our work with contemporary records and expand that perspective for the benefit of all those who would use archives now and in the future. Appraising and revealing the information contained in archives, to name but two of the challenges facing us, require that we work out a corpus of ideas (some would say theory) on which to base our practice. Historical study might help us articulate those ideas, but it cannot be a substitute for their study and development. Of course, the outcome of all of our thinking about archives ought to serve historical scholarship or else it is seriously flawed. The archivist is indeed in a vital position vis-à-vis historical scholarship. Only archivists today can extract the record of enduring value and place it in the context in which future historians will use it. In *Archivaria* 17, Don Page nibbles at the edge of that idea, but he assumes that the way to its realization is through a relationship between institutional historians and archivists, much as historian C.P. Stacey did in his address on the centenary of the PAC in 1972. In fact we ought to be developing better management programmes for records all along the way — the archivist's bread and butter. It is true, however, that all such critiques of current arrangements are in effect a challenge not only to what we do but also the basis on which we do it. It is not enough to dismiss the challengers as being irrelevant because they do not share our perspective and our burdens.

Finally, the last thing we need is “two solitudes” — one concerned primarily with lofty ends, the other with everyday means. The art of being a good archivist is surely to be found in linking effective means to agreed upon ends. That, in short, is our professional agenda. On that much I hope we can agree. If we can, there is a place for scholars to reflect on ends and means, and a place for practitioners to try to bring the two together in an awkward and often hostile world. The ethos Bolotenko speaks of so passionately and the tenor of the debate he has engendered do not seem to me to be likely to solve the problem of matching ends and means.

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### ***Bolotenko, the Debate, and the Future***

As a Master of Archival Studies student at the University of British Columbia, I have followed the debate initiated by George Bolotenko in *Archivaria* with some interest. To a certain extent both this debate and the 1984 ACA Conference programme reveal a developing rift within the profession as we witness the increasing crystalization of attitudes dividing those who believe that archivists should be first and foremost historians and those who stress the need for information management skills.

Interestingly, this debate has tended to fracture along predictable lines with those from some of our larger institutions supporting the notion of the archivist-historian. This attitude was particularly evident during the first half of the ACA