From the Editor

TOWARD THE DISCIPLINE OF ARCHIVES

The recent debate in *Archivaria* over the place of historical research in archival work has mobilized competing wings of the profession. The great authorities from Jenkinson to Schellenberg have been summoned to the front by both sides. Milton, Donne, Nietzsche, and Hegel have been called in as reinforcements. Ammunition has been made from material as disparate as records keeping in the Middle Ages and George Orwell's *Nineteen Eighty-Four*. And when the bombardment has ceased for a time, the combatants have even tried the milder appeals of poetry and literary allusion to urge us to avoid what Terry Eastwood sees as "two solitudes." Has anything been accomplished in all this? Has the sound and fury moved us any closer to an understanding of the discipline of archives?

The answer to both questions is yes, a great deal. Although major differences have been aired and remain, Canadian archivists have never before had such thorough and articulate statements of the principal rival conceptions of the profession as Hugh Taylor provides in *Archivaria* 18 and Terry Cook and Richard Kesner offer in this issue. Taylor and Kesner believe the most important item on the archival agenda is the challenge of mastering the enormous amount, broad range, and complex character of contemporary administrative documentation. Archivists must pass this test to survive the computer revolution. According to Taylor, archivists ought to exchange their traditional primary interest in acquisition and care of historical records for a more purely administrative role as managers of documents used from day-to-day in the agencies which create them. These new "information generalists with an archival emphasis," as Taylor calls them, would work for the agencies rather than the familiar central archival repositories. Their primary duty would be to serve the administrators and policy makers in these agencies. Central repositories would house what they already contain as well as the oldest records of administration which the new departmental archivists identify as archival. Once in the strictly historical archives, off the main line of records keeping in the creating agency, the oldest records would sit on what Taylor calls the "historical shunt." There they would be in the custody of scholar-archivists.

Kesner focuses his attention, in effect, on what the new archivists ought to be doing with contemporary documentation in the creating agencies. With Taylor, he argues that they will become more heavily involved in records manage-

ment, the design of "automated forms and databases" for the electronic office, and selection of local area computer networks and electronic data-processing systems. Kesner says these tasks would be performed with archival purposes in mind and while archivists "continue to fulfil those responsibilities that have always been part of our credo." If, however, the old title of archivist must be relinquished, the profession ought to be prepared to do so.

Terry Cook replies to these appeals for a major reorientation of archival work with the most thoughtful reformulation now available of the role of the historian-archivist. Although Cook points to a number of potential practical, ethical, and even political difficulties with Taylor and Kesner's proposals, the basic thrust of his critique is borne in the question: "Why should the archivist attempt to rescue the policy-maker allegedly fumbling through the modern information labyrinth, and in so doing intrude on the proper role of the records manager and thus abandon at the same time, at least in relative terms, the well-defined, honourable, and necessary role as archivist?" Cook sees far less drastic means of dealing with the complexities of contemporary documentation than "a complete reorientation of the archival profession." He reminds us that archivists have adjusted to earlier changes in documentation without pulling themselves away from conventional archival settings to administer records in the creating agencies.

Cook does not defend the centrality of historical research in archival work solely because the alternatives present practical difficulties and some risks. His ultimate purpose is to draw attention to the *broader* role historical research should have in archival practice. Historical study of archival records enriches the criteria upon which archivists make decisions affecting acquisition, appraisal, arrangement and description, conservation, and public service. At the same time, Cook maintains that archival scholarship contributes to the general pursuit of knowledge through study of a principal human activity — the creation and use of documents. Cook takes George Bolotenko's broad theoretical defence of historical knowledge in archival work and Tom Nesmith's view that historical study of records is the cornerstone of the discipline and weaves them into the very fabric of archival practice and scholarship.

The remaining articles in *Archivaria* 19 can best be read in light of this perception of the widening role for historical study of documentation in archival work and research. The lead article by Josef Henke of the *Bundesarchiv*, Federal Republic of Germany, retraces the steps which led to the dramatic revelation of the forged Hitler diaries. Henke, who is responsible for Nazi party records, outlines the scholarly analysis he and his colleagues undertook in appraising the forgeries. Although the importance of their task for historical knowledge of the Nazi period could have hardly been discounted when they began the analysis, the examination was not done merely to safeguard academic interests. The legal and financial considerations riding on the outcome were far from inconsequential. And, Henke notes, if the analysis had been mishandled, West Germany would have suffered great political embarrassment. As it turned out, the archivists at the *Bundesarchiv* not only served their government and country with distinction, they also justly earned the plaudits of colleagues in archives around the world.

Academic history is also not the only or perhaps even primary beneficiary of Bill Russell's study of the administration of records keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs between 1860 and 1914. Russell examines a period of rapid expansion of departmental responsibilities and records as well as major innovation in records disposal policies. He finds this exercise indispensable as the archivist responsible for the nearly two thousand metres of records relating to Indian Affairs in Record Group 10 in the Federal Archives Division of the PAC. Russell's suggestion that the "White Man's Burden" extended to records keeping will be of interest to historians; his article, however, will be of immense practical value as well to native claims researchers, officials of the Department of Indian and Northern Affairs, and native people — all of whom depend on informed archival custody of Record Group 10. Patrick Dunae pursues a slightly different line of inquiry in his article on immigration records created between 1872 and 1915. He deals with the actual preparation, transportation, distribution, and sometimes even doctoring of the promotional documentation issued mainly by the federal government to encourage British immigration to Canada. Most of these records are now in Record Group 17 (Agriculture Canada) and Record Group 76 (Immigration Branch) in the Federal Archives Division of the PAC. Dunae's work is complemented by Jim Burant's article on the nineteenth-century revolution in visual documentation since a great portion of the documents used to "promote the Dominion" was pictorial. Burant adds that the peculiar power of visual records to communicate major milestones in Canada's progress gave them a unique nation-building mission in Victorian Canada. In similar fashion, Tom Nesmith links the appearance in the late nineteenth century of a variety of documents used in Ontario farming to social aspirations and economic pressures which, according to the provincial government's agricultural officials, made their creation and use a vital new feature of progressive rural life. He reveals that the Ontario government expected the process of preparing, storing, and consulting documents to assist farmers to adopt more rational or scientific approaches to their work.

Graham Lowe shows that the advocates of scientific office management at the turn of the century held similar hopes of rationalizing industrial and commercial enterprises through efficient records keeping. Lowe's study of the evolution of office work examines the economic and social context of administrative change in the business sector and the early theories of management which governed creation and use of business records. Carolyn Gray's account of her efforts to locate the records of the Dominion Power and Transmission Company for 1896 through 1930 serves as a specific study of the general themes Lowe discusses. Gray, however, observes that theories about scientific office management had very little impact on records keeping in the company. The dispersal and fragmentation of these records (which reflect rapid changes in business structures and informal personal relationships between businessmen at the turn of the century) necessitated her lengthy and sometimes frustrating search just to locate the records. This is the type of research business archivists ought to note and undertake to obtain better knowledge of the nature and location of records in their areas of interest. Historian William Wylie presents another variant of the type of research into records done by Gray and the other contributors to this issue. Wylie's article on the nineteenth-century Canadian iron and steel

industry reflects interest in social history. Social historians have pioneered in the use of complex sources such as the manuscript and printed censuses. This has obliged them to examine the creation of these records in ways compatible with developing archival concern for a fuller understanding of the nature of documentation. Wylie's discussion of the censuses as sources for the labour history of the iron and steel industry is further evidence of the merging of these perspectives in historical research.

Archivaria 19 only samples the breadth and depth of historical knowledge archivists must develop to become truly qualified keepers of records. The effort to understand how, why, when, where, and what archival records have been created and used is the principal means of fashioning the discipline of archives. The burgeoning of the historical study of records in this and, of course, previous issues of *Archivaria* contrasts with uncertainty about the place of history in archival education which the Chairman of the Master of Archival Studies Programme at the University of British Columbia, Terry Eastwood, expresses in a letter to the editor in this issue. And the growing importance of such study in archival work can hardly be equated with Hugh Taylor's "historical shunt" or Richard Kesner's "antiquarian curatorial role" for historian-archivists. These terms greatly diminish the value of past achievements in archival work and the complexity of demands on custodians of archival records. Furthermore, Taylor and Kesner's attempts to secure future benefits for archives by escaping the allegedly narrow confines of the historical research role are likely to meet with disappointment. The very complexity of the contemporary information society which prompts them to call for radical departures in archival work is bound to make it impossible to serve adequately the traditional archival interests they want to protect while the new archivists or information specialists perform records management duties, advise policy makers, and cope with evolving communication technologies. The contemporary information environment says John Meisel, former Chairman of the Canadian Radio-Television and Telecommunications Commission, in a contribution to this issue of the journal, is "mind-bogglingly complex." If Taylor and Kesner's new archivists are to devote themselves primarily to understanding communication in this environment in order to make a genuine contribution to modern administrative records keeping, it is very difficult to see how they can provide anything resembling archival attention to records of lasting value. They will be under constant heavy pressure to organize and provide information for daily administrative purposes and to facilitate the policy-making process. That can be nothing less than a full-time occupation in which purely archival concerns will be incidental. Taylor implicitly recognizes this by calling these new duties "quasi-archival." After all is said and done, this is a tiny carrot indeed to hold before the profession. If the strictly archival aspects of the new directions offered us are severely limited at the same time as our traditional role is passed off as unworthy of our best efforts and greatest resources, the prospects for archives which Taylor and Kesner present us are meagre. Taylor may well be right to say that departmental records keeping in the information society requires some sort of "overarching information generalist with an archival emphasis" in addition to records managers — although the best among the latter undoubtedly, and with reason, also aspire to that role. Why, however, should the archival profession, as a profession, redefine its work

in order to provide the new specialists when, as Richard Cox points out in his counterpoint in this issue, the existing, unique, and heavy responsibilities archivists already have can barely be discharged?

Historian-archivists, of course, are not exempt from changes in communication. They can rely on a knowledge of previous means of communication and information management to help them adapt to contemporary and future communication. An understanding of the evolution of records keeping will enable archivists to make the initial adjustments essential to protect archival records as future changes in communication occur. This will involve them in the study of contemporary communication only to the extent required to ensure the survival of eventual archival records through scheduling and preliminary conservation measures. There is no satisfactory reason for archivists to design or manage records not yet in archives for contemporary administrative purposes or to locate and interpret them for policy makers. As scheduled records reach archives and begin to receive more detailed analysis in selection, arrangement and description, and public service, our understanding of the records must expand to sustain our increased responsibility for them. As records age during this process, archival scholarship rooted principally in the study of history must come to the fore in our work if we are to perform these tasks adequately and demonstrate the lasting vitality of our holdings. This point is best made when archivists consider that those who succeed them in the profession will have no other guide but archival scholarship to help make sense of the enormous amount of valuable documentation we shall leave them. That is why archivists must be historians — historians of a certain kind, historians of records. And if archivists in the next and subsequent centuries will have little but their historical knowledge of records to guide them through the remains of the late-twentieth-century "information revolution," archivists today have neither less reason nor better means for accomplishing the same purpose with the records they have inherited from the last century of archival work.

Tom Nesmith
December 1984