

The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914¹

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Records keeping, J.E. Hodgetts noted, has been characterized as the “donkey work” of the civil service yet, he rightly observed, “paper constitutes not only the bloodstream of an organization but also its memory.”² The purpose of this paper is to investigate — through the study of the structure and evolution of its records-keeping operation — the degree to which one government department at the turn of the twentieth century was successful in coping with the “donkey work” and safe-guarding the corporate memory. In general terms, the period is an interesting one not only in the broad historical development of Canadian society, but also in the process of maturation of government institutions which mirrored that national development. It was a time of change and growth with obvious impact upon the creation of government records in a country where, from its beginnings, the state has played a significant role in fostering national progress. Moreover, in terms of developments within the office itself, it is also an important period, preceding and to a certain extent overlapping the years delineated by G.S. Lowe in his thesis on “The Administrative Revolution,” when principles of modern or “scientific” management began to take hold in the office world generally, and “rationality, structure, and efficiency replaced the informality, paternalism, and ‘rule of thumb’ of the 19th century establishment.”³ And more specifically, for the Department of Indian Affairs (DIA), the period 1860-1914 is a momentous one. It was in these years that an Indian policy defined in the Province of Canada before Confederation was carried east and west into a full national structure and a significant bureaucracy developed dedicated to its implementation and refinement.

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- 1 The origins of this paper can be traced to J.E. Hodgetts' *Pioneer Public Service: An Administrative History of the United Canadas, 1841-1867* (Toronto, 1955) in which he describes the administration of Indian Affairs in this country as the “White Man's Albatross.”
 - 2 J.E. Hodgetts, *The Canadian Public Service: A Physiology of Government 1867-1970* (Toronto, 1973), p. 29.
 - 3 Graham S. Lowe, “The Administrative Revolution: The Growth of Clerical Occupations and the Development of the Modern Office in Canada, 1911-1931,” (Ph.D. thesis, University of Toronto, 1979), p. 6; see also his “ ‘The Enormous File’: The Evolution of the Modern Office in Early Twentieth Century Canada” elsewhere in this issue of *Archivaria*.

While this essay is primarily concerned with *how* a government department maintained its records during a particularly vigorous period of growth in its activities — with the internal records-keeping policies and procedures as well as the impact on records keeping of administrative decisions not directly related to the records maintenance function — that is not the end in itself. It is through their musings over the problems associated with *how* to maintain a records system that we see DIA administrators grappling with the questions of what they *kept* and why and, to a certain extent, what they *created* and why. In their discussions on how best to cope with the functions of records classification, custody, control, and disposal, they provide us with something of their perceptions of the value of their records and the purposes they served. This, in turn, gives us glimpses of their view of the role of their department in both the government and society at large.

It is not simply historical curiosity, then, that prompts the study of past records-keeping policies and practices. Rather, it is a belief that the government records archivist has a great deal to learn about the records-creating agency through an historical investigation of the records-keeping process itself. Surely no one would argue against the proposition that in order to perform our jobs properly, government records archivists have a responsibility to do more than simply service the documents in our custody by preparing endless lists and fetching boxes for voracious researchers. If we are to do justice to the records charged to our care today, we must understand the relationship between the structure and organization of the creating agency and the records created, and integrate a knowledge of the records-keeping process into an understanding of the record. If research into the “nuts and bolts” of the records-keeping function can help provide these insights, then clearly that research is part of the archivist's duty to perform.

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The factors affecting DIA records-keeping practices and policies during the period 1860-1914 were many and varied. The overriding preoccupation of the Victorian bureaucrat with economy and efficiency in all aspects of departmental administration had a major impact on records-keeping operations. Not insignificant were the personal idiosyncracies of senior departmental officials whose ideas about rationalization and centralization were to colour all aspects of the administration. At the same time, however, a certain inertia or simple resistance to change, was evident in the administration which often worked at cross purposes to economy and efficiency. And, obviously, organizational/structural changes in the department that had, in their initiation, nothing to do with records keeping, redounded upon the operation.

Without detracting from the importance of these functional explanations, it is suggested, however, that there is another factor which may help in understanding why and how the DIA kept its records as it did. There is something intriguing that appears repeatedly in later years in the statements of DIA officers concerning the value and role of their records. And there is evidence of similar

perceptions in the minds of their counterparts in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, as illustrated in the following two statements of DIA registrar-cum-archivist A.E. St. Louis:

We possess . . . in the Public Archives and in our own Department Archives an unbroken chain of chronological events relating to our Aborigines. . . . I wish to emphasize the fact that none of our papers can be classified as Indian legends or myths, but all of them bear the characteristics of historical monuments. . . . They contain an almost continuous record of our Indian wards progress . . . all this related chronologically by our Superintendents, Inspectors, Agents, Farmers and lastly by those worthy representatives of the Church. . . . I feel that it is incumbent on the Department to preserve from decay the remembrance of what these men have done for its wards and these records should be kept intact for historical purposes as an example to future generations.⁴

and,

Our correspondence, unlike other departments of the government service, deals almost exclusively with a human problem: the Indian and his land. The safekeeping of documents affecting his person and property he has entrusted to us and it is felt that his implicit faith in that trust should not be shattered through our neglect to provide and maintain proper safeguards for the preservation of these documents. . . .⁵

Is this simply the maudlin prose of an obscure public servant searching for a way to justify his existence? Not entirely. While it is, of course, the *sine qua non* of records keeping that records are created out of an operational need in the bureaucracy and maintained for as long as they serve that need, the concept of "operational value" had some interesting twists when it came to Indian records, twists the origins of which lay in the unique relationship of the Indian to the DIA and to the larger society. One can observe in DIA administrators in the period 1860-1914 at least the genesis of a perception of an "historical" dimension to their records that transcended simple operational value. It seems that St. Louis and his predecessors perceived a special moral and legal responsibility in the work of their department that set it, and more importantly its records, apart from other government agencies. And, it is argued here, the perceptions DIA administrators had of the role and value of their records had an impact on the manner in which records keeping was carried out in the department, particularly in the area of records disposition. Even the records office was not immune to the responsibilities of the "White Man's Burden."

Before moving on to the "nuts and bolts" of late nineteenth-century government records keeping, a few comments concerning records creation in the DIA are in order to provide some context for what is to follow. As J.E. Hodgetts

4 Public Archives of Canada (hereafter PAC), Records relating to Indian Affairs, Record Group 10 (RG 10), vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, Memorandum of A.E. St. Louis to IAB Director H. McGill, 3 August 1937.

5 *Ibid.*, 1 February 1944.

has convincingly demonstrated, fundamental to an understanding of the DIA and the records created during the period 1860-1914 (and even today) is an appreciation of the fact that the department is a "clientele agency."⁶ Status as a clientele department — as opposed to a functional one — has defined very broad perimeters of records creation for the DIA. Although it is less true today with the devolution of many former functions to other agencies (for example, health to the Department of National Health and Welfare), for the period 1860-1914 the DIA was responsible for virtually all aspects of Indian life in Canada. As a consequence its records reflect a multiplicity of functions from financial management to vaccinations, from road culverts on Indian reserves to the final adjudication of Indian status. The DIA developed as a self-contained agency with its officers responsible for a full gamut of services required by its clientele. The records created in the process reflect the all-encompassing mandate of its operations. And, in particular after the *Indian Act* of 1876 came into force, a single piece of legislation codified the relationship between Indian and non-Indian society and perforce the records that describe that relationship.

In its role as record creator and record maintainer, the DIA during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries controlled to a large extent the *sole* record for any facet of the Indian-non-Indian relationship, be it legal, social, economic, or cultural. Because for much of this period the Indian population was largely illiterate, especially in the West, native people were not in a position to create and control their own written records. Their strong oral traditions were not accepted as valid alternatives to the European's scraps of paper. This is not to say that there were no independent records of the White-Indian relationship — in fact, the extensive and valuable fur trade and missionary records are examples — but these were usually not as all-encompassing in scope as those the DIA created. In the DIA, a single government department created and maintained custody over the records of not one but a number of "societies" or culturally distinct native groups and controlled their relationship with each other and with the larger white society. DIA records were more than those of a government bureaucracy; to a large extent they formed the written history of a people.

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In 1880 the Indian Branch of the Department of the Interior was elevated to the status of the Department of Indian Affairs, a full-fledged clientele agency.⁷ Under different names and serving various masters it had, of course, been already formally in existence for 125 years. Its archivists, St. Louis and his

⁶ See both *Pioneer Public Service* and *The Canadian Public Service*.

⁷ The Minister of the Interior carried with him the title *ex officio* of Superintendent General of Indian Affairs until 1883. In that year provision was made that the head of any department could hold the SGIA post *ex officio* and when John A. Macdonald relinquished control over the Department of the Interior later that year he retained the designation Superintendent General of Indian Affairs. In 1887 the office was transferred back to the Minister of the Interior who continued to hold the office *ex officio* throughout the period under investigation. See Public Archives of Canada, *Guide to Canadian Ministries Since Confederation* (Ottawa, 1974), p. 16.

predecessor George M. Matheson, frequently made the proud claim that the Indian Department was the oldest in the government service. "Its records," the former boasted, "date back to the first quarter of the 18th century, and it is doubtful if there is another branch of the Service having an almost continuous record of correspondence since such a distant date".⁸ The DIA could, in truth, claim a line of direct descent to the early eighteenth century as the origins of the old Imperial Indian Department are usually considered to lie in the appointment in 1755 of Sir William Johnson as first Superintendent of Indian Affairs in the Northern Department of British North America. In fact, the records of the Indian-European relationship were as old as contact itself, and documents inherited by the DIA included such early eighteenth-century items as the Minutes of the Albany Commission from 1722. In truth, though, the records of the administration of Indian Affairs were neither as comprehensive nor as orderly as their longevity might have permitted them to be or early twentieth-century departmental officials implied they were. The history of Indian-White relations in British North America from 1755 to 1880 had seen major shifts in policy and considerable upheaval in operations. That the documentary material that remained from the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries was scattered could be to a considerable extent attributed to the chaotic structure of the DIA's ancestors.

From 1755 to 1860, Indian matters were the responsibility of the Imperial authorities and until 1830, in the Canadas at least, the relationship bore a decidedly military character, which reflected the role of the Indian as an ally to the Crown. Many early Indian-related records are found today in the papers of political-military figures such as Frederick Haldimand, while the records of the British military contain many volumes dealing exclusively with Indians. Moreover, the Indian Department was not the responsibility of one Imperial agency but, rather, no less than three: the Colonial Office, the Treasury, and the Army Commissariat. As Hodgetts notes, while it is customary to refer to an "Indian Department" and while there were permanent heads for this creature in the Canadas (the Superintendent General and, after 1794, a Deputy Superintendent as well), "so many Imperial departments shared responsibility for making vital decisions that the local administrative machinery remained shadowy and almost completely unorganized."⁹ The effects of such an administrative structure on the creation and maintenance of the records of the Indian Department are clear — a diffuse and at times chaotic chain of responsibility did nothing to enhance the integrity of the record.

Divisions of responsibility within the colonies themselves also had the effect of fragmenting the Indian record, as did simple misfortune. At the end of the eighteenth century, for example, the Indian Department was divided along geographical lines with the Superintendent General and his Secretary residing in Montreal and the Deputy Superintendent General and Assistant Secretary at Fort George. Fortunately, the Indian Affairs archivist is left with a rich picture

8 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memorandum of A.E. St. Louis to T.R.L. MacInnes, 8 June 1936.

9 Hodgetts, *Pioneer Public Service*, p. 215.

of the records maintained in the former office thanks to two schedules of documents prepared by Secretary Joseph Chew in 1795 and 1805.¹⁰ The records at Niagara had a less happy fate. Although, interestingly enough, it was at that location that the first reference to a records room occurs (described in an 1800 complaint as having neither fuel, shelves, nor a desk),¹¹ Fort George was abandoned during the War of 1812 and the Indian Department records there were transported to the safety of York. Sadly, when the Americans captured and burned the town in April 1813, the Indian Department records disappeared. A similar fate befell records at Amherstburg, abandoned in the face of the advancing American army later that year. And, apparently, an important portion of Sir William Johnson's papers had similarly been lost to marauding rebels in 1778 when his family had been forced to flee their Mohawk Valley home in New York.¹²

A dispersed (both functionally and geographically) administration and the ravages of war were not the only factors conspiring against the Indian Department records in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries — or, more correctly, conspiring against the archivist who, 150 years later, must fathom the sometimes confusing records-keeping system employed. Letterbooks recording outgoing correspondence were not regularly maintained in the Indian Department until 1829. While Sir John Johnson had had his secretary keep one as early as 1821, it was not as a public record but for his private information. On the opposite side of the ledger, incoming correspondence to the Superintendent General was arranged in bundles in order of date, sometimes with draft replies, sometimes with only a note that a reply had been sent, but without any kind of letter register.¹³

In the face of a growing humanitarian movement in England, a major new policy direction was taken in Indian administration in the 1830s. Henceforth the Indian (in the Canadas at least, for the policy shift seems to have been largely ignored in Nova Scotia and New Brunswick),¹⁴ who was no longer seen as a valued military ally and object of conciliation, was to be protected and "civilized" through religious instruction, education, and agricultural training. This policy placed responsibility for a much greater number of aspects of the Indians' welfare in the hands of the Indian Department. Yet, throughout the period up to 1860, administrative confusion continued to plague the service, only now on a wider scale. To that curious combination of Imperial control

10 "Indian Records," in *Indian Affairs Canada: Historical Sketches by G.M. Matheson, Registrar of the Department of Indian Affairs* (Ottawa, 1935).

11 *Ibid.*

12 *Ibid.*

13 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memorandum re: filing systems, (A.E. St. Louis) to H. McGill, 5 March 1934.

14 L.F.S. Upton, *Micmacs and Colonists: Indian-White Relations in the Maritimes 1713-1867* (Vancouver, 1979), pp. 102-3. The situation in the Atlantic colonies was noticeably different from that in the Canadas. The Indian-White relationship was marked by neglect and ignorance with no government agencies responsible for the welfare of the native population and relatively few records.

of policy and purse-strings with actual field operations in the hands of officers of the Indian Department was added the new complication of colonial involvement.

What might be termed "structural problems" in the administration were compounded by serious short-comings in records keeping. The example of Indian land sales is a case in point. In Upper Canada the colonial Crown Lands Department was given the responsibility of handling sales of Indian lands. Yet no adequate accounting system was maintained by the Indian Department to keep straight and separate the monies derived from various transactions. Moreover, land records themselves were so poorly kept that tracts generally accepted as Indian land were not properly registered and quickly became subject to trespass and the object of dispute with white settlers.¹⁵

It is not as if the problems of the Indian administration were not appreciated. The Indian Department was the object of scrutiny by a number of commissions between 1839 and 1860, yet problems persisted and, while the Imperial authorities became increasingly less enamoured with their responsibilities and tried repeatedly to divest themselves of their Indian charges, colonial governments were adamant in their refusal to take up the "White Man's Burden." The reports of the different commissions are fascinating for their descriptions of the idiosyncracies of the administration, but they also provide some interesting commentary on records-keeping practices. Referring to the office of the Chief Superintendent, commissioners Jameson, Macaulay, and Hepburn noted in 1840 that until quite recently "scarcely a book seems to have been considered necessary." Of funds derived from sales of Indian lands, they recorded that "Regular and systematic Books of Account do not appear ever to have been opened." As for the Indian Department's correspondence and other financial records, they concluded that until recently the former had been "most irregularly kept" and the latter were "without system of arrangement."¹⁶ Included in the report's conclusions were the recommendations that a chief clerk and full-time bookkeeper be attached to the Chief Superintendent's office to conduct the correspondence of the Indian Department and keep proper account books for Indian finances. It was suggested, as well, that "a Book in which shall be entered all the correspondence of the Department, with an Alphabetical Index" be opened.¹⁷ This recommendation, at least, was accepted and this was the genesis of the department's letter registers of incoming correspondence.

A second commission report, delivered four years later, pointed to many of the same inadequacies in the Indian Department administration including its short-fallings in record keeping. The Bagot Commission's findings did result in major organizational changes in the Indian Department in the Canadas. Included in its recommendations were the centralization of control over Indian

15 Duncan Campbell Scott, "Indian Affairs, 1840-1867," in A. Shortt and A.G. Doughty, eds., *Canada and Its Provinces* (Toronto, 1913), p. 343. For a particularly useful overview of this period, see J.D. Leighton's "The Development of Federal Indian Policy in Canada, 1840-1890," (Ph.D. thesis, University of Western Ontario, 1975).

16 *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1847, Appendix T, Appendix #1, "Report of Committee No. 4 on Indian Department" submitted January 1840.

17 *Ibid.*

matters in the office of the Governor General's Civil Secretary, with the uniting of the Indian records relating to Canada East and Canada West in one office and the conduct of the correspondence and central business of the office at the seat of government under the superintendence of a chief clerk.¹⁸ These changes were effected, the office of the Chief Superintendent dispensed with, and the Civil Secretary took on the title of Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (SGIA). Hodgetts argues that even those functions now brought under the view of the new SGIA were not particularly efficiently prosecuted: "A chief clerk and an accountant between them handled the correspondence from the resident superintendents, kept up the files in a desultory fashion, and maintained a loose record of the finances of the tribes."¹⁹ Despite this rather gloomy appraisal of the Indian Department's central records keeping after 1845, it must in fairness be pointed out that the system was an improvement over what had gone before. To this day the indexed letterbooks of outgoing correspondence of the Civil Secretary in his capacity as SGIA and the letters received, kept together in over twelve thousand individually numbered docketts, with abstracts providing an index, offer students of the period a valuable source of material. As for the system of keeping accounts of Indian land sale revenues after 1845, some improvement was offered with the transfer of this responsibility to the office of the colonial Receiver General.

Throughout the 1850s it became increasingly clear that the perennial "push of war" — for neither side wished to emerge the victor — over who should have responsibility for Indians in the Canadas would be "won" by the Mother Country and the administration pass completely to colonial hands. Seeing this eventuality, the members of yet another Special Commission, this one appointed in 1856, came down in favor of an Indian administration centralized in one agency with a permanent head — in effect, replace the system of the past hundred years with a clientele department.²⁰ This was, in fact, the administrative structure created soon after control was transferred to the Province of Canada on 1 July 1860. Although matters relating to Indians were not given departmental status, they were united in a single branch under the Commissioner of Crown Lands and, in 1862, the Office of the Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs (DSGIA) was resurrected, thus giving the branch a permanent head.

Under Section 91 of the *British North America Act*, "Indians and lands reserved for the Indians" were placed within the jurisdictional sphere of the federal government. In terms of policy and operations, however, the Indian

18 *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1847, Appendix T, "Report on the Affairs of the Indians in Canada, laid before the Legislative Assembly, 20 March 1845," section III, part V. See also John Leslie, "The Bagot Commission: Developing a Corporate Memory for the Indian Department," Canadian Historical Association, *Historical Papers* (1982).

19 Hodgetts, *Pioneer Public Service*, p. 216.

20 Hodgetts, *Pioneer Public Service*, pp. 222-23. See also *Journals of the Legislative Assembly of the Province of Canada*, 1858, Appendix 21, "Report of the Special Commissioners appointed on the 8th of September 1856 to investigate Indian Affairs in Canada."

administration was hardly traumatized by Confederation. Essentially the infrastructure established under DSGIA Spragge in the Province of Canada remained intact and to it was added responsibility for the Indians of Nova Scotia and New Brunswick and certain tasks with respect to Indian funds which had been handled by or shared with other parts of the old Crown Lands Department or the Receiver General. The central office itself had been moved to Ottawa in the autumn of 1865 and ensconced in the new East Block of the Parliamentary Buildings. A departmental home was found for the Indian Branch in 1868 when it became one of the four branches of the new Department of the Secretary of State of Canada, with the Honorable Hector Langevin assuming the title of SGIA. In the following year, it was transferred to the short-lived office of the Secretary of State for the Provinces under Joseph Howe. Finally, responsibility for Indians was taken over by the Minister of the Interior when that department was created in 1873.

Like any bureaucrat, of course, Spragge complained in his annual reports of a considerable increase in Indian Branch business in the first years after Confederation,²¹ but this would be nothing compared to the growth experienced over the next two decades, which saw a burgeoning of both field and headquarters activities that would put tremendous pressures on the records-keeping system of the branch. The 1870s was a decade of transition in policy development and operations. Indian agents were appointed in New Brunswick, Nova Scotia, and Prince Edward Island. The real focus of attention, however, was the West with the entry of British Columbia and Manitoba into Confederation and the prosecution in six years of seven treaties with an Indian population stretching from the head of Lake Superior to the Rocky Mountains. The government spent much of the decade feeling its way for policies and for an administrative structure under which to place these vast new territories in which Indian people constituted an overwhelming majority of the population. For much of the period, the department was hindered by poor communication with its officers in the field — to say nothing of the often conflicting or non-existent information on the condition of its new charges.²²

As for records keeping in the first decade after Confederation, at first the system maintained by Spragge in the old Crown Lands Department was largely retained. For the main headquarters correspondence, this entailed registration of incoming letters and their maintenance in a docket system and the chronological recording of outgoing letters in letterbooks. To this, of course, must

21 Compare, for example the Letters Received 1868-69 (1,686); 1869-70 (2,023); 1870-71 (2,114); 1871-72 (2,236); and Letters Written 1868-69 (1,531); 1869-70 (1,731); 1870-71 (1,577); 1871-72 (1,882). *Sessional Papers*, Annual Report of the Secretary of State for the years 1869-72 (hereafter *Annual Reports*).

22 The details of these formative years of Indian administration in the West are amply provided in a number of secondary works. Readers are directed to such sources as Leighton, "Development of Federal Indian Policy," chapters 9-13; A. J. Looy, "The Indian Agent and His Role in the Administration of the North-West Superintendency, 1876-1893," (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, 1977); A. J. Looy, "Saskatchewan's First Indian Agent: M. G. Dickieson," *Saskatchewan History* 32, 3 (Autumn 1977); J. B. D. Larmour, "Edgar Dewdney, Commissioner of Indian Affairs and Lieutenant-Governor of the Northwest Territories, 1879-1888," (M.A. thesis, University of Saskatchewan, Regina Campus, 1969).

be added the ancillary records kept in the Ottawa office — the various account ledgers, land sales books, paylists, and miscellaneous records — and the considerable volume found in the various field offices under an assortment of systems tailored to individual requirements. The main headquarters records system was soon found to be insufficient. A significant backlog in departmental business was apparent by the early 1870s and dissatisfaction with the system of records keeping was evident. In his first annual report as Minister of the Interior, the Honorable David Laird noted that “the papers and records were in a state of confusion (the older ones being quite inaccessible when required),” but added that prompt measures had been taken to dispose of the arrears in departmental business and “to classify and arrange the papers and records and to introduce a simple and more efficient system of registering and filing papers.”²³ What he was referring to was the introduction of the Indian Branch’s first file system, what came to be known as the Red Series and which, with certain significant refinements, was maintained until the early 1920s.

It is fortunate that a relatively streamlined central file system was introduced at this juncture before the real “records explosion” of the late 1870s and 1880s began, with its staggering increase in the flow of paper funnelled towards departmental headquarters in Ottawa. Looking at the most basic indicators, it is easy to understand the pressures those charged with maintaining the records system came to face. Between 1875 and 1880, letters received at and sent from headquarters rose a dramatic 111 and 97 per cent, respectively, as the clientele department extended west.²⁴ Even with a new file classification system, it comes as little surprise that the DIA was soon experiencing trouble in managing the work associated with the maintenance of its records. “In the Correspondence Branch,” lamented Chief Clerk and general office manager Robert Sinclair in October 1881, “no indexing of the letterbooks has been done since the middle of last April and there are, as a consequence of this, five or six volumes, each containing 1000 pages of correspondence to which, in the event of reference being needed, there is not the slightest clue, and hours of valuable time are wasted each week in the (sometimes unavailing) effort to ascertain from those books what action may have been taken in certain cases.”²⁵ A similar situation existed in the records room where the indexing of the letter registers was likewise six months in arrears. “An immense amount of work in connection with correspondence flows through this branch, work of a nature requiring great care, steady attention and accurate memory,” Sinclair concluded, but in order to keep up with his work the Clerk of Records, Samuel Stewart, was compelled to work nights for as much as four months of the year.²⁶

The bottom line of Sinclair’s woeful appeal, of course, was for more personnel and in this he had some success. Yet the problem of backlogs in these crucial areas persisted, forcing the DIA to shift personnel and frequently to bring in

23 *Annual Report*, Department of Interior, 1874, p. 2.

24 *Annual Reports*, Department of Interior, 1876-80.

25 PAC, RG 10, vol. 2160, file 33366, Memorandum of Robert Sinclair to DSGIA, 14 October 1881.

26 *Ibid.*

extra, temporary clerks.²⁷ The latter practice continued throughout the 1880s, although by the end of the decade a reasonably permanent staff was finally established. In fact, by 1892, the Registry (Records) Branch could boast a complement of seven clerks in a total Inside Service of forty-six. Even this, though, was not sufficient to meet the tasks at hand, for as late as February 1890 complaints echoed those of a decade before:

For many months past the members of the Branch have been working overtime in the almost hopeless attempt to keep the work of the office from getting into a muddle, but the fact becomes more apparent day after day that the present staff cannot hope to accomplish the task of keeping the work in anything like proper shape. . . .

It is becoming more difficult month after month to find any document that is required. . . . We have therefore to rely greatly upon our memory in keeping track of documents. . . . We have very little difficulty in finding documents eight, ten or twenty years old, but it is a serious matter to have to find a letter received within the past two years.²⁸

Clearly this was still a records-keeping operation with problems that had an obvious deleterious effect on the functioning of the administration.

While at least one historian has suggested that the poor quality of DIA staff was part of the problem in the department as a whole, this explanation does not hold for the short-comings in the Records Branch.²⁹ Registering and indexing correspondence, preparing, maintaining, and controlling the circulation of files, conducting searches through old unindexed records to solve disputes of decades past, and indexing letterbooks in an office of the late nineteenth century were doubtless not exciting jobs. The mind conjures Dickensian images of cowering clerks hunched over their desks in poorly lighted dusty rooms, working feverishly under the watchful eye of a stern master. Working conditions may not have been ideal (as evidenced by such items as a petition forwarded to the Chief

27 See the Return of Officers and Employees included in the *Annual Reports* for the years 1882-90. See also the files relating to the hiring of clerks McGirr (PAC, RG 10, vol. 2173, file 36009), J.A. Scharf (*ibid.*, vol. 2402, file 83763), James Guthrie (*ibid.*, vol. 2521, file 107182), I.H. Wilson (*ibid.*, vol. 2345, file 69367; vol. 2368, file 74313), L.E. Dale (*ibid.*, vol. 2469, file 97203), and F. Yeilding (*ibid.*, vol. 2668, file 113794). See also the comments concerning the work of clerks Austen, Bliss, and Reiffenstein (*ibid.*, vol. 2184, file 37023; vol. 2214, file 42959; vol. 2415, file 85173; and vol. 2307, file 60900). See also Vankoughnet's comments to Macdonald, 4 April 1882, concerning clerk J.O. Cuthbert (PAC, John A. Macdonald Papers, MG 26A, vol. 293).

28 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memo (Robert Sinclair?) to DSGIA, 26 February 1890.

29 Leighton, "Development of Federal Indian Policy," chapter 14; and "A Victorian Civil Servant at Work: Lawrence Vankoughnet and the Canadian Indian Department, 1874-1893," in I.A.L. Getty and A. Lussier, eds., *As Long as the Sun Shines and Water Flows* (Vancouver, 1983), pp. 109-10.

Clerk in February 1887 concerning the state of the DIA building)³⁰ and certain of the records staff put in long hours of overtime to keep up with their work. But from the comments found on their personnel files and in departmental memoranda, they appear to have been diligent and, for the most part, above reproach in their work habits.³¹ The obvious and most simple explanation of the DIA's records keeping "problem" in the 1880s was too great a workload for too small a permanent staff. As the clientele department expanded its services, both in traditional functions and new areas, the system became overloaded. Using again the most basic indicators to illustrate the extent of the records explosion, between 1880-81 and 1889-90 occurred an increase of 119 per cent in letters received and 121 per cent in those sent.³² Added to this were certain physical problems in the records operation itself that led to inefficiency: insufficient storage space,³³ failure to centralize records functions in one room,³⁴ and inadequate control on the circulation of records.³⁵

And there were certain "structural" problems in the administration as a whole, control over which was beyond the records staff but the impact of which affected their work directly. The entire decade of the 1880s seems to have been marked by struggle between DSGIA Vankoughnet and the Indian Commissioner for Manitoba and the North-West Territories — a battle of centralization *versus*

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- 30 The DIA was forced to make a series of moves in a short time period and found itself occupying less than satisfactory buildings. The worst quarters, though, must have been those occupied in the old St. Lawrence and Ottawa Railway Company building, which generated the following petition from the DIA clerks: "We do not wish to create any unnecessary alarm, but the falling of plaster from the ceilings of late and the gradual sinking of the middle partition of the building convinces us that unless something is done to give the building stronger support in the centre, there is more than a possibility of its collapse" (PAC, RG 10, vol. 2171, file 35911). Conditions in the actual records room were obviously not ideal either. In 1890, for example, we find the complaint of insufficient cupboard space for files resulting in the frequent misplacement of records and damage to documents through improper storage (*ibid.*, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memo, 26 February 1890). In his evidence presented to the Civil Service Commission in 1881, DSGIA Vankoughnet complained of poor office layout and cited the records storage rooms as a fire-trap (*Sessional Papers*, 1881, Paper No. 113, First Report of the Civil Service Commission with Appendices, p. 204).
- 31 See PAC, RG 10, vol. 2169, file 35456; *ibid.*, vol. 2214, file 42959; *ibid.*, vol. 2307, file 60900; *ibid.*, vol. 2521, file 107182; *ibid.*, vol. 2469, file 97204; *ibid.*, vol. 2668, file 133794.
- 32 *Annual Reports*, 1881, 1890.
- 33 In discussions in 1887 surrounding yet another office relocation, surveyor W.A. Austin complained: "We also have a large quantity of documents etc. in cases in four passages. . . . I would respectfully recommend that if possible we should have 1,000 feet more than we now occupy for office room apart from documentary space." (PAC, RG 10, vol. 2390, file 79979, Austin to DSGIA, 23 December 1887).
- 34 *Ibid.*, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Memo (Robert Sinclair?) to DSGIA, 26 February 1890.
- 35 While I have uncovered no specific complaints of friction between the "line" branches and the records operation regarding internal control of records in the 1880s, there is evidence that a problem existed in this area. The general "Departmental Orders" file includes two circulars from the 1880s exhorting staff to deal quickly with files and return them to the records room (*ibid.*, vol. 2277, file 55412-1). Macdonald, during the period in which he served as SGIA, was apparently notorious for losing or not returning promptly DIA files sent for his perusal. See, for example, Stewart's appeal to Pope to return a file sent to the prime minister six months before and Pope's scribbled message "can't be found" (Macdonald Papers, vol. 290, Stewart to Pope, 31 October 1885). Similar appeals from Sinclair to Pope are found in *ibid.*, vols. 291 and 292.

local control. The DSGIA insisted on personally overseeing as many aspects of Indian administration as possible, a fact which resulted in slow communications with the field, tardy decision making, and confused lines of authority — all of which had a damaging effect on the Indian administration.³⁶ This centralization was thus also responsible for clogging the records-keeping operations at headquarters to an extent that may have been unnecessary had Vankoughnet been prepared to allow more decision making in the field, at least for operational matters (as one could hardly expect decentralization of policy decisions). As it was, there was much duplication of effort with the Indian Commissioner's office acting not so much as a clearing house for routine matters (which would have saved work in Ottawa), but as an extra step in the process by which information was channelled to headquarters.³⁷

It appears that the great backlog problems that hindered the work of the DIA's records keepers, which were still evident as late as 1890, were finally overcome in the last decade of the century. This can largely be explained by a dramatic increase in Registry (Records) Branch staff in a relatively short period. Repeated complaints and the evident damaging effects on the operation of the service convinced the administration to loosen somewhat their tight grip on the purse strings. From a complement of five clerks in 1890, the Registry Branch had had by 1895 increased to ten.³⁸ Moreover, there was a significant innovation introduced into the main headquarters filing system — a file subject index — which did much to facilitate the location of correspondence in the system and ease the life of the records clerks by cutting significantly the time required to locate documents. These indexes were also in place in 1895.³⁹

* * *

Such were some of the problems of records keeping in one department. However, the year 1890 was an important one in the history of records keeping in the entire federal government. It signaled the beginning of a series of government-wide investigations into departmental records practices. The impetus of a records retention and disposal proposal from the Post Office in 1889 gave the government the opportunity to canvass all departments on the extent to which useless records encumbered their operations.⁴⁰ The response was not overwhelming. Archer suggests that departments probably lacked the resources necessary to carry out the work of sorting their records that would be required in order to

36 Leighton, "Lawrence Vankoughnet: Victorian Civil Servant." See also Larmour, "Edgar Dewdney, Commissioner of Indian Affairs," pp. 57-66; and Looy, "The Indian Agent and His Role," pp. 326-27, on the struggle between Dewdney and Reed (decentralization) and Vankoughnet (centralization).

37 See, for example, the detailed 1888 Scott memorandum describing seemingly needless duplication of work in the office of the Indian Commissioner (PAC, Hayter Reed Papers, MG 29, E106, Scott to DSGIA, 1 March 1888).

38 *Annual Report*, 1895. See, as well, the memo entitled "Present Organization of the Department 1893-4" in the Hayter Reed Papers, vol. 17, file "Financial Estimates — Indian Department".

39 *Annual Report*, 1895, p. xxxiv.

40 Details of this scheme are summarized in a Treasury Board Minute of 19 February 1897 in Canada, *Report of the Commissioners Appointed to Inquire into the State of the Public Records 1897* (Ottawa, 1898), pp. 5-6. See also J. Atherton, "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1956," *Archivaria* 8 (Summer 1979), p. 38.

assess relative value.⁴¹ This may have been true for some, but the DIA reply hints at a more interesting explanation.

While the DIA had an over-burdened records system and physical problems of inadequate storage space, no evidence has been yet uncovered to suggest that the department had heretofore considered disposition as an option. At this point in time, of course, for all intents and purposes, disposition meant records destruction for, while there existed both an Archives Branch in the Department of Agriculture and a Keeper of the Public Records attached to the office of the Secretary of State, neither was active in the pursuit of public records of long-term value.⁴² On one earlier occasion when *another* department had suggested that DIA records might be burned to open up much needed office space in the East Block, Vankoughnet had fairly bristled. In an angry letter to Macdonald, the DSGIA declared:

I cannot agree with Mr. Russell [Lindsay Russell, Deputy Minister of Interior] in the conclusion that the records of the Indian Department are as he apparently insinuates of so little importance that it would matter very little if they were destroyed by fire or not. There are large interests involved in the preservation of the records of the Department . . . and these papers are not what Mr. Russell is pleased to describe as connected with 'dead issues;' but on the contrary the increasing correspondence of the Department and the number of documents received convincingly show that they are living issues regarding which the Department is principally concerned in the preservation of its records.⁴³

Hell hath no wrath like the deputy minister whose empire is invaded! Was this the response of a wounded bureaucrat fighting to protect his turf? A straightforward defence of his records on the basis of operational requirements? To be sure it was, but in this comic episode one can also see a glimpse of DIA chauvinism — a feeling that their records were unique and of certain historical importance to the ministry and country alike. And a hint of this surfaces again in the DIA response to the 1890 investigation. In his memo on the subject, accountant Duncan Campbell Scott explained that the documents in DIA custody had not proliferated to such an extent to cause space problems and that destruction at the present time was therefore unnecessary.⁴⁴ The official

41 J.H. Archer, "A Study of Archival Institutions in Canada," (Ph.D. thesis, Queen's University, Kingston, 1969), p. 81.

42 Atherton, "Origins," p. 36.

43 Macdonald Papers, vol. 293, Vankoughnet to Macdonald, 26 January 1882.

44 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, Scott to Deputy Minister, 30 October 1890. Scott's comments may not be as contradictory as they first appear. Some of the space problems identified in earlier correspondence did relate to DIA occupation of particular buildings. By 1890, however, the DIA had moved to new and more spacious accommodations in the Langevin Block where the offices were to remain until 1897. In fact, commissioners investigating the operations of the Civil Service in 1892 reported that the DIA was "exceedingly well placed in regard to rooms and space" and that it had "room to spare rather than otherwise" (*Sessional Papers*, 1892, No. 16c, "Report of the Royal Commission appointed to investigate the working of the Civil Service Act and other matters connected with the Civil Service generally," p. lxxxix). It seems, then, that by a change of location the DIA received a brief reprieve from the effects of the "paper explosion."

answer sent from the SGIA, however, embellished this rather prosaic reasoning by alluding to the unique client relationship which the DIA had with Indian people, a factor which attached an added value to the department's records:

As the Indians are generally regarded as wards of the Crown, and a comparatively small number of them understand the ordinary forms of business, the Statute of Limitations is not enforced against them and claims or supposed claims, of very remote date are constantly arising which the Department endeavours to settle by means of documents which, under other circumstances, might perhaps be destroyed.⁴⁵

For the most part, this response demonstrates an appreciation of a long-term operational value to DIA records; what might be destroyed in other departments had to be kept in Indian Affairs because of the special complexities of the relationship between the clientele agency and its wards. Yet one can see present as well an element of something more fundamental and rooted in a deeper respect for the value of the records.⁴⁶ However, in the end, and for whatever reasons — a genuine belief in the long-term value of its records, inertia, or nothing more than Scott's practical explanation that space was not a problem — the DIA responded negatively to the 1890 records disposal initiative.

The commissioners appointed to investigate the Civil Service in 1892 were the next to foray into the field of departmental records keeping. Considering the problems which had plagued the department during the previous decade, the relatively clean bill of health given the DIA must have been satisfying. The commissioners were, in general, pleased with what they found in the several departments visited and, while they did find individual cases of departments still using "cumbrous and old-fashioned" practices, the DIA was commended:

. . . the accounts and correspondence are well attended to. The department is an example to all the rest in having in one of its divisions a large vault wherein the books are put away every night, as they are in a commercial establishment.⁴⁷

45 RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, Draft of SGIA to Privy Council, (8) October 1890.

46 Leighton suggests in his thesis that DIA officers in the last years of the nineteenth century suffered from what amounts to an inferiority complex brought on by little recognition and lowly status in government circles. He suggests that this resulted in an introversion, with DIA personnel "steeping themselves in its [the DIA's] traditions and administrative peculiarities" (Chapter 15 "Conclusion"). I am not prepared to discount this "introversion" argument, although at this point in my research I prefer to put a more positive construction on the evidence. Regardless of the reasons for their actions, the end result was the same. DIA officers, when challenged on some administrative peculiarity or out-moded practice or when questioned on the utility of keeping records that in other departments might be destroyed, did play both their "tradition" and "unique status" cards.

47 "Report of the Royal Commission," 1892, p. lxxxix. The DIA had maintained a vault for the protection of valuable records for a number of years. In 1882, in fact, one of its office relocations had been held up because Vankoughnet refused to move to the building until an adequate fire-proof safe had been installed to protect the accounts records, original deeds of surrender, and treaties, "none of which if destroyed could possibly be replaced" (Macdonald Papers, vol. 293, Vankoughnet to Macdonald, 15 February 1882).

On the other side of the balance, though, the report, while praising the care taken by the DIA for its financial records, was critical of the lack of protection provided other material:

A large number of valuable and important records are kept in this department, especially the treaties made in former years, going back to the last century. . . . Many of these documents are original, and are of the highest interest and importance, yet they are liable at any time, should a fire break out, to be entirely destroyed. . . . There is no one thing that needs early attention from the Government more than this protection of documents and records that are simply invaluable. . . .⁴⁸

The Civil Service commissioners, a little optimistically it seems, also concluded that the DIA offices had “room to spare rather than otherwise,” seemingly a confirmation of Scott’s appraisal two years before. Barely three years later, however, the department was feeling another of the strains of the “paper explosion” on its operations. While the evidence suggests that in the 1890s the DIA largely overcame the old problem of keeping up with its burgeoning file system, the new problem of where physically to store their records had to be faced. Writing in response to an inquiry about DIA records destruction policy, DSGIA Reed reported in 1895 that, while “it has been found impossible safely to destroy any of the correspondence,” a large quantity of records had been found to be “encumbering the shelves to an extent that was severely affecting the ease with which records could be found.” These had had to be packed and moved to store rooms.⁴⁹ Obviously, the DIA was still not prepared, for long-term operational reasons connected to the department’s unique relationship with its client, to allow any of its records to be destroyed. Yet a compromise on storage had to be reached.

Barely five weeks later, the department made an interesting move. Seemingly on its own initiative,⁵⁰ it contacted Archivist Douglas Brymner and proposed the transfer to the Archives of “any documents of importance wh[ich] we may hold.” It was suggested that Brymner come to the department and search the records, separating those of no great historical value from those of importance.⁵¹ Ironically, the Archives could not take advantage of the DIA’s proposal for want of space. Brymner did, however, offer his services towards sorting and arranging the papers in question, while holding open the possibility of a future transfer, and advised caution on the question of destruction. “As to the less valuable papers,” he concluded, “it is excessively difficult to say what should or should not be destroyed and a mere cursory examination would

48 “Report of the Royal Commission,” 1892, p. lxxxix.

49 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, Reed to A.M. Burgess, 4 April 1895.

50 I have checked Brymner’s letterbook for 1895 and found no evidence to suggest that he approached the DIA concerning a transfer. There were of course frequent dealings between the Archives and the DIA prior to this date. Brymner’s letterbooks include many exchanges concerning research carried out in the Archives’ collections on behalf of the department. See, for example, the letters found in PAC, Records of the Public Archives of Canada, RG 37, vol. 183, pp. 22, 78-79, 267-70, 423.

51 *Ibid.*, vol. 137, letter #5547, D.C. Scott to Brymner, 11 May 1895.

not be sufficient to decide on the point. In the meantime nothing should be destroyed.”⁵² As a footnote to this aborted plan, historians and DIA authorities today should be thankful that the transfer was not undertaken. Brymner’s letter indicates that he would have arranged the papers in bound volumes by tribe, an indication of his ignorance not only of Indian history and DIA organization and operations, but also of the principle of maintaining the original order of records.

In any case, here was an interesting new twist in the development of a DIA records policy. Prior to this, records disposal had been discussed simply in terms of the destruction of valueless documents (and rejected outright by the department). Now, for the first time, was a suggestion initiated by the DIA that its most valuable records could be alienated although still not destroyed. Whether this decision was the result of increasing storage problems or a feeling that the records could be better or more usefully maintained elsewhere is not clear. In the end, nothing more came of the 1895 initiative and it would be another twelve years before the first DIA records were transferred to the Public Archives.

Less than two years later, another important development in the history of records keeping government-wide took place. Prompted by the arguments of Under Secretary of State Joseph Pope and the disastrous West Block fire of February 1897 in which valuable documentary material was lost, the government appointed a commission to investigate the state of its records. Harkening back to the 1890 efforts, Treasury Board provided the commissioners with a mandate to examine how records were kept and where (with particular note to their safety in event of fire), and to report generally on the possible adoption of a system for safe-keeping of records worthy of preservation and periodical destruction of those deemed to be useless.⁵³ The commissioners began their work of visiting departments in March 1897 and on 22 October toured DIA offices accompanied by DSGIA Smart and officers in charge of the records. Their report noted the great historic value of many of the older records and the little protection afforded most of them against fire. “Their loss would be irreparable,” the commissioners concluded, recommending immediate transfer to a safe location. They noted that “nothing appears to have been destroyed in this department,” although DIA officials did suggest to the commissioners that the voluminous annual reports from agents and vouchers returned from the Auditor General after verification might be destroyed after one and ten years, respectively.⁵⁴ This was certainly a major concession from an administration which had, heretofore, flatly refused to consider record destruction.

The commission’s final report painted a grim picture of the condition of government records keeping. Lacking was any “community of plan” among departments in the arrangement and preservation of records. For want of a

52 *Ibid.*, vol. 185, pp. 198-99, Brymner to Scott, 16 May 1895.

53 *Report of the Commissioners 1897*, p. 9. The report and its appendices provide extremely valuable documentation both of the situation in individual departments and of the general concerns for government records. For a summary of the commission’s work, see Atherton, “Origins,” pp. 40-42. See also PAC, Records of Interdepartmental Committees, RG 35, Series 1, Departmental Commission on Public Records, 1897, vol. 1.

54 *Report of the Commissioners 1897*, pp. 42-43.

system of records disposal, the bureaucracy was clogged with records, the oldest of which were relegated to storage "often under conditions eminently unfavourable to their preservation and use." Records in a number of departments were totally unprotected from the hazard of fire. The report's recommendations were sweeping. Of particular concern were those records from a number of departments whose value warranted immediate transfer to a proposed Records Office. Included in this category were the DIA's bound manuscript volumes of the Albany Commission and other similar historic reports and the collection of original Indian surrenders.⁵⁵

The recommendations regarding the transfer of valuable documents to safe storage in a records centre were fine and good, except for the fact that no such facility existed. Its construction was not an immediate priority of the Liberal administration; neither was there a great impetus from the aging Douglas Brymner. With the 1903 amalgamation of the roles of Archivist and Keeper of the Records, however, an order-in-council was passed directing the DIA to place in the custody of the new Dominion Archivist the items identified by the 1897 commission as being of particular value.⁵⁶ This had only to await the completion of the new Archives building in 1906. The first DIA records transfer to the Archives Branch of the Department of Agriculture took place in November 1907. Included were nine bound volumes of the earliest correspondence in DIA custody, proceedings of Indian councils of 1766, Minutes of Indian Affairs under Guy Johnson (1774-76), and a large number of Indian treaty and surrender documents.⁵⁷ Over the next five years, a further number of deeds of title were transferred, a few at a time, and in some cases the Dominion Archivist returned items to the DIA because they were deemed not to be deeds of original title.⁵⁸ Between October 1913 and November 1914, a significant block of the DIA's pre-1872 records was added to the Archives holdings in five instalments.⁵⁹

As time went on, the earlier DIA records had been found to require less and less consultation. And, regardless, there was a good working relationship with Doughty and his staff who now had a building in which to house the historically valuable pre-1872 records. As the DIA had first proposed an archival transfer in 1895, it was clearly not opposed on principle to giving up its treasures. The fact that the DIA was preparing in 1913 for relocation from the East Block to the Booth Building doubtless made the transfer of the older records to the Public Archives in that year a timely move. The findings of yet another commission to inquire into the state of public records seems to have had some impact on the 1913-14 transfers as well. Although the commissioners' final report was not handed down until March 1914, they visited the DIA quite early in their work in December 1912. The commissioners made an extensive report on the DIA's holdings and, although they noted the good condition under which

55 *Ibid.*, p. 8; and Appendix A, p. 15.

56 Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development (DIAND), Indian and Inuit Affairs Program, Ottawa, file 1/1-6-10, extract P.C. 2018, 7 December 1903.

57 *Ibid.*, "List of books and documents transferred . . . 5 November 1907."

58 For periodic transfers, 1907-12, see DIAND, file 1/1-6-10; and PAC, RG 37, vol. 36, file 60-3-1A.

59 Detailed lists of the items transferred in 1913-14 are found in DIAND, file 1/1-6-10.

the material was maintained in general, they did comment that “the removal of all old documents to safer quarters where they could be better preserved, and access to them improved, is a matter for consideration.”⁶⁰ A comparison of the lists of DIA documents published by the commission with those of the records transferred to the Public Archives in 1913-14 reveals many common items. Obviously, many of the records listed in the commission’s report still had operational value and could not be transferred. It seems, though, that the commission’s activities did give added impetus to the DIA’s transfer programme.⁶¹ That this should be the case is interesting in that the commission has been widely viewed as having had, despite its far-sighted proposals, virtually no immediate impact on records-keeping operations in the government.⁶²

At the same time that a transfer policy for historically valuable documents was emerging, departmental officials also came to some important decisions on records destruction. They had indicated to the commissioners in 1897 a willingness to accept destruction as a means of controlling their burgeoning records; what remained was to work out a methodology to put words into action. In 1900, Chief Clerk and Accountant D.C. Scott, noting that “the accumulation of papers is getting to be very great,” recommended that an order-in-council be obtained to authorize the destruction of all pre-1890 vouchers and cheques which had been checked by the Auditor General.⁶³ It appears that no action was taken on this proposal, but when another was made two years later by Registrar Matheson for an assortment of loose and reportedly useless items — weekly Branch work reports, agents’ diaries, provision returns, rejected tenders, old estimates, and annual report manuscripts and galleys — it was decided that the papers were merely occupying space and should be done away with. It is worth noting that this first recorded authorized DIA destruction was decided upon internally. There is no evidence to suggest that executive permission was sought and, in fact, the matter may have gone for approval no further in the hierarchy than the desk of departmental Secretary J.D. McLean.⁶⁴

The next disposal decision, however, followed a much more formal route. In 1909, the office of the Indian Commissioner in Winnipeg was finally closed and the following year that of the Indian Superintendent in Victoria was similarly dispensed with. In both cases the old and active files of the offices were transferred to Ottawa.⁶⁵ This obviously created some strain on the storage facili-

60 Canada, *Report of the Royal Commission to Inquire into the State of Records of the Public Departments of the Dominion of Canada, 1912-14* (Ottawa, 1914), p. 22.

61 *Ibid.*, Appendix 3, pp. 61-63 and Lists A-E. See also PAC, Records of the Royal Commission to Inquire into the State of Records of the Public Departments, 1912-14, RG 33/11, vol. 4, file 38, which contains notebooks relating to the visits to the different departments, and file 39 which contains drafts of the report.

62 See Atherton, “Origins,” p. 46; Archer, “Archival Institutions,” pp. 97-103; I.E. Wilson, “Shortt and Doughty: The Cultural Role of the Public Archives of Canada, 1904-1935,” (M.A. Thesis, Queen’s University, Kingston, 1973, pp. 159-61); and “A Noble Dream: The Origins of the Public Archives of Canada,” *Archivaria* 15 (Winter 1982-83), p. 32.

63 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, Scott to Secretary, 18 April 1900.

64 *Ibid.*, G.M. Matheson to Secretary, 6 February 1902.

65 *Ibid.*, vol. 3877, file 91839-1, Laird to Secretary, 24 March 1909; and vol. 3626, file 5680, McLean to W.A. Stevens, Victoria, 14 June 1910.

ties at headquarters, for in January 1911 the DIA, referring back to the 1890 order-in-council which had set out procedures for dealing with useless papers, obtained executive approval for the destruction of a large part of the records from the two offices. The records in question were said to be causing congestion at headquarters and were reported to be largely duplicated in the Ottawa office. At the same time, authority was also granted for the destruction of all vouchers ten years or older which had been returned from the Auditor General and copies of which were already on DIA files.⁶⁶

An important precedent had now been set. Hereafter, destruction of headquarters records at least would be undertaken with the approval of the Governor General in Council rather than on an *ad hoc* basis. By 1914, then, the DIA had established the perimeters of a headquarters records disposition policy that would serve for the next thirty years. It would combine the periodic transfer of historically valuable items to the Public Archives with a cautious approach to records destruction.⁶⁷ The judgments on the value of the records in each case, of course, would be made by the DIA.

If straightforward practical considerations — expansion of records but not of staff or space and no major innovations in records-keeping practices — were the prime determinant of DIA records disposition policy in the first fifteen years of this century, what had happened to the old arguments concerning the uniqueness of the department's records and the important historical purposes their retention served? The relationship between the DIA and its clients had not altered to such an extent that the records no longer had a long-term legal/operational value requiring the department to keep documents which in other agencies might have warranted destruction. Rather, the realities of the "paper explosion" had simply dictated that the DIA would have to exercise more discretion than before. Officials had come to the realization that they could no longer afford to maintain that *none* of their records could be destroyed; obviously some could. Still, the DIA was extremely cautious, and would continue to be for a number of years, in what it chose to destroy. A glance at the lists of documents destroyed in 1902 and 1911 as well as the correspondence surrounding destructions in the interwar period bears this out. As for the appreciation of the historical value of the department's records, there was certainly no less commitment on the part of the DIA to see its most valuable records preserved for future generations. If anything, the policy of transfers to the Public Archives demonstrated an increased commitment. It was, after all, the department which had first suggested removing records to the custody of the Archives. The DIA had responded positively to the recommendations of the 1897 and 1912-14 commissions and seen

66 *Ibid.*, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, P.C. 135, 30 January 1911.

67 For the periodic transfers of material to the PAC, see the entries in Doughty's letterbooks, and also DIAND, file 1/1-6-10. For post-1914 correspondence on record destruction, see PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3 and in particular letters concerning 1916, 1924, and 1930 destruction actions. The great degree of caution with which the DIA approached records destruction in the 1914-1950 period is an interesting phenomenon, as it is in these debates, particularly in the 1930s and 1940s, that we see some of the most vivid defences of the DIA's "heroic" past and reference to its place in history as assured through its records.

the Public Archives not as a dumping ground for unwanted material but as a more appropriate conserver of the long traditions which these records reflected.

Furthermore, the DIA was fortunate in that its staff included individuals such as G.M. Matheson and D.C. Scott who took great pride in what they saw as the historical achievements of their department which were reflected in its records. To today's reader, their views on Indian "progress" and the department's role in carrying the "White Man's Burden" will be dismissed as ethnocentric and more than a little self-congratulatory. Yet one must wonder whether as many of the records would have survived had the DIA records staff not had this historical interest. From glimpses in departmental correspondence, in his relations with Public Archives personnel, and from his many writings, Matheson was a keen and knowledgeable observer of Indian and DIA history. He took obvious pride in his role as DIA "archivist" as well as chief of the Records Branch. Here was an individual who combined historical appreciation with the bureaucratic function of records keeper. And in Duncan Campbell Scott, who in 1913 was elevated to the position of Deputy Superintendent General, the DIA had as its bureaucratic head a poet and writer of no small stature.⁶⁸ As early as 1893, he had begun to collect items for a departmental library and eleven years later took up this cause in earnest. Noting that the Parliamentary Library was not well equipped in the field, he envisaged creating a facility that would house works on all aspects of the country's history that related to Indians, including books on Indian languages and vocabularies. However, he took this idea even further in suggesting that the DIA in effect set up a resource centre for Indian history. This scheme was put forward to Sifton in January 1904:

We have in the Department a number of valuable old records which should be of great service which we are now directed to hand over to the Dominion Archivist. The contents of these should be thoroughly sifted and copies made of the most interesting. We should also have copies of all the documents and letters referring directly to Indian subjects which may now be in the Archives. These should be copied from time to time . . . bound and indexed so that in a short time . . . we could have a complete basis for a history of the Indians of North America under British rule. . . . I think if we give careful attention to a library of Indian literature and a repository for copies of all Indian archives, we shall be doing useful and necessary work.⁶⁹

68 Dominion Archivist Arthur Doughty and DSGIA Scott had a considerable correspondence as a result of both their roles as public servants and mutual interests in such institutions as the Royal Society. And Scott was a contributor to Shortt and Doughty's *Canada and Its Provinces* (see the correspondence found in Doughty's letterbooks, RG 37, vols. 194-207). Matheson remains a more shadowy figure, but his writings do demonstrate clearly his interest in the historical content of the records charged to his care. He also seems to have possessed no shyness in singing the praises of his role in the bureaucracy. Writing of his own position, Matheson stated in one boastful example: "It is to him that the Custodian of the Manuscripts and other officials of the Archives apply for information on Indian research. It is doubtful if there is another official in the service having duties with which his are comparable, comprising, as they do, the management of a records branch and the research work above indicated." (PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-4, Matheson memo, 24 October 1930).

69 *Ibid.*, vol. 3081, file 270000-1, pt. 1, Scott to Sifton, 29 January 1904.

The library part of the scheme received some support (to the tune of \$200 annual expenditure), but nothing came immediately of the larger plan. In later years it was, in fact, at least partly accomplished by G.M. Matheson.

The DIA's records-keeping operation was not without problems. Possibly one of its most serious shortcomings was in the area of field office records for, by 1914, the department had not yet succeeded in developing consistent records-keeping practices outside Ottawa. This essay has focused on the headquarters operation and it is not intended to broaden the scope at this point with any detailed commentary on what was taking place in the agencies. A few words should suffice. At the outbreak of the First World War, there were approximately one hundred Indian agencies scattered throughout the country. As the tasks of the various field officers differed depending on local circumstances, so too records keeping was a patchwork. This is not to say that records keeping in the field was out of control or necessarily poorly carried out but, as one inspector noted, there were "careless and unbusinesslike methods followed at some agencies."⁷⁰ Most importantly, there was no system parallel to that at headquarters uniformly applied in all offices. Just such a standardization — which would have seen the introduction of letter registers, uniquely numbered subject files, and file indexes — was recommended in 1914 but was "put by for the present."⁷¹ In lieu of such a filing system, agents seem to have created their own arrangements which usually meant a combination of letterbooks for copies of outgoing correspondence and omnibus shannon files for broad subject categories of incoming letters. It was not until the late 1940s that file classification was standardized for field offices and headquarters.⁷² As for records disposition in the field, the policy well past the period under examination here was to destroy nothing. As has been seen, when offices were closed, all records were routinely sent to Ottawa. As late as 1927 agents were being told to keep all records,⁷³ although one suspects that a few agency offices were kept warm over long winter nights thanks to a supply of old papers for which storage space had simply been exhausted.

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In summary, then, in the DIA before 1914 occurred the genesis of a records-keeping system, expanding and changing to meet the needs of a growing bureaucracy. The period also witnessed the emergence of a records disposition policy (for headquarters records at least) that would serve the DIA for a number of years. And at the same time that the DIA was thus feeling its way, the government as a whole was also beginning to take an active interest in the state of records throughout its departments. Where these two developments met — in 1890, 1897, and 1912-14 — useful touch points occur at which to compare thinking in the department with the broader interests of the government at large. Clearly, there is room for comparative study to determine how other government departments responded to similar forces and initiatives.

70 *Ibid.*, vol. 3183, file 456000, Memo of Inspector Markle, May 1914.

71 *Ibid.*, Matheson to Scott, 10 May 1914. The "put by" note is dated 7 October 1914.

72 See correspondence 1946-49 on DIAND, file 1/1-6-2, pt. 1.

73 PAC, RG 10, vol. 8586, file 1/1-6-3, J.D. McLean to T.W. Harris, 20 October 1927.

A primary purpose of this investigation was to assess how a government department maintained its records and how it responded to the pressures of a "paper explosion" occasioned by the tremendous expansion of its responsibilities in the decades surrounding the turn of the century. It was suggested at the outset that such an inquiry would provide glimpses of the perceptions of the department's officers as to the nature of their records and ultimately the role that their agency played in the bureaucracy. Obviously they saw in their records a long-term operational and legal value, but it is argued that these values took on an added dimension because of the nature of the DIA as a "clientele" agency and, more importantly, the peculiarities of the client. The Indian was the untutored ward of the state; the DIA bore a responsibility to protect, through cautious records-keeping practices, not just the interests of the department but also those interests — albeit as defined by ethnocentric white bureaucrats — of the Indian people who were viewed essentially as legal minors. Here was the "White Man's Burden" carried into the realm of the records office.

But it has also been suggested that departmental authorities at least claimed to appreciate an historical dimension to their records that was greater than the operational/legal value and in the area of records disposal decisions seem to have been influenced as a result. Was this an expression of a genuine interest on the part of a few DIA administrators in the history of the White-Indian relationship? Was it self-glorification? Was this the Victorian revelling in his own goodness for having taken up the burden of "civilizing" an untutored race and wishing to ensure that the story be recorded for posterity? No one clear answer emerges. Did their whiggish "historical perspective" of three-quarters of a century ago serve the history of the DIA or of Indian people well? The question is open to debate.