

## ***Instant Professionalism: To the Shiny New Men of the Future***

by **GEORGE BOLOTENKO\***

I am reluctant to write once again on the archivist-historian. What began as a debate is now in danger of becoming a verbal fire-fight, where contenders lose sight of both issues and reason, and where tangential concerns and supporting examples are elevated, dissected, and exalted at the expense of broad principles and the central core of my original argument. Let me return, therefore, full circle, at the invitation of the editor, and offer my last words on the subject. What I have to say adds, I hope, something new, clarifies my general argument or, at the very least, does not bore by being a re-arrangement of the same old ditty.

My second round of critics share a zeal for the commanding concept of “professionalism.” (Their comments all appear in *Archivaria* 19, the Winter 1984-85 issue.) Terry Eastwood and Christopher Hives speak of professionalism in their letters to the editor. Carl Spadoni entitles his rejoinder “In Defence of the New Professionalism.” And Richard Cox, in his concluding remarks, gives the notion pride of place: “I stake my professional future on the vision of the archivist’s professional integrity without sacrificing his relevance to a modern, complex society.” Everywhere, the magically efficacious buzz-words — “professional” and “professionalism.”

Although my two earlier pieces touched on this sacred commodity of “professionalism,” I would now like to treat this subject more fully, for it is the seductive siren-song which has disposed some archivists to break too rapidly with things past, and to search too nebulously for things new. Nearly every profession, J.C. Colson observed in 1968,

...is engaged in a more or less persistent debate among its members on two questions. The first is: How shall recruits be prepared for it? The second is: Where shall this preparation be obtained?... Much of this [however] is a debate about shadows rather than a concern with reality. The shadows, in

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\* I wish to thank Tom Nesmith and Terry Cook for their helpful criticisms of earlier drafts of this article. I also profited from the comments of Edward Laine, Walter Neutel, and Ian McClymont, all of the Public Archives of Canada.

almost every case, are the mystique of 'professionalism,' the magical authority of science and the doctrinaire insistence upon the separateness of the profession.<sup>1</sup>

Colson warned that "the mere mastering of a corpus of technical operations is not preparation for a profession."<sup>2</sup> There needs to be much more. There must be content, knowledge, cultural breadth, and academic endeavour — in a word, all those attributes which, it seems to me, either characterized the archivist-historian or in the very least stood and continue to stand as his ideals.

Keeping Colson's warnings in mind, the "separators" might stop a moment to consider seriously the implications of what they are about. Their concern with the outward signs of "professionalism" — with technique and methodology, with the creation of a new and distinct body of practices, with new forms, with uniqueness, mystique, and separation<sup>3</sup> — can go too far, and be reduced to a celebration of novel forms which are substantially without meaning. For example, one student of this question of professional identity seems to agree with the authorities he cites, who argue that "the question of [professional identity] is not whether [the members of] 'a group are really professionals, but the fact that they claim to be so and that they aspire to professional status.'"<sup>4</sup> If to this is added the design or fact of a distinct "professional" association, expressed through a systematized codex of new principles and practices<sup>5</sup> (i.e., techniques and methodologies), we magically have a new and distinct "profession." In short, desire translated into association, technique recast as principle, new outward forms (Colson's shadows) accepted as substance and knowledge and — bingo! — instant "professionalism."

What intrigues me in all this profession-building is the question of content. Other professions display a similar tension between form and content, and some such professions are experiencing a profound crisis precisely because the methodologists, the sculptors of form in their midst, have been in the ascendant in recent times. The teaching profession in North America, for example, is in particularly painful disarray because, in the preparation of educators since the 1960s, content has been reduced to insignificance under the pressure to create a new mystique of form. Virtually everywhere, the curricula of teacher-training institutions have come to emphasize teaching techniques and educational theory at the expense of academic subjects, "focussing on practical skills without much intellectual content."<sup>6</sup> As a member of the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching has commented, if no changes occur, "teachers will become like the ancient Greek Sophists, 'saying nothing well,' possessing enviable blackboard skills but a dim understanding of algebra or history."<sup>7</sup>

1 J.C. Colson, "On the Education of Archivists and Librarians," *The American Archivist* 31 (April 1968), pp. 167-68.

2 *Ibid.*, p. 173.

3 W. Birdsall, *The American Archivists' Search for Professional Identity* (University Microfilms International, Ann Arbor, Michigan, 1977). Birdsall's work, a Ph.D. dissertation for the Department of Library Science, University of Wisconsin, addresses itself wholly to the crystallization of the "archival professional" identity, an evolution based necessarily on the negation of the archivist-historian connection, and on the steering of a middle passage between librarians and historians.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 2.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. 4, 69.

6 "Why Teachers Fail," *Newsweek*, 24 September 1984, pp. 64-67; A. Nikiforuk, "Why Our Teachers Can't Teach," *Quest* (September 1984), pp. 34-40.

7 E. Boyer, in "Why Teachers Fail," p. 67.

In the art of teaching, we have arrived at the point of too much methodology and form, and too little substance, stressing process at the expense of product.<sup>8</sup> While it is true that “a good grade in math or English doesn’t mean that a person will be a good teacher, you can’t teach anything unless you know something.”<sup>9</sup> And that’s the crunch of it all — form and methodology, without intellectual substance, is no great gain. It takes no extraordinary insight for the reader to replace the “teaching profession” with the “archival profession” in the foregoing passage. Such an exercise is no mere sophistry; the parallel between the two professions is real, valid, and disturbing.

It is in this context that I fix Messieurs Hives and Eastwood’s objections to what I say. In his letter entitled “Two Solitudes,” Eastwood comments that I believe “there is no basis for the academic study of archives. In that case, there is no *profession* [my emphasis], just a job to be done by anyone who comes along, with employers deciding who qualifies to do the job.” He is right in part — I do not care for the mystique of “professionalism,” something which he seems to value in its own right. From this, however, it does not follow that I propose that archival work is “just a job to be done by anyone who comes along.” Far from it! That work is to be done by those interested in, and especially those trained in, historical research and related endeavours; that is not just anyone coming along. Nor does it follow from my general position that I have no use for the study of methodology and the application of rationalization, standardization, and computerization to archival activity, a point I have made repeatedly, but seemingly without effect. Yet this does not vitiate my main concern, which is that archivists must perceive the matter of methodology simply as something utilitarian, that they must remain first and foremost historians, and that, in the rush to define their new professionalism, they must not in blind imitation of teachers and educators reduce their calling to the idiocy of form without content.

The irony of it all is that there is absolutely no need to do so. Those who now scramble to impart a new professional colouration to archival work ignore the fact that such already exists. As the noted American archivist, Herman Kahn, observed years ago,

The training one receives as an undergraduate and graduate student in history or related subjects, which gives or should give one a knowledge of what scholarship is, what research is, how research is conducted — the relationship of the scholar to his sources, and the use and limitations of various kinds of sources — the whole story of man, and as a part of that story, how man has used the record in writing his own story — all of those vast areas of human knowledge that make use of the written record — it is when he is being trained in these fields that *the potential archivist is receiving the truly professional part of his training*.<sup>10</sup>

Commenting upon Kahn’s observations, Frank Burke refines this concept further:

This is an accurate statement relating to the most professional activities of an archivist’s career, and once that training has been received, the potential archivist need learn only some mechanical procedures about arrangement,

<sup>8</sup> Nikiforuk, “Why Our Teachers Can’t Teach,” p. 36.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 40.

<sup>10</sup> Herman Kahn, cited in Frank G. Burke, “Similarities and Differences,” in R.L. Clark, Jr., ed., *Archive-Library Relations* (New York, 1976), p. 59. Emphasis added.

description, and those few aspects of archival administration (i.e. security) that might differ from the administration of any other organization.<sup>11</sup>

In a word, it is in the intellectual and cultural dimension of the archivist's work that the true professionalism of the calling resides. To elevate methodology and form to the honour of being the chief criterion of determining professional status is to strip away the gold for a patina of pyrite.

There is, in the interesting presidential address of 1984 to the Society of American Archivists by David B. Gracy II, an intriguing — one might say foreboding — intimation of where such “pyrite” tendencies will lead. This is all the more significant because it is based on the findings of the SAA Task Force on the nature and future of the archival profession in the new information world of the later 1980s. Reviewing various options open to archivists who, in his opinion, have their backs to the wall in today's climate, Gracy writes that “the paradox of switching roles from historian/scholar to administrator is that we are finding ourselves falling instead into the lesser role of valet fetching old information.”<sup>12</sup> To demonstrate such a development, he points out that the U.S. Office of Personnel Management and similar offices at the state level have lowered both entry requirements and remuneration levels for archival work, “because they perceive it to be more technical than professional.”<sup>13</sup> Those so keenly wound up with the notion that unique methodologies and new forms allegedly impart professional lustre to a vocational group might take the Gracy evidence to heart. In turning against the scholarly-intellectual core of archival activity — let it be called the “professionalism” of higher education and continuing scholarly activity if there must be a “professionalism” — they are draining the calling of its real uniqueness and expertise and reducing it to a clerical service.

It is in this context that I would answer the several objections that Richard Cox raised to what I have written earlier. He argues that I am out of touch with the pragmatic (i.e., logistical and financial) difficulties which presently compromise the mission of the archivist, that I do not understand the mission is *already* compromised (his emphasis). How he arrived at this finding I do not know, unless my silence on this matter constitutes for him sufficient proof of my ignorance. Lack of legislation in aid of archival work, lack of funding, lack of basic institutional care for archival records, lack of respect for the “profession” — all this and more is, in fact, somehow attributed by him to my historian-archivist of days past. Again, where the logical connection is, I do not know, unless Cox finds it sufficient to argue from associationalism: that the archivists of the past were archivist-historians, that the very same logistical problems existed then, and that that therefore renders historian-archivists (and the orientation of archival work they represent) responsible for the crisis facing archivists today. Did they not strive mightily, Mr. Cox, even as many are doing today, to find ways with which to impress upon society the value of the historical record and the imperative to preserve it? Are today's archivists somehow different in their dedication? Likely not — but will you, some thirty years down the road, look back and, should similar logistical differences persist, damn your new professionals equally much? Might not our problems today be just as easily ascribed, as David Gracy suggests, to the fact that we have *abandoned* the historian-archivist nexus at a time when it is most needed?

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11 *Ibid.*

12 D.B. Gracy II, “Our Future is Now,” *The American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985), p. 17.

13 *Ibid.*

Cox also finds me falling far short in the realm of archival theory. However, it seems to me that the very authorities to whom he turns for proof of this contention lend more support to my general position than to his. For example, quoting Richard C. Berner, Cox writes that “too few [archivists] have raised themselves above narrow mastery of mere technique borrowed from myriad institutional settings.” And yet it seems to me that Cox himself is concerned less with theory and much more with technique. Or does Cox hold to the peculiar notion that the mechanics of records management, the practices of library science, or the language of Fortran constitute theories in the fullest sense of that term? Is this not an elementary, yet far-reaching, misconception — this perception that technique and methodology constitute “theory” — and is this not the very thing against which Berner warns us?

Cox rightly notes the importance of appraisal in archival work, and cites Frank Burke’s commentary on this subject. Yet in none of this do I see a challenge to what I have argued. On the contrary, everything Burke recommends suggests a closer linkage with the historical calling, with an awareness of the historical context of records creation and the nature of historical research, and with the needs of the practitioners of history. Burke’s astute observation that the archival educational programmes now in place are “producing a large crop of parish priests when no one has bothered to devise a theology under which they can act” is quite accurate. And that is *precisely* why I am arguing for the same end — a theology. I would suggest to Cox that his arguments, as they stand, are a prescription not for a theology to inspire and elevate as Burke and I envision, but for a catechism of ritual to adapt, and emulate. Each has its value, but it is no small thing to recognize which is which.

Staying with the question of archival theory, Cox finds a weakness in my characterization of records management, in my sensing of an antithesis between archivist and records manager. I believe that there are grounds for such a contention. For example, G.F. Brown, a records manager, has written:

While [the methods of archivist and records manager] are alike in many ways, they serve different purposes.... The Archivist serves the needs of the scholar, the historian, and posterity, whereas the Records Manager serves the needs of a business which is usually profit-motivated and which is interested only in information that contributes to or protects the profit or the goals of the organization. To put it another way, the Records Manager is basically a business administrator and the Archivist is basically a historian.... The Archivist must realize that the Records Manager considers himself to be ‘going beyond the call of duty,’ when he concerns himself with historical records, or at least records that might become historical.<sup>14</sup>

My review of *ARMA Quarterly* and *Records Management Quarterly* issues from the 1970s onward convince me that Brown’s characterization of records management is the norm. True, some authors have expressed an interest in archives and demonstrated how good records management eases potential future burdens for the archivist.<sup>15</sup> On the whole, however, archives and the collective past were of no importance to the

14 G.F. Brown, “The Archivist and the Records Manager: A Record Manager’s Viewpoint,” *American Records Management Association Quarterly* 5 (January 1971), pp. 21-22.

15 A. Ricks, “Records Management as an Archival Function,” *Records Management Quarterly* 11 (April 1977), p. 15.

contributors to these two publications, whose credo was perhaps best summed up by E.C. Hanes when he wrote: "...so then I believe the real test of a records manager is how well we make the right information available ... at the right time ... to the right people ... at the right cost."<sup>16</sup> In this purely administrative formula — perfectly laudable in its own place — I see no ideological or theological value for archivists interested in the matter of an archival philosophy.

As I find myself repeating to everyone's nausea, by all means cooperate with the records managers, co-opt what is good, acquire those necessary rituals. Do not, however, pretend that this somehow alters the calling of archivist; the archivist is still archivist-historian, save that he has now acquired several new tricks. I have argued, and will continue to argue, against those who elevate technique to the level of archival ideal, an elevation premised on the reduction of the historian in the archivist. Methodologies are post-academic, indeed post-professional, attributes easily acquired by an archivist; the mastery of such methodologies in no wise changes the preparatory requirements for an archivist, nor the necessity to stay actively involved in academic activity, nor the general "mind-set" of the historian-archivist.

Which gets us to Carl Spadoni. I will not respond to every single criticism which he directs at me in his latest writing, but one in particular, dealing with the historical "mind-set," does call for another attempt at elucidation.<sup>17</sup> Spadoni argues that, were I correct on this matter, it would be almost impossible for a librarian to become an archivist. I do not think that the latter contention flows axiomatically out of the proposition. Of course, a librarian with requisite historical training and orientations can become an archivist: many institutions, either out of foolishness, inertia, necessity, or some higher wisdom, do require library science training for archival duties. But were Spadoni to recall the original purpose of my writing, it was never to presume to venture a full analysis of the library science profession, nor to anathematize library science in its own right. Rather it was to argue that library science, which remains largely uninformed *vis-à-vis* in-depth historical research, can be no more than a methodological aid to archivists, that the archivist remains vitally "historical" in his work, and that, in the modern tendency toward a "professional" redefinition of the archivist, we should not in cavalier fashion rush off into things new, throwing off the old, without serious reservation and without a balanced awareness of the value of established ways. Coincidentally, I find it incomprehensible that many archivists are sufficiently expansive in outlook to admit new rituals, while they are so narrow in their perception of things of value in the ethical mother of us all, the discipline of history. And more, I find this rush to condemn history both trite and mercenary because the acceptance of new ancillary methodologies does not at all require the negation of the historian-archivist ethos.

I will deal only with one other point which Spadoni raises. He suggests that there is an inconsistency in my general argument that an archivist should be an historian, and that what I say on this point must either have a prescriptive value or it does not — that I can't have it both ways. Spadoni is quite right that in my opinion an archivist not only can, but

16 E.C. Hanes, "The Challenge of Change," *Records Management Quarterly* 7 (April 1973), p. 7.

17 I might suggest to Spadoni that the use of this term is not a novelty introduced by me. Herbert Butterfield, for example, writing on historiography, has observed that to understand the Western historical tradition, one must understand Western religious thought and sentiment because it "shaped the mentality of our ancestors, deciding the 'set' of their minds and governing the way in which they conceived the world of human happenings." Emphasis added. See his *The Origins of History* (London, 1981), p. 15.

in fact should, be an historian, preferably by training and certainly by inclination. However, there is no consistency between this position and my “casual disclaimer” (as he puts it) that I am not making a “whole and binding prescription for proper *conduct* [emphasis mine] by all archivists.” Everything hinges on the word *conduct*. I have deliberately avoided setting out a fulsome formula for all that an archivist *must do* in the area of archives and history for the simple reason that I neither accept nor prescribe modes of conduct and degrees of fulfilment thereof. To my archivist-historian, given his historical disposition and training, it is a matter of choice whether, and to what degree, he practises the art of history. I believe that he *should* because, in my opinion, it will make him a better archivist: whether he does or not, however, is his business. All of this reduces to a problem not of logical consistency, but of quality and quantity of archival-historical intellectual activity, a choice left free to each archivist. As in any profession, this means some will excel and others will not: one cannot *prescribe* excellence or even conduct past a certain point. But accepting the historian-archivist orientation for the profession means that the lowest common denominator for the central core of *archival* work will be higher than would otherwise have been the case.

There is a final concern that I wish to address since some archivists seem to have difficulty with the abstruse and abstract quality of some of my ideas. I have written of historical preparation and orientation as absolute *sine qua nons* for an archivist, and yet I have never shown their practical application, their day-to-day relevance to the archivist on the job. Accordingly, Terry Eastwood remarks that “strangely, Bolotenko actually undersells the role of historical study in the making of archivists because he does not identify and *illustrate* [his emphasis] the ways in which historical study informs the daily work of the archivist.”

I did not do so simply because many others have already made the connection well between history and its application in archival settings. As readers of this journal are readily aware, Tom Nesmith wrote a ground-breaking full-length article on this matter well before I began my first piece, and Terry Cook has also addressed this issue directly more than once.<sup>18</sup> Frank Burke’s excellent contribution to *Archive-Library Relations* and his important piece on the future of archival theory treat this question with considerable insight as well.<sup>19</sup> Article after article in *The American Archivist*, in whole or in part, looks at the intrinsic connection between history and archival practice; an example is W.L. Joyce’s recent, beautifully crafted piece, in which he concludes:

Some archivists have recently asserted a ... disingenuous view, arguing that, while their readers are academic, they are not historians. While this may be true in the narrow sense of disciplinary affiliation, it overlooks an important fact: whatever the disciplinary affiliation of the academic user of archives, most come to the archives using an historical way of thinking. Even if they are not formally trained in the discipline of history, social scientists, public

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18 Tom Nesmith, “Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” *Archivaria* 8 (Summer 1982); Terry Cook, “From Knowledge to Information: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49; Terry Cook, “Clio: The Archivist’s Muse?” *Archivaria* 5 (Winter 1977-78), pp. 198-203. Another useful piece with a strong “practical” bent is Thomas T. Spencer, “The Archivist as Historian: Towards a Broader Definition,” *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 296-300.

19 See Clark, ed., *Archive-Library Relations*, pp. 31-68; and Frank Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *The American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), pp. 40-46.

policy makers, and others approach their topics with a retrospective or sequential understanding. Scholarship in the social sciences and the humanities is essentially an exercise in problem solving, and such projects are often an exercise in analytically evaluating a pattern of decisions regarding a problem historically defined. As repositories of non-current records, archives are inevitably (one is tempted to say relentlessly) historical. While some archivists may want to absolve themselves of dealing with historians, they cannot avoid dealing with the historical method and its implications for archival repositories and archival researchers.<sup>20</sup>

Those who want to see the application, the relevance, the “practical” implications of history for archivy, will find abundant evidence in all the above-cited articles.

In summary, therefore, I have been writing of the need for an archival theology; that is not to say that I see no value in the ritual, the methodologies, the techniques, and the skills of modernity applied to archival work, or the connection between ritual and theology. I simply believe that archivists can be best inspired in the performance of their rituals by history — by the discipline itself, by the skills which attend that discipline, by the constant honing of those skills through participation and practice in the arena of history; all of this, as some have pointed out, constitutes the true “professionalism” of the archivist. Put bluntly, “human society needs history;” and the work of an archivist is, to steal a phrase from Arthur Marwick on history, “ministering to a human need.”<sup>21</sup> *Ministering* I would emphasize, not *servicing* as our information-management colleagues would have us.

To those who wish to make archival work a purely “service profession,” I would quote Nietzsche as a warning. In *Zarathustra*, writing of pedants of rote and blind form rather than true scholars, Nietzsche had Zarathustra declare:

Good clocks they are: but take heed to wind them up aright! They will then tell the hour without deception, ticking modestly the while.

They work like millstones and corn-crushers — if grain be thrown into them! They know but too well how to grind corn and make white dust thereof.<sup>22</sup>

That is what I fear may befall the archival calling, that we may become mindless grinders of corn, blind processors of information as a commodity, unless, as Joyce puts it, we realize that “the primary purpose of archives is cultural.”<sup>23</sup>

What Nietzsche wrote a century ago leading American historian Oscar Handlin has but recently restated in as colourful terms. Fearful of much that is transpiring presently in the *métier* of history, much that is fully parallel to what has occurred in the teaching profession, Handlin wrote:

My fears [for the future of the calling] now focus on a more grotesque image: a super, super, super-market, in which shiny, shiny men stock the endless

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20 W.L. Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” *The American Archivist* 42 (Spring 1984), pp. 131-32.

21 Arthur Marwick, *The Nature of History* (New York, 1970), p. 8.

22 Friedrich Nietzsche, *Thus Spake Zarathustra*, translated by A. Tille (London, 1958), p. 115.

23 Joyce, “Archivists and Research Use,” p. 125.



shelves, indiscriminate, inarticulate, each to his own pitch — with no questions asked about the contents of the boxes.<sup>24</sup>

I share that fear with him, because it applies equally well to what I sense transpiring in the archival calling.

In my perception and in my fervent hope, we are — or must be — much more than mere mechanics smoothing along the interminable flow of endless bits of information, coming from somewhere and going to somewhere. To those who refuse to see the archivist as a key player in the process of societal self-awareness and who refuse the concomitant notion of archivist as historian and scholar, and who in its place wish to erect a new archival paradigm of archivist as information manager — as the stock-boy moving boxes hither and yon interested much less in content than movement — I can only suggest caution. Like clerics without a faith, like clerks without knowledge, they will come to constitute the “shiny new men” of archives. Should this come to pass, I believe that the question posed at the conclusion of my first article would still stand unanswered — where, then, the archivist?

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24 Oscar Handlin, *Truth in History* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979), p. 22.