

Letters to the Editor

Reassessing the “Historical Shunt”

Since the appearance of Hugh Taylor’s “Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980’s” in *Archivaria* 18, the reaction of the archival community has focussed almost exclusively upon Mr. Taylor’s notion of an information culture and the modifications this will engender for contemporary records keeping. A more-or-less coherent professional self-analysis has ensued, and while many of the more contentious issues remain unresolved, few would consider that the exercise has not had the positive effect of challenging archivists to reassess their roles. My only reservations with this process concern its historical frame of reference, at least insofar as it has been constituted by Mr. Taylor in his conception of the “historical shunt.” Irrespective of Mr. Taylor’s perception of the archival function in the new information environment, the historical dimensions of his argument offer a somewhat distorted view of the medieval and, especially, the early modern past. In effect, the theory of the historical shunt contrives to sever modern archivy from the medieval and early modern experience by fostering a consciousness of discontinuity. According to Mr. Taylor, the advent of “scientific” history and the inauguration of the great national records repositories in the nineteenth century of necessity moved archivists away from their former preoccupation with the administrative purposes of government records. Archivists were transported from the records office to the “historical archives.” Consequently, it is axiomatic to Mr. Taylor’s theory that medieval and early modern archivists were simply government administrators labouring in the bowels of the cameral or state paper office.

To be sure, our present knowledge of archival history in the medieval and early modern period is fragmentary, confined to the few specialist monographs and books available, and what may be gleaned from the standard historical texts. Indeed, there may even be some question as to whether anything comprehensive in the way of archival history for this period can be written. Given the remarkable fluidity characteristic of European bureaucracies during and after the fifteenth century, it is often easier to feel that something approaching a synthetic archivy existed than to say exactly what it amounted to. Nevertheless, it is exceedingly presumptuous to suppose that the current state of our information is sufficient to support historical conclusions such as those proposed by the hypothesis of the historical shunt. In the first place, Mr. Taylor’s observations issue principally from his assessment of records keeping as it evolved under the English national government of

Henry VII and his successors. While some passing allusion is made to the cameral records offices of Europe by way of association, in essence we are provided with a distillation of the Anglo archival tradition recollected from Professor Elton's "Henrician Revolution" and the administrative histories of Galbraith, Aylmer, Cheney, Thompson, Jenkinson, et al. Just as perfunctory is the strict equation of the archive with the state paper office or public record office. Here we are reminded of the glossaries of the juriconsults, where *archivium* is defined as "a place in which public records are preserved" or "a public repository of records and documents." In this formula, there is no role assigned to the private archive or the archive-library, or to the corpus of manuscripts, books, chronicles, collectanea, maps, drawings, three-dimensional objects, and other miscellanea which together with the public acts, writs, registers, and communications comprise our early modern archival heritage.

Perhaps the real surprise is the absence of any reference to the Italian archival tradition, whose roots naturally may be traced to the Roman Empire but whose modern origins are normally placed in the latter stages of the *quattrocento*. For nearly a century now, the Renaissance has been generally regarded as a watershed in the intellectual as well as the artistic development of Europe. The transformation of ideas which occurred during those innovative years certainly had implications for the writing of history, and, though we are still some considerable distance from the work of Hume, Robertson, and Gibbon, we have at hand the birth of modern attitudes to the past in the work of Brunni, Biondo, and Platina, among others. This is not the place to consider the contributions made by humanist historiography to the new learning, or to recall the influential role it assumed in the education of a new lay governing class. But it is important, in reflecting on the altered position of the historian in the fifteenth-century, to remember that many scholars found permanent employment with the governors they instructed, notably in the chancery and cameral "records offices." Inevitably, this would have a profound impact upon the administration of archives.

One of the more visible effects of the historian's presence in government was the allotment of public funds for the foundation of repositories dedicated to the preservation for posterity of all documents public and private as well as to the bureaucratic mainstream of records management. If the evidence of the chancery registers and rolls of stipendiaries provides any indication of contemporary archival practice, it is that the archive was an institution quite distinct from the record office and almost invariably in the charge of a historian. It appears, too, that public records were assigned an active and dormant life cycle, eventually finding shelf-space among the bewildering assortment of things which constituted "dormant storage" or the "historical archives." What is abundantly clear, however, is that the administrators of these records "twilight zones" (as Mr. Taylor calls them) were historians. And whether these individuals were inscribed on the employment rolls as archivist (*archivista*), or librarian (*bibliothecarius*), or custodian (*custos*), they were expected to select, collect, conserve, and organize the public and private documents which fell within their jurisdiction or mandate. In some instances, they were also expected to write what could be loosely described as "official history."

Typical of the sort of individual who gained employment as an archivist in the later *quattrocento* is Pellegrino Prisciani, records keeper for the Duke of Ferrara, Modena, and Reggio. Court astrologer, poet, philosopher, Doctor of Laws and History (he taught astrology and history at the University of Ferrara from 1456 until his death in 1525), Prisciani first appears in the role of records keeper as *bibliothecarius* in 1480, when he

undertook to prepare an inventory of the holdings in the ducal library (now the *Biblioteca Estense* in Modena). Later, in 1488, he was appointed *conservatore de la ragione de la Camera* (archivist) and charged with responsibility for all public and private records under nominal control of the Estensi *signoria*, including the dormant administrative records formerly preserved by the cameral *referendarius* and his *cancellieri*. Numbered among his most significant contributions to *quattrocento* Ferrarese archivy would be the inauguration of a central records repository in the Palazzo della Ragione, the foundation of the secret archive (*Archivio Segreto*), the organization of signorial records into *fondi* and series, and the preparation of a complete inventory of archival holdings. His other accomplishments were many and varied. He formed part of a small circle of humanist scholars with Tommaso Fusco, Lucas Gauricus, and Lodovico da Bagno, and he wrote prodigiously, providing us with the *Annales Ferrariensis*, the *Ortopascha*, the *Collectanea*, and *De Spectacula*. He designed the first modern European theatre to be devoted to the presentation of secular drama and was instrumental in the translation of the Terrentine and Plautine texts used as scripts. His knowledge of diplomatics and protocol was also in constant demand, and, at one time or another, he acted as Estensi ambassador to the Court of Milan and the Venetian Republic.

In singling out Prisciani, I want to emphasize that he was far from unique; however, there is no need to catalogue the others which fit the archivist-historian mould. Rather, it has simply been my intention to offer a perspective on early modern archivy quite distinct from the one proposed by Mr. Taylor and to raise questions concerning his historical interpretation. Mr. Taylor is certainly entitled to his opinion of the archival profession, and there is much of value in what he says. But before we exorcise the historian from the archivist by reference to the past, we might well profit by a more cautious and considered examination of our professional roots.

Richard Brown
Federal Archives Division
Public Archives of Canada

The Women and War Exhibition, A Rejoinder

First, let me compliment *Archivaria* for acknowledging through its exhibition reviews, the valuable role of exhibitions of archival documents in transmitting information to the general public about our history. It is indeed heartening to know that times and attitudes are changing and that more and more archives and archivists are accepting public education, particularly through exhibitions, as an essential role.

Now to the primary purpose of my letter — to redress an imbalance created by the review in *Archivaria* 20 of the *Women and War* exhibition now on display at the Canadian War Museum in Ottawa. As the principal researcher/writer for this exhibition, I wish to take issue with several of the personal opinions and conclusions put forward by the reviewer, Jeanne L'Espérance. Ms. L'Espérance opined that the exhibition was “a rather disappointing failure” leaving the visitor with “a general sense of puzzlement.” She is, of course, entitled to her views. However, I wish to point out that other reviewers have described it as “cause for awe,” as “provocative without being biased,” as “a reminder of