From the Editor

Archives and the "Circle of Knowledge"

The new *Canadian Encyclopedia* has quickly won a prominent place on bookshelves across the country. And justly so. It contains a wealth of information on Canada in entries ranging from *A Mari usque ad Mare* (which, incidentally, was written by W.K. Lamb) to Janusz Zurakowski (who was the chief test pilot for the Avro Arrow). For many, the *Encyclopedia* will be the most accessible and serviceable means of moving within the Canadian "circle of knowledge" (the root definition of the word "encyclopedia"). For archivists, the *Encyclopedia* is more than another valuable reference text. It is a national cultural achievement in which the archival profession shares along with scores of other professions. The names of twenty-five archivists appear on the list of contributing authors. Their topics range from the Loyalists (Bruce Wilson) to the history of cartography (Ed Dahl), from heraldry (Auguste Vachon) to the Department of Veterans Affairs (Glenn Wright), and from Rupert's Land (Shirlee Anne Smith) to William Lyon Mackenzie (Victor Russell). The profession's greatest contribution to the *Encyclopedia*, however, is as the custodian of hundreds of the documents which illustrate it and of the wider body of archival material which, for the general reader, is likely to be the unseen source of much of the information the *Encyclopedia* contains.

The participation of archivists over the years in the preparation of encyclopedias and general reference books prompts reflection on the changing ways in which archivists have helped enlarge and penetrate the circle of knowledge. Since the formative stages of the profession in the late nineteenth century, leading Canadian archivists have seen their contribution to a comprehensive overview of knowledge as the highest ideal of archival work. This began as the "noble dream" of the first federal archivist, Douglas Brymner, who, after taking up his duties in 1872, planned to acquire documentation related to every aspect of Canadian history. His successor, Arthur Doughty, pursued this goal by, among other things, editing (with L.J. Burpee) the *Index and Dictionary of Canadian History* (1911) and (with Adam Shortt) the twenty-three volumes of *Canada and Its Provinces* (1913-17). Dominion Archivist Gustave Lanctot was a member in the 1940s of the editorial board of *The Encyclopedia of Canada*. In the 1950s, W.K. Lamb was chief editorial consultant for the founding edition of the *Encyclopedia Canadiana*. And Norah Story, a former Chief of the Manuscript Division of the Public Archives of Canada, is better known to Canadians as the sole author of the monumental *Oxford*

Companion to Canadian History and Literature (1967). Story became aware of the need for such a book while doing archival work. She viewed the information it would provide as an integral part of an archivist's sphere of knowledge. "The duty of an archivist," she wrote in the introduction to the *Companion*, "is to know 'who did what when' and to be familiar with the ideas and the political, economic, and social activity of any given period."

Few, if any, archivists today have as broad a conception of their area of expertise. Undoubtedly none would embark on a survey of historical and literary knowledge as ambitious as Story's *Companion*. No other scholars seem brave enough to do so either. The impact of the explosion of literary work in Canada in the last twenty years not only necessitated a supplement to the *Companion* which appeared in 1973, but also a much modified successor to it. *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature* (1983), edited by William Toye, "narrows" the field surveyed to literature alone and was prepared by 192 contributors.

New research in many fields, facilitated in part by a corresponding increase in archival acquisition activity, has enlarged the circle of knowledge and justified new access points on its circumference such as *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, *The Oxford Companion to Canadian Literature*, the recently published *Encyclopedia of Music in Canada*, and additional volumes from such ongoing projects as the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. However, individual archivists cannot absorb even a significant portion of the infinite range of subject matter either within these fields or within the now more extensive array of documents in Canadian archives. Adjustment to this state of affairs has presented the principal intellectual problem for the archival profession in Canada in the past two decades. How can this ever-widening variety of researchers use archives effectively when archivists can neither possess subject specialist knowledge in all the disciplines these users represent nor readily provide direct access to the subject contents of archival documents? Are there entry points to archival holdings which can be found without depending primarily on the archivist's familiarity with the subject being investigated or the subject matter in the documents?

Although archivists today are unlikely to conceive or edit encyclopedias of general knowledge, their efforts to extricate the profession from this conundrum can be assisted to a certain extent by the model an encyclopedia provides of how knowledge can be made accessible. The editors of *The Canadian Encyclopedia*, along with archivists, have been presented with the same question: how can large, complex bodies of information best be explored? Although an encyclopedia amasses huge amounts of information, its principal function is to distil information through careful selection of subject entries and skilful editing and indexing of them to highlight their interrelationships. This format assists the reader to move from one subject entry to another and even beyond the encyclopedia itself to other sources of information. The process takes the reader from one small access point to ever increasing numbers of larger points of entry to the subject. The entry in *The Canadian Encyclopedia* on archives, which was written by Ian Wilson, leads the reader to other entries on the Public Archives of Canada, Arthur Doughty, folklore, conservation of movable cultural property, historiography, the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, and, in the note at the end of the entry on recommended readings, to related books, journals, and other publications on the subject of archives. And these in turn provide various additional components of information and lead to further sources. If, as the encyclopedia model suggests, distillation of information into a comparatively small

number of elements is the key to huge, complex bodies of information, how should archival institutions identify these elements from the information in their holdings?

The lead article in this issue of *Archivaria*, by David Bearman and Richard Lytle of the Smithsonian Institution, attempts to answer that question. The article is the culmination of several years of study in the United States of methods of retrieving information in archival holdings. Archivists have traditionally striven to distil information in archives by identifying the subject matter in the documents (and either devising or borrowing, often from libraries, means of indexing it) or by indexing the key elements in file titles — usually the names of people, places, or institutions. Bearman and Lytle contend that these indexing methods must be superseded by an approach which locates points of entry to archival records in information about their provenance rather than about their content. They argue that information about creators of records and records-generating processes provides the most useful means of access to the variety of other information the records contain. They point out that this is, in fact, the assumption behind most archival reference service anyway. Since most archival records are not controlled by subject content indexes made by archivists, archivists continually fall back on the utility of information related to the provenance of records in order to locate documentation of specific subjects. Bearman and Lytle state that archivists would markedly improve access to archival records by doing the research required to compile as much historical and current information as possible about the creators of the records. If *this* information (once known) about institutional mandates, functions, interrelationships, and the types of records created by administrative entities was standardized in controlled vocabularies, indexed, and automated, archivists and researchers would have a truly powerful means of entry to the subject matter in archival records. They would be coping, even in large archives, with a manageable few thousand series entries and agency histories rather than with millions of individual subject files.

In effect, Bearman and Lytle propose the creation of something like an encyclopedia of information about archival documents. The main entries in this encyclopedia would be the units of provenance information. As in an encyclopedia, this information would be cross-referenced to permit as many access points to it and linkages between such points as possible. And, also like an encyclopedia, the main entries would lead a researcher to other "recommended readings," which in this case would be the inventories prepared by the archives and file classification manuals, file lists, indexes, and agency guides the creators of the records made to control them. If the administrative histories of the components of the Canadian federal government were available, and thus their various responsibilities described and then indexed, a researcher interested in, for example, art history, would not only be able to locate quickly information in unexpected places such as the records of the Department of Agriculture which, before 1918, administered Canada's participation in international exhibitions where Canadian art was displayed, but would also be able to track the government's involvement in such activities across other administrative units and time periods from 1867 to the present. And if a national archival information "encyclopedia" could ultimately be made available, based on the principle of provenance, researchers would have an invaluable instrument for locating information across the archives of the country.

The advantages researchers would acquire from such an "encyclopedia" are matched by the benefits which would accrue to the archival profession. The distinct intellectual dimension of archival work would be more firmly established. It would, however, rest far

more on information *about* records than on the subject matter *within* them: the essential distinction perhaps of the scholarly role of the archivist *versus* the historian. The discipline of archives would encompass information about both historical and contemporary records. In this way, archivists would be better prepared to become custodians of records which still have current administrative purposes — which is the burden of Richard Kesner's article in *Archivaria* 19, Hugh Taylor's article in *Archivaria* 18, and his counterpoint elsewhere in this issue of the journal. Archivists who understand *both* the historical and contemporary context of records creation will be better able to work with records managers on what Jay Atherton calls, in an article in this issue, the "continuum" joining the two professions. Archivists can thereby strengthen their links with records managers to improve appraisal and acquisition of current records, as well as retrieval of older records for contemporary administrative purposes, without sacrificing in the least the many other legitimate custodial responsibilities which distinguish archivists from such information professionals. If archivists can offer their employers an overview of the past and present administrative context of records keeping in their institutions, perhaps institutions such as hospitals which, as Barbara Craig makes clear in this issue, do not now see a significant role for archives, would reconsider that view. The profession's approach to these institutions might well begin with proposals for pilot studies of the way hospitals have created and managed records which could demonstrate the administrative value of an "encyclopedia" of records assembled in an archives. This may be especially useful if a hospital archivist could not only make his institution's archives more accessible, but also call on the resources of a national archival information system to locate relevant medical documentation in other archives. As Bearman and Lytle point out, "...no one [in the management levels of most institutions] has an overview of what the organization was, how it became what it is today, and where it is headed tomorrow. Archivists are ideally situated to provide such a view through the information systems which they ought to be creating to provide intellectual control for historical materials."

Bearman and Lytle's recommendations also come at at time when crucial decisions about the application of computers in archives are being considered or reviewed. (See in this issue Eldon Frost's discussion of automation in the Federal Archives Division of the Public Archives of Canada and the comments elsewhere in the issue by users of the SAPHIR automated system developed by the Archives nationales du Québec.) Bearman and Lytle's article will be required reading for archivists responsible for computer applications since the central intellectual problem in automating archival records is determining which access points to or levels of description of the records ought to be entered in the computer. The great drain computerization makes on the usually slender financial and other resources of an archives permits little tolerance of serious errors in making those decisions.

Finally, would not development of a national archival "encyclopedia" be just the sort of project which could galvanize the Association of Canadian Archivists into the relevant professional body which Terry Eastwood laments it has not yet become in his counterpoint in this issue?

To remain among society's guides to the ever-expanding circle of knowledge, the archival profession must find innovative ways to make more accessible the not inconsiderable portion of that circle in its care.

Tom Nesmith
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