

Counterpoint

Through the Minefield

by HUGH A. TAYLOR

Readers of *Archivaria* will surely be growing deaf from the clang of couplings as hyphenated archivists are shunted around the pages of so many issues. We must all be rather tired of the noise, but the exercise has been quite revealing in a number of ways. In particular, the printed word has lost none of its power to excoriate opposition; we have witnessed a classic pamphlet war of broadsides aiming their volleys from fixed positions and points of view, though not always on target. Most of us claim to have been misunderstood and some have already attempted to clarify their remarks in the face of apparent obtuseness. What better illustration of the dangerously limited and narrowly focused power of the printed word as a means of communication (as opposed to a channel for information)! This is especially true when we use words in the scientific mode of one-word one-meaning as with “historian” and “archivist.” Print is all we have at present for our published exchanges, but the time lapse between the challenge and the response of serious writers writing serially without the benefit of oral inflection, hesitation, body language, immediate feedback, and clarification can be devastating. Precise formulation on paper cannot smile; only the language of the poet can transcend these limitations.

My article on information ecology in *Archivaria* 18 was not intended to favour one side or the other in the dispute over the place of history, historical research methodology, and the “history of the record” approach in the life of the archivist. I am not “anti-history” and I do not see the archivist as simply an information manager (though that task is itself far from simple). However, I do believe the archivist has a place within automated information management. I do not consider this to be inconsistent, because it is no longer possible to define our work in terms of the “historical” record alone. Increasingly, our electronic environment is eroding the hard edges of definitions, as we know when we plan retrieval systems; professions are becoming increasingly hyphenated as the old fragmented social order breaks down. We have bio-statisticians. Why not historian-archivists and other kinds of archivists, to be simply called “archivist” when this debate is over? There will be keepers of the record assuming various roles in society as there always have been, but with automated records, automated systems of retrieval, and media of record other than the manuscripts and textual government records, upon which archival principles were built, I do not believe that the work of the archivist can be so clearly defined as hitherto. Conversely, we should not confuse a stand on principle with a lack of perception as to our new roles. I am not saying that archival principles basic to our work have changed much yet, but only that they are liable to change and that we should not close our minds to the possibility. The suggestions I made in my “ecology” article were attempts to

hold in tension the traditional archivist and modern information manager in such a way that we as “professionals,” if we must use that term, might embody elements of both without compromising our integrity. My own lack of clarity has resulted in some misunderstanding.

I would, therefore, like to address first of all the contributions of Terry Cook and Tom Nesmith,¹ who have read me most carefully and replied in a thoroughly constructive manner. I should first explain that I see an “historian-archivist” as one who through preference and extensive training in academic history is able to advance “the history of the record” along the lines so ably discussed by Nesmith, as well as performing those more general tasks which fall to most archivists today. To them will fall the lot of enlarging our knowledge of diplomatic and administrative history, but not only to them: all archivists have a part in this and I would like to warn readers from pinning exclusive job descriptions to the archivists I shall describe; I am concerned with emphasis rather than definition. Archivists tend to resist strict and narrow definitions; this I believe is not our weakness but the cause of our survival and will be in the future.

I do not contrast the historian-archivist with some anti-historical “new” archivist who stays on the main line and gets into all the new trendy exciting technology of information management. They will all be archivists who, I hope (naturally!), will have taken the UBC Master of Archival Studies degree or something comparable. Those who do not first have an extensive background in history should have a degree in a discipline which has a *retrospective* component, but which may not be academic history *per se*. On the actual post-graduate archives programme, all prospective archivists will have had exposure to the “new” media, automation, historiography, and administrative history. At present, the only difference is an emphasis on academic history because much of the history of the record in terms of modern diplomatic is being done in the field of manuscripts and textual government records, still the basis of most historical writing. However, a time will soon come when there will be many graduates (not just a few as now) leaving an archives programme with a strong emphasis, say, on film and television where an understanding of semiotics may be essential for a study of “modern diplomatic” in this field; they will be comparable to the “historian-archivists.” I am not challenging the centrality of history broadly defined to the study of archives, but I insist that the term history be not limited to the teachings of university departments of history, and that centrality is likewise used with caution to mean the development of an historical sense that informs the various fields of study engaged in by the archivist. Extensive academic history, as presently taught, is not essential for all.

It must be remembered that the knowledge required by a qualifying archivist is nowadays considerable and expanding rapidly, as is natural if we are to have generalists familiar with all the media of record from an archival point of view, with perhaps an emphasis one way or another. This knowledge is not just a bundle of techniques and even less so if it becomes the basis for challenge, innovation, and reformulation. There is plenty of “intellectual content” here if we consider the nature and social impact of the record as well.

1 See Tom Nesmith, “Toward the Discipline of Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 16-20; and Terry Cook, “From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives,” *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 28-49.

The "historical shunt" is not resolved simply with solutions to "procedural difficulties and technological challenges," though this is part of the problem; it has to do with just that cultural ethos to which several writers have referred. What is the role of the archivist in tomorrow's culture for which we must prepare? This is immensely difficult to predict and requires a careful study of cultural history which is not generally taught at the university level where it is a little too holistic for comfort, and we have to take into account that a future planetary culture may and probably will not be historically based at all. This is not to say that the past with the records and artifacts of the past will not be valued, but that they would be valued as the underpinning of myth in the technical sense of that term. Our role, and the nature of the records culturally valued by society, may well change as a result. I believe we are coming to the end of a whole span of time during which civilized man has thought historically on the literate Greek model. I am therefore in favour of the "centrality of history" for archivists at present, but with a suspended judgement about the future and the need for a mind open to perceive subtle changes and shifts already emerging, which must be cultural not technological. We are presently in the grip of what George Grant has, I believe, called a "technological imperative" which needs to be broken; but, broken or not, technology has shaped our culture, and our media of record continues to shape the way we perceive the world in a way we failed to realize until recently. This should be the concern of the archivist and one reason for my "ecology" piece.

The "in-house" archivist, whose training will have been very similar to those in the central archives (and in some cases identical), is an attempt to face the problem created by fragmented bureaucratic structures having their origins in the age of paper and traditional literacy which must now deal with electronic information and communication, so that the appropriate cultural record is preserved and the accumulated knowledge (not just information) within the record fully utilized.

Essentially, the "in-house" archivist is a bridge between the department and the central archives forming a continuum of available recorded information and interacting with his colleagues there, in part electronically. Paper was one thing, but in the field of electronic records (and this includes television), it is increasingly difficult to draw neat date lines between what shall be retained permanently and what shall be erased, simply by consultation between the central archives and the records managers. Many electronic records are erased or changed very fast without reference to records managers. I realize that we have here two serious problems: the impartiality and integrity of the archivist and the relationship with records managers. I see the in-house archivist as a source of information from both the department and the central archives available to the department and, on occasion (and to a more limited extent), to the public. You might argue that all that is required is enhanced training for the records manager, but here the historical perspective comes in which may be crucial. Certainly decisions about the creation of electronic and manual forms could be greatly improved to provide retrieval continuity with earlier series and to ensure that the data collected has relevance for the longest possible time in proportion to its importance. The older records would not remain "primarily in the departments," but some series might spend a longer time there than they do now, unless they had been sampled.

What I am proposing is simply a hypothesis, a "what if," which may be worth examining further. I agree with Cook about the role of the archivist during the "shunt" period, which I believe was unavoidable and valuable in that we were able to develop our

understanding of archives and their historical value without the pressures of the recent record. All I am saying is that the nature of the automated record requires us to be involved much earlier in its life and, on occasion, prior to its birth. Of course, this is light years away from Jenkinson's text, but we are already some distance from the role of Richard Kesner's "passive recipients."²

On another point, we will all move out of the shunt together, and it is already beginning to happen. I never intended to suggest that somehow the historian-archivists and other archivists in the central archives would remain "shunted." All would be within the same continuum of archival activity which would extend out into the departments. Automated description of long-term value, carried out in the departments, would release archivists in the central archives from a great deal of routine descriptive work, some of which takes a great deal of research. In-house archivists would be in a position to evaluate the administrative and archival dimension of the automated record at one and the same time and may be in a better position to secure the necessary documentation at the time than records or information managers. Again, I realize that this is a difficult area which needs to be explored. As for the accessibility and public use of records within departments, an archivist having close links with the central archives would be in a strong position to serve the needs of "citizen science," the growing demand of interest groups critical of "experts," developing briefs on a wide range of subjects (often with an historical dimension) such as the environment, health, national security, etc. Widespread popular "feedback" resulting from increasing freedom of information is likely to be a new element in democratic government, which is already beginning to make some impact despite opposition and the threat of an Orwellian model. This relatively new pattern of use is a product of the electronic age. As I have said above, this will not be easy to put in place. Cook's example of the Department of Indian Affairs is well taken, but there is nothing to prevent whole bodies of records from being transferred to the central archives as a result of negotiation and agreement. An archival link with the department may well make such arrangements easier. The central archives would still continue as "total archives" receiving records from the private sector, and I quite agree that archivists working there may become more culturally informed as a result of this enrichment. Meanwhile, the in-house archivists would be not only concerned with the administrative, legal, and fiscal value of their records, but also their long-term cultural value and they would be in a much better position to monitor this and ensure regular transfers to the central archives. Winston Smith's experience at the Ministry of Truth could just as well be a parable for a central archives as a department. Under the present system, there is an unacceptable destruction or "loss" of records; could this be partly due to a failure to understand our role for want of regular contact with working archivists familiar with current departmental problems? To summarize, the electronic environment has revealed a gulf, not so apparent in an age monopolized by paper, between the records manager in the department and the archivist in the central archives which needs to be bridged somehow. A machine-readable archives division in the central archives is essential and those working in such a division are more aware of the problem than anyone.

I hope these remarks have helped to clear up misunderstandings about my position and to explain why I find myself in agreement with most of Cook's examination of what is

2 See Richard Kesner, "Automated Information Management: Is There a Role for the Archivist in the Office of the Future?" *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), p. 164.

unique about us. In-house archivists working with their counterparts in the central archives would appraise "records in the aggregate" with due consideration of provenance and context and, since they would be archivists, would be concerned with informational value. I am not, as I have said, in the camp of the "information-management specialist," but I am convinced that reconciliation is both possible and essential. Our wired planet abhors polarities, dichotomies, and centres and margins, and we have to resist examining the problem with the logical cause-and-effect lineality of our western, literate, and (dare I say?) historical mind-set which seeks to solve problems one at a time by piece-meal fragmentation of fields and environments of culture. This old attitude often requires the positing of an "enemy" against whom we pit our cause and whom we needs must denigrate and diminish. Planetary culture requires consensual approaches if we are to survive, and this is equally true for us as archivists who, I hope, will again become an unhyphenated part of Teillard de Chardin's "noosphere."

Perhaps what I have said has also helped to clarify my position for Tom Nesmith. I realize that "information generalists with an archival emphasis" could be misleading, but I never suggested that "scholar archivists" should remain "shunted" and I believe that the respective roles of archivist and records manager need to be re-examined, particularly for electronic records as indicated above.

Which brings me to Richard Kesner's article in *Archivaria* 19, which has greatly disturbed many archivists and delighted others. Whatever else one may say, it is a well-written, articulate piece, carefully researched and presented. Is he then my "overarching information generalist with an archival emphasis?" Not quite, because no one yet is. His image of most archivists is somewhat exaggerated, and his solution in consequence is too drastic. We are not "passive recipients of documents," though we have been very shy about getting into preserving automated records partly because of the cost and partly because of the nature of the record itself which requires a great deal more research by us. I do not, however, believe we should become "information management professionals," but Kesner certainly faces head on the problem of the so-called "electronic office" and it is precisely this field that I have tried to explore in archival terms. The requirement that we should "mature into information management professionals" sounds a little patronizing, because I do not see it as a matter of maturity or immaturity. We must certainly learn a great deal more about "information" in an electronic environment if we are to perceive the archival dimension and, in fact, Kesner makes a strong plea that we should do just that. However, "professional" is a term I try to avoid as being impossible to define precisely in our field, and "information management" is in a different dimension. You will notice I do not say different "job" or "category," because there is a relationship within the integrated circuits of automation which dissolves the old hard lines of division between archivist and traditional records manager. We are here dealing with an information-rich soil within fields of knowledge with patterns waiting to be recognized, whose use and interpretation, we hope, will result in wisdom through wise decisions. The archivists' role lies somewhere within these fields of knowledge, but we must be wary how we use our "historical perspective" which may be too linear, from fixed points of view. We must somehow extrapolate this sense of the antecedent into the patterns generated by aggregates of information (Cook's "records in the aggregate"), and we are skilled in recognizing such patterns within traditional archives. This will inform and enrich "information management," since information is now the principal staple of society and its management merges with general management when the executive addresses his terminal. As archivists, we will continue to advise and recommend and our advice will only be taken

as long as it is sound and thoroughly informed. All this may sound highly theoretical and academic, but I feel as if I am picking my way through a minefield of loaded and highly charged terms into uncharted territory.

I would like to conclude by suggesting the following agenda arising out of this long debate. Let us:

1. Use Cook's examination of our proper archival role as a basis for analyzing the information generated in Kesner's "electronic office." Can we make valid comparisons between electronic and paper records? How far can we push such a comparison? As a result, does present archival theory still hold up? Does automation and the electronic image produce a totally new way of thinking and ordering knowledge?³
2. Organize joint sessions between archivists, information managers, and records managers on their respective attitudes towards automated records and services.

³ This is John Meisel's suggestion. See his " 'Newspeak' and the Information Society," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984-85), pp. 173-84.