

From the Editor

The Archival Perspective

Archives in Canada and elsewhere are now in the public eye. The list of issues and incidents which has put archival institutions in the news is lengthy: the forged Hitler diary; the Waldheim affair; the exposure of former Philippine president Marcos's falsified war record; the federal Royal Commission of Inquiry on War Criminals; the McGill Allan Memorial Institute psychological experiments in the 1950s; the publication of transcripts of the Erik Nielsen and Lloyd Francis tapes; the defacement of the Proclamation of the Constitution Act; the discussion of compensation for Japanese Canadians whose personal property was confiscated and disposed of by the federal government during the Second World War; and the proposed federal Archives of Canada Act. (And, to go from the sublime to the ridiculous, the Public Archives of Canada is included in a recently published *Harlequin* "Superromance." See a review elsewhere in this issue.) Archival materials are not only being consulted as never before in the course of public affairs, but they are also being employed in less obvious ways in policy research and formation and contemporary administration across a variety of subject areas. These developments shaped the programme of the 1986 conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Winnipeg where several papers were heard on the uses of archives in the fields of medicine, science, law, and social work.

Two articles in this issue of *Archivaria* are indicative of the ongoing response of the archival profession to these new directions. Judith Roberts-Moore's article on the records of the Office of the Custodian of Enemy Property from 1920 to 1952 will be of interest to anyone examining the treatment of Japanese Canadians and the fate of their property during the Second World War. These records are the main source of government documentation related to this question. Roberts-Moore's article contains the sort of detailed knowledge of the history of archival records which is needed to perform reference service in complex areas of public policy-oriented historical research. If archival records are going to be increasingly used in the resolution of contemporary issues in public policy, research of this kind by archivists will also grow in importance. The second article, by Christopher Hives, argues that corporate archives also have a valid role to play in contemporary decision-making, albeit in private sector institutions. Hives maintains that business archivists "may assume an active role in the development of managerial policy based on past activities as documented in archival records...."

The article by Sandra Wright and the late Peter Yurkiw suggests, however, that much unfinished archival business exerts a strong countervailing pressure against tilting archival priorities too sharply in the direction of the use, contemporary or otherwise, of archival materials. Wright and Yurkiw show that the massive problem of ensuring the mere physical survival of aging archival holdings (or at least the information they contain) may require as much emphasis on conservation programmes. The urgency of the problem certainly calls for greater emphasis on such programmes than in the past. And if the conservation problem with existing archival material is not serious enough, in the "Counterpoint" section of this issue John Mallinson and Sue Gavrel debate appropriate responses to the newer and perhaps even more formidable challenge of conserving current and future machine-readable archival records.

As these few examples alone demonstrate, in the last few years there has been a large extension of the range of archival services and concerns. Even in the most familiar area of archival activity — the historical — archives are responding to a far more multifaceted approach to the past. (The articles in this issue by Edward Laine in multicultural history and W.A. Waizer in public history represent this trend.) As a result of contemporary and often contentious public issues, archivists have begun to appear before royal commission and parliamentary committee hearings, in court rooms, and on editorial pages. At the federal level, current government policies have required the Public Archives of Canada to adjust its work to the Access to Information and Privacy Acts of 1983 and to a new records management policy for the Canadian government also issued in that year. (As recent developments in Ontario and Manitoba indicate, other jurisdictions are moving in similar directions.) At virtually the same time, the future, in the shape of computerized access to archival holdings and acquisition of a greater volume of machine-readable archival records, now races toward archives at an even faster pace. The amalgamation of the Federal Archives Division and the Machine-Readable Archives Division of the PAC, Harold Naugler's RAMP study of machine-readable archives (which is reviewed in this issue), PAC adoption of the MARC format, publication of the report of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards, and the forthcoming 1987 ACA conference on the theme "Archives in the Information Age" are signposts on the way. These developments have involved major administrative reorganization (as at the PAC) and the creation of a new bureaucracy for the archival community as associations, committees, subcommittees, and, as of 1985, the new Canadian Council of Archives attempt to plan and coordinate these diverse and yet interrelated problems. (Incidentally, many of these administrative changes are conveniently outlined by Terry Eastwood in "Attempts at National Planning for Archives in Canada, 1975-1986" in *The Public Historian* 8, no. 3 (Summer 1986), pp. 74-91.)

After having completed this list of new initiatives launched and challenges accepted, what, we may ask, does all the ferment really amount to? As Terry Eastwood wrote in *Archivaria* 21, there remains a nagging doubt that Canadian archivists collectively are "going nowhere in particular." Terry Cook shares Eastwood's uneasiness in the "Counterpoint" section of the current issue. Cook adds that the typical archivist may be forgiven a feeling of disorientation amid the blur of recent professional activity. Indeed, the information in the many new areas of archival concern threatens to overwhelm the profession because archivists are either too harried on the job to reflect on it for long or, which is worse, choose not to. All of the emerging concerns and programmes undoubtedly have a place in the archival scheme of things, but what is that place? If they are put on an equal footing, individual archivists would soon be on the point of collapse under the

weight of their varied duties. It would be impossible to function. If, despite their clear importance to archives, some must be deemed of primary importance and others of secondary and tertiary importance, on what grounds should such discrimination be made?

It is legitimate to begin by asking whether some aspects of archival concern are more distinctly archival in nature than others. Which ones must be preserved and nurtured as the essential core of an archivist's goals and duties? What is the irreducible basis of archival work? How extensive and complicated is it? Is it actually quite modest? Perhaps it simply encompasses a knowledge of the standard, straightforward, readily applicable archival principles of provenance and respect des fonds, which can be gleaned from a few classic texts and articles by such luminaries as Jenkinson and Schellenberg. Does archival work mainly involve some rather minor methodological, logistical, or procedural facets of historical, library, or other research? Does an attempt to make more of this work merely raise impediments of idle theorizing and misapplied effort which get in the way of the more legitimate uses of archives by researchers and the sponsors of archives as well as the performance of the necessary functions of acquisition and description and arrangement? Or, is there something in such work which makes archival records, functions, and institutions valid objects of extended study by archivists?

Although the recent debate in *Archivaria* understandably leaves these larger questions still unsettled, it has at a minimum resulted in general agreement among the contributors on the main items (from history to the automated office) which are on the now-bulging archival agenda. But as Terry Cook argues in this issue, participants in the discussion must eventually make the "hard choices" which establish the boundaries and priorities of archival work from among the many possibilities this agenda allows. Otherwise, says Cook, archivists will continue to go "in circles, buffeted by today's storm, tomorrow's current, and the day after's wind change."

How, then, do archivists proceed? The principal tasks of an archivist are to define, identify, and acquire the archival record, describe and arrange it, provide the reference service which makes it available for use, and ensure its physical care and permanent survival, whether in its original or in some other viable form. In my view, the intellectual work required to understand the value and characteristics of the huge volume and wide variety of archival records — across the extended periods of time and media for which they exist — is the undisputed core of archival expertise. This knowledge drives all the primary archival functions — acquisition, arrangement, description, and reference service. If this intellectual core of archival work is nevertheless limited in extent, contains information which is largely self-evident and easily obtained, then it is reasonable that the main investment of an archivist's time and effort ought to be made in other necessary areas of archival concern which would then be, taken together, more extensive and probably harder to acquire since they must be borrowed from specialists in these fields. These areas include records management, information management, conservation, security, computerization for administrative and access purposes, library science, law, and either business or public administration. If, on the other hand, as the articles in this issue by Donald Macleod, Judith Roberts-Moore, H.T. Holman, Jim Burant, Alex Ross, and Anne MacDermaid suggest, the intellectual core of archival work is a large and growing body of knowledge, not easily acquired, but only available through ongoing painstaking research into the records, carried out as an integral part of archival work, the knowledge in the various areas of related archival concern cannot also be assimilated in great detail by an archivist. The fields of related knowledge identified above (from records management to public administration) must then become secondary archival concerns. A

relationship with the experts in these areas must therefore be devised which obtains their contribution to archival objectives without burying the archivist in an avalanche of detail and duties which snuffs out the time and energy available to cultivate the primary intellectual core of archival work. This relationship may be established by short training courses for archivists or by hiring as permanent staff or obtaining on contract the necessary experts in these areas. It will then be their task to help achieve the archival goals defined principally by those who are directly involved in the most distinctive aspects of archival work.

It is likely, of course, that archives are not always able to find the resources to implement fully all of these arrangements. Passing circumstances, financial restraints, and the shortcomings and shortsightedness of parent institutions may make it impossible for an archivist to avoid spending far more than the appropriate amount of time and attention on the necessary secondary archival functions. The danger in remaining in this situation too long is that the core archival work and purpose may eventually be misconceived as the expedient variety of it. It would thus be self-defeating for an archivist to fail to define the distinct archival component in his or her work and attempt to move toward it as quickly as persuasion, changing circumstances, and new opportunities permit. This failure, unfortunately, is one of the profession's greatest problems.

The need is a clearer idea of what might be called the archival perspective. A perspective is the view from a vantage point selected to see certain things best. It can offer the widest view, if not a perfect view, of everything in the line of sight. There is, after all, a vanishing point on the horizon. A perspective of one kind or another, however, is all that is really possible. The archival perspective would offer the preferred way of ordering and performing archival work and administration. The archival perspective is sought at the vantage point from which the value and characteristics of archival records can be viewed most clearly. It extends as all archival functions and related concerns are perceived in relation to this primary body of archival knowledge. But the perspective actively drives the archival agenda, rather than allowing that agenda to be driven by other, secondary factors. And the perspective is obtained as answers emerge to the central archival question — if archival records have certain properties, what must archival work, the archivist, and archival institutions be like?

Tom Nesmith
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