

Shadows in the Canadian Archival Zeitgeist: The Jeremiad of Terry Eastwood Considered

by **TERRY COOK**

There is considerably more courage than might first appear behind the penning of Terry Eastwood's "Going Nowhere in Particular: The Association of Canadian Archivists Ten Years After" which appeared in *Archivaria* 21. This was not some wild fulmination tossed off by a grumpy professor in the middle of the night; rather, it was a public address given before more than one hundred of Eastwood's colleagues. Moreover, it was not just any address, but the final panel on the final afternoon of the Tenth Anniversary Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists. It was a panel of past ACA presidents, meeting in the same city in which the association was founded a decade before, and the intent was clearly to glorify its foundation, its growth, and the accomplishments of the previous ten years, which the other speakers did admirably and predictably enough. To deliver his jeremiad in these circumstances, therefore, took real courage. The results are worthy of serious reflection and commentary.

Of course Eastwood is not alone in deploring the malaise behind and much of the superficiality of the Canadian archival profession as crystallized through the ACA. The association's key founder, first president, and longest-serving editor of *Archivaria*, Gordon Dodds, of whom Eastwood writes so poignantly, delivered similar sentiments in the keynote address at the Ottawa conference in 1982, a few hours before his anguished resignation. But perhaps Dodds as the isolated (if splendidly so!) iconoclast was easy for some to dismiss as too far ahead of his time to be taken seriously. The year before, Kent Haworth as president tried to engage the profession in a serious debate about the creation of an integrated archival network in Canada. He discouragingly told me that he had received a bare three responses from his five hundred concerned colleagues in reply to his extensive *Bulletin* appeal. Perhaps people thought it did not affect them in their cozy corner of their own institution, and thus could safely be dismissed. (Although representatives of archival *institutions* have since made much progress in this area, the crucial issue of networks has still never been discussed by archivists as associated *professionals* in the ACA beyond the mere level of mechanical structures; the professional goals and priorities to be achieved by such networking have never been debated, let alone set.) I too have argued, in editorials in *Archivaria* 16 and 17, that the profession must encourage and participate in lively debate to define and keep fresh its mission and its priorities and that it must fight, on the issue of networks and much else, to preserve the professional

substance of our work rather than being obsessed with its form. But editors and editorials are by nature cantankerous and critical, are they not, and thus also easy to dismiss.

But if Eastwood is not alone, he is certainly the most pointed and detailed critic to date of our professional inadequacies. And surely he is not easily dismissed. As an ACA president, *Bulletin* and *Archivaria* editor, chairman of the Working Group on Descriptive Standards, constant writer and speaker on archival matters, and only professor of graduate archival studies in the country, Eastwood has been at the centre of professional affairs for the past decade and thus his lament should carry considerable weight. That in these circumstances he finds our professional association so lacking should be a splash of cold water to the complacent and a cause of deep concern to the committed. By putting his remarks in print, Eastwood demonstrates the obvious: they were not some temporary pique, but a sober reflection that should command our attention.

I quarrel with neither his analysis of nor prescription for our spiritual crisis, our collective failure of thought and feeling which is our *zeitgeist*. With him, I readily acknowledge that useful vehicles have been created by the ACA for the expression of debate and the development of policy alternatives, but that little expression or development has occurred. Under its umbrella, too, some important interventions have been made, perhaps most notably with the hearings on federal access and privacy laws and over funding opportunities with the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council, but almost all such activities have been the work of a few committed individuals operating in relative isolation. The collective will of archivists as individual professionals rarely has been sought (other than through hurried, undebated, retrospective rubber-stamping at annual general meetings) nor brought to bear effectively. I join Eastwood in thinking that few even know the issues at stake in these interventions. I would add that much incisive commentary has come from Canadian archivists, most notably in the pages of *Archivaria*, but also at sessions of the annual conferences. Such individual ground-breaking initiative is as it should be, and must be encouraged and accelerated. But the failing Eastwood deplores is that such new ideas (which are amazingly dismissed by some as the irrelevant musings of a scholarly fringe) are not seized by archivists collectively — that is through their professional association — and discussed, debated, and developed into clear policies, goals, and directions for the profession as a whole. Rather, they are left an inchoate mass of trial balloons, assertions, assumptions, and digressions. Without a clear focus, our professional identity will remain a blur. The archival profession is a ship with a rudder perhaps, but no compass and no charts to guide it through increasingly stormy seas.

Two small personal anecdotes are illustrative of the malaise which Eastwood describes. At the Edmonton ACA conference, following a survey of the membership, the issue was raised briefly in the Executive Forum of the affiliation or otherwise of the ACA annual conference under the Canadian Learned Societies umbrella. After a short expression of opinion, a suitable compromise was worked out. The point is that afterward one prominent ACA member said to me in a sad, almost wistful tone that she had had such high hopes for a harmonious conference (this was pre-Eastwood!) and now that was threatened and tension was in the air. It was as if debate, controversy, facing issues squarely, were to be feared, or were in some way offensive. Another senior ACA supporter enthused to me that the association was really maturing: it now had links internationally through the Bureau of Canadian Archivists and was establishing connections with and sending a delegate to the Canadian Museums Association and similar groups. This is well and good, but to what end — aside from the obvious possibility of better

communications and so on. What can archivists learn from museum curators, and *vice versa*, to improve their craft? How can our collective concept of heritage be broadened and deepened by such links? There are many interesting ways, I am sure, but these we have never heard of, for the membership receives no reports of such work nor more significantly is its input sought in any way. We have a voice, but what does it say? The same thing internationally. Short reports have appeared in the *Bulletin* which amount to meeting agendas of the items discussed, but where is the substance? Is there a Canadian position advanced at these international gatherings? What is it? How is it received? How does it compare to other countries' perspectives? What indeed are the priorities of archives around the world? We are never told. We are never asked. What we have are mechanisms without heart, forms without substance. Between the grand idea and the practical manifestation, we wind up chasing shadows.

This shadowy existence, this malaise, puts one in mind of lines from T.S. Eliot's "The Hollow Men" (*Collected Poems, 1909-1962*):

Between the idea
And the reality
Between the motion
And the act
Falls the Shadow...

Between the desire
And the spasm
Between the potency
And the existence
Between the essence
And the descent
Falls the Shadow

How to regain our desire, to marshal our potency, to understand our essence? How to move out of the Shadow? That is the core of Eastwood's lament.

To resolve our identity crisis requires first studying its causes. How did we get into (or construct) a vehicle "going nowhere in particular?" Three points may be made here. No small number of archivists, especially in understaffed, underfunded institutions with overwhelming workloads, never get a chance, even if so inclined, to stop and reflect about their profession. Hugh Taylor outlined this scenario in his paper, "From Dust to Ashes: Burnout in the Archives," delivered at the ACA conference in 1985. Charlie, the mythical archivist in Taylor's nice conceit, progressed with alarming (and too typical) rapidity from enthusiasm to stagnation. Hired as a summer or term employee based on an interest in history, given a large arrangement and description project off in the stacks, and receiving minimal supervision and virtually no training, Charlie impressed with his hard work and eagerness, as a result soon joined the permanent staff, and in short order began answering inquiries and doing other reference work. Based on such episodic skills and knowledge picked up along the way, he also started making sporadic and then regular acquisition and appraisal decisions, but again with no appraisal criteria, selection standards, or sampling policy to guide him — only vague "gut feelings" that one particular group of records or another had some research value. After several years of this, his seniority and enthusiasm brought him to a supervisory position where not only was the syndrome repeated with new employees, but Charlie began to deal with more compli-

cated problems such as new media of record and computerization — all while trying to cope with ever more researchers, ever larger backlogs, ever shrinking budgets, and ever growing demands by auditors, evaluators, coordinators, and planners for administrivia. The tale goes on, but Hugh Taylor's point is that it is all a house of cards. There has been no rational approach to the profession of archives by Charlie or those who trained him. There is no corpus of professional knowledge, no body of theory, no overall perspective on the work. While some good work is doubtless done in these circumstances, the whole is a hollow shell ready for collapse. And, Taylor posits, collapse it often does: in personal burnout with, in some cases, serious illness and exhaustion, in others with discouragement, disillusionment, and stagnation. When such people become involved in their professional association, they quite naturally, in Eastwood's phrase, fail "to detach themselves from parochial, institutional concerns." They just as naturally shirk from controversy and debate, from attempting to set a mission and policy and direction for the profession across a whole range of issues. They just want to be left in peace. They are basically there to trade horror stories, occasionally to carp and criticize a new initiative that might disturb their fragile house of cards, and to enjoy the many social occasions laid on to amuse the weary. Indeed, can one ask, without being cast as a poor sport, if the apparent need to schedule such a large number of social "events" with each archival conference — far more, in my experience, than other professions and interests — is not in itself proof of Eastwood's malaise? There is not time or perhaps interest for the issues- and policy-oriented debates which Eastwood and I have explicitly called for, but baseball games, disco evenings, and river cruises lack no participants! As with Charlie, does one keep frantically busy for fear that by slowing down and scratching beneath the surface one would find ... nothing? Whatever the cause, the disillusionment and professional stagnation are very real: between fifty and seventy-five ACA members do not renew their memberships *each* year.

A second aspect of the identity crisis in our profession concerns a dichotomy between those who do the actual work of appraising, describing, and making available archival holdings and those who administer, nourish, and facilitate such work by others. Yet it is the latter group which largely makes up the attendance at ACA conferences and which almost exclusively comprises its Executive, that collective leadership which Eastwood finds so wanting. The latter group of course also fills the ranks of management at virtually all archival and host institutions. Indeed, some of its members have not touched an archival document for years or even decades. There need not be a split here, but I perceive that there is one. The latter group is busy solving its problems and so naturally such problems dominate the agenda of the association: how better to plan and organize archives as administrative entities, to set budgets and get better funding, to put in place helpful legislation and regulations, to build or renovate physical plant and arrange proper security, to improve efficiency through programme measurement, evaluation, audits, and automation, to administer copyright, access, and privacy laws, and to ward off deprecation of the archives' resources by treasury boards, other agencies, and so on. And without doubt, these concerns should be part of the archival agenda. Yet these issues are similar to those faced by managers and senior administrators in other cultural institutions, whether a university library, a city gallery, a provincial museum, or an historic site. This does *not* diminish their importance to the world of archives, but it does underline the fact that it is the former group, the "working-level" archivists, which has the *unique* aspects of the archival profession to cope with on a day-to-day basis. They are the Charlies in the stacks. They are the ones faced daily with, if I may make the distinction, the intellectual as

opposed to the administrative challenges of our profession. They are the ones who must decide what to keep and what to destroy first within a particular record series or collection, then for the entire donor agency or person, and ultimately within certain thematic and subject areas for across the nation. They must cope with the growing interconnections of record media (textual, microfilm, electronic office, databases) increasingly common in many government and corporate offices and the resultant implications for appraisal, with the urgent need for sampling policies to save a significant fraction of the millions of case files generated by interventionist agencies, with new demands for more complex forms of archival description so that the mountains of new material will be intelligibly retrievable, with growing needs to research the nature of records and media in order to make sound appraisal and descriptive decisions, and with entirely new approaches to public service to try to cope with an increasing, more varied, and more sophisticated clientele. It is in these areas that a professional association should pool experience and provide leadership in the development of policies and directions. Yet I share Eastwood's contention that it is precisely in these areas that the ACA has failed to rise to the occasion. Perhaps those who run the ACA are relatively out of touch with the working-level archivist, who either rarely attends the annual conference (too junior to obtain travel funds) or feels out of place with the "administrative" agenda to say much. If such two solitudes exist — or even the tendency towards them — small wonder that a malaise has crept into our affairs.

A third dimension of our identity crisis is graphically and cleverly articulated by David B. Gracy II in his presidential address to the Society of American Archivists (see *The American Archivist* 48 (Winter 1985), pp. 14-17). He outlines numerous paradoxes that force perplexing and often troubling choices on archivists. Offering guidance to archivists in making these choices is of course exactly what Eastwood finds most lacking in our professional life. There is first the paradox of appraisal: to save records, we must perforce destroy others, for everything cannot be kept despite some residual value that even the most mundane housekeeping document undoubtedly has. There is the paradox of use: the principal reason for keeping records is that they will be used, yet use is one of the main factors leading to the deterioration and ultimately destruction of the same records. There is the paradox of technology: information of lasting value is increasingly stored in forms that will not last. There is the paradox of our clientele: many kinds of records we save are primarily for future researchers or anticipated uses, but it is contemporaries and present needs which support our existence now. There is the related paradox of permanence: archivists stress their custodianship of permanently valuable records, the nation's collective memory, as necessary in humanist terms to understand ourselves as a people through common heritage and common traditions, at the very time when societies have increasingly rejected absolute values — nothing is permanent, everything is disposable. There is the paradox of history: archivists assiduously safeguard everyone's history and, with few exceptions, ignore their own — Gracy asks "what do we know of the development of means and patterns of communication, which govern the nature, content, and methods of setting down information we strive to save, not to mention where we look for the information and how we find it? ... Precious little indeed." There is the central paradox of role, which will surprise no reader of this journal: by abandoning or "playing down our recognized and formerly strong role of historian/scholar in favor of our role as administrator ... we are finding ourselves falling instead into the lesser role of valet fetching old information." Those who pay and classify archivists, Gracy warns, are as a result increasingly perceiving the work "to be more technical than professional" and thus

deserving of less remuneration and prestige. Apparently, the utilitarian obsession with economy and efficiency in serving as information managers to corporate Pooh-Bahs is a less promising ethos for archivists *as a collective profession* (though there will be exceptions) than many have claimed. And this paradox of role leads to Gracy's final point, which I mentioned before: the paradox that archival work is no longer archival work. In his words the "gathering, appraising, arranging, describing, preserving, and making available" of archival records are increasingly displaced by promotion, outreach, and marketing of archives in order to justify our existence to a growing number of sceptical audiences in increasingly perilous times. And this is an affliction affecting working-level line archivists more and more, not just managers and administrators. Gracy's clever paradoxes (and there are more in his article) point out that archival activity is fraught with tensions, complex issues, and hard choices. Without clear professional guidance in these circumstances (which was the point of Gracy's own call to the SAA), small wonder that an identity crisis can be perceived among archivists! Small wonder that they seem to be chasing Shadows! Small wonder that they suffer from professional ambiguity and thus display professional paralysis! As Gracy concludes his section on paradoxes (p. 17), "if archival work no longer is archival work, what business are we in?"

Do these digressions illuminate Eastwood's theme? With our hollow Charlies, with our working-level and administrative dichotomy, and with our unresolved and largely undiscussed paradoxes, can we be surprised, really, to be charged with "going nowhere in particular?" When archivists (whom I won't embarrass by naming) glibly declare that debate on fundamental issues such as Gracy raises and such as fill the history-archives exchanges in *Archivaria* is irrelevant or unimportant or hopefully (to them) at its final instalment over issues obviously not yet resolved, then how can they expect the archival vessel to go someplace specific as steered by the collective professional will? When the same archivists plead with some exasperation to stop talking about the work and get on with doing it, do they not realize that that is the prescription for perpetual Charlieism, for the continuation of a profession without standards, objectives, or common purpose? Precisely because fundamental issues are not debated and resolved, there *is* no collective will, no guiding policies and directions. Without compass, charts, and sailing instructions, the archival ship sails in circles, buffeted by today's storm, tomorrow's current, and the day after's wind change. On a whole plethora of major issues noted earlier in this piece which face the working-level archivist daily, let alone as Eastwood notes on the equally fundamental questions of the education and hiring of such working-level archivists, the profession has been silent. "What is patently lacking," Eastwood correctly concludes, "is some sense of communal mission, some expression of a real community of archivists striving to reach well-articulated and agreed upon objectives."

Heeding Eastwood's brave call, might not the second decade of the Association of Canadian Archivists be dedicated to being a decade of decision? If the first was one of establishment, of getting the necessary forms and structures into place, might not the second one aim at providing the profession with those much needed objectives of which Eastwood speaks? This will not happen overnight, but if a process were to be created by the Executive to identify the issues needing study, then to set those issues in priority, and finally to study them and have them fully debated, approved, and accepted by the professional archivists of Canada, sure progress will be made. The key, as Eastwood noted, is that the objectives must be well-articulated and agreed upon by archivists as professionals through a congress-convention-seminar format, not as archivists representing institutions

(as at Kingston) or purely as an elite of archival administrators or as a ten-minute after-thought at various sessions in the annual conference. I believe with Eastwood that out of such debate will come not acrimony and division (as many fear and thus shy away from), but affection and respect in pursuit of a common purpose. I believe too that such a process will give us a collective identity, a sense of mission, that in short order will dispel our identity crisis and its attendant malaise.

If Eastwood is listened to, then no one will have to stand up in Edmonton in 1995 to repeat his strictures to what might be left of the ACA. And if he is not, then one returns again to the unhappy images of T.S. Eliot:

Our dried voices, when
We whisper together
Are quiet and meaningless
As wind in dry grass
Or rats' feet over broken glass
In our dry cellar

Shape without form, shade without colour,
Paralysed force, gesture without motion...

Remember us — if at all — not as lost
Violent souls, but only
As the hollow men
The stuffed men.