

Counterpoint

Some Modest Proposals: A Public Historian Looks at Archives

by PHILIP GOLDRING

The past three decades have seen considerable growth in the size and activity of Canada's "heritage professions," bodies of experts concerned with preserving and interpreting tangible reminders of the past. Many of these professions — historic park planners, site interpreters, restoration architects, and the like — have virtually been created or have changed profoundly in the recent past, as part of a general expansion of government services. In Canada the senior heritage profession, the archival profession, has matched growth in numbers with an impressive analytical effort to define itself and its professional mandate. Non-academic historical researchers are not so far advanced; they are developing a professional outlook and self-image, but as a profession they still lack a clearly defined membership or codified standards of practice. Patterns are nonetheless emerging.

These remarks were evoked by a recent invitation to present a user's view of archives to the largest annual professional gathering of Canadian archivists.¹ Some historians, chafing under the real or imagined burdens created by modern archival practice, would welcome such an invitation with intemperate glee. Temptations to excess should not always be resisted, but this case called for moderation. Participation in the Association of Canadian Archivists session marked my twentieth anniversary as a user of archives: the occasion had a commemorative, retrospective character. This accounts both for my comments' unabashedly autobiographical flavour, and for the effort to help define the ideal relations between public historians and archivists within the broader context of historical scholarship in Canada. From a personal point of view, 1986 therefore offered an apt occasion to review the current state of service to historical researchers in a way that is both critical and self-critical.

Since 1966 I have used archives for two years as an undergraduate, for five years as a graduate student, and for thirteen years as a civil servant, reading, writing, and discussing history full-time for a living. This research led me to about forty different archives as far north as Orkney, east to Essex, south to Connecticut and west to British Columbia. There is a tendency in such travels to attribute variety to regional and national differences, but constructive change has also taken place in the institutions I have used most constantly

¹ A version of this *Counterpoint* was read at the 11th Annual Meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists. It was then titled "Social Aspects of Research: A Public Historian's View of Archives." The author's personal views do not necessarily represent those of Environment Canada.

over the years, the Public Archives of Canada and the Provincial Archives of Manitoba. Observation of these and other institutions demonstrate that archives have changed, are changing, and ought to continue to change. Habitual users of archives deserve a role in planning this evolution.²

This *Counterpoint* is a comparatively modest approach to just three aspects of the problem. The first is a brief discussion of one type of heritage professional, those I term "public history generalists," a group with distinctive research needs and practices. Second is a selective review of services provided by archives, and their utility to public historians. Third, some observations are offered on the state of historical research in Canada generally, the system of status, esteem, privilege, and rewards that are accorded to particular types of research contributions. The common theme linking all three points is the importance of social exchange among the various historical disciplines. Spoken communication is often the most efficient way of transmitting information from one individual who has it to another who needs it. A vital element in the work of public history generalists is consultation with peers and colleagues in related disciplines; among these, archivists are often the most helpful.

Nevertheless, the archival profession itself has grown more complex, and each group of users of archives needs to define itself clearly, and to communicate that sense of definition to related disciplines. Any professional group is hobbled if it does not collectively explain and advertise its methods, and the unique contributions it can make to its clients' requirements. Some public historians have begun to build up a definition of their discipline and its place within the professional bodies conducting historical research in Canada. To date most of the existing literature has dealt with institutional historians, the researchers who write about an agency which employs them. Alongside these specialists, an equal or larger number of researchers work as public history generalists, studying an eclectic range of topics for heritage agencies. Since public historians are intensive consumers of archival services it seems appropriate to ruminate, in a journal read primarily by archivists, on some distinctive aspects of the pursuit of historical research in public agencies.

Some ramifications of working for public agencies were brought home to me by a colleague's experience in planning for a national historic park in Saskatchewan. After an animated public meeting a farmer approached the platform and congratulated the planner on doing a good job. The surprised public servant's thanks were cut short by the farmer's terse assurance, "You better be doing a good job, because *you* work for *me*." As a federal public servant I work for most of the archivists on whose professional services I rely. The corollary of this is that good archival service is not a privilege or a luxury for some historians: it is an essential tool for carrying out publicly-funded functions.

The essence of what is loosely called "public history" is the control of the research agenda by someone other than the researcher. Duncan McDowall described public history as "history commissioned for a specific audience. Implicit in its practice is the idea of control, an idea alien to academic history.... Such history is undertaken in a conscious effort to achieve certain ends."³ To date, much of the theoretical work on public history in

2 I have used the word "archives" arbitrarily to describe repositories which hold original or facsimile historical documents, and allow them to be used (under appropriate conditions) by people who are not connected with the agency which created or which owns the documents.

3 D. McDowall, "Business History as Public History: One of Canada's Infant Industries," *Journal of Canadian Studies* 20, no. 3 (Fall 1985), p. 6.

Canada has been written by people like McDowall and Donald Page, who treat public history as a tool to improve a corporate image or to give managers a longer perspective on current issues.⁴ Institutional historians of this type write about the agencies which employ them.

The mandate of public history generalists differs from both institutional and academic history. Generalist work has three salient features. Its practitioners a) research and write more or less full-time, b) change fields frequently in response to priorities they do not control, and must maintain the assigned focus even if source materials are defective or hard to use, and c) work to inflexible schedules including, at times, inconveniently short deadlines. Free-lance researchers, employed on contracts for a year or less, experience these constraints most severely, but full-time employees of heritage agencies rarely escape from them altogether.

Public history generalists, whether free-lance or working for one employer, are analogous to academic historians in their goals (discovery and explanation of important aspects of the past), and in their subject matter, which is eclectic. They are more like institutional historians (or like archivists) in the way tasks are assigned, however, and they are governed by deadlines which reflect the need of the sponsoring institution, more than the professional's assessment of the value of the topic.

Full-time employees have an additional role, largely unsought, which is analogous to the reference role of archivists. Members of the general public write to federal and provincial heritage agencies for information on past events and historical sources; amateur and family historians consider they have a right to tap the knowledge of publicly-paid professionals, and academics perceive that public history generalists are in command of a great deal of archival knowledge which they cannot effectively exploit within the lifetime of a research project, and may be willing to share. It is often a matter of happenstance or personal acquaintance whether such queries about sources end up on an archivist's desk or on that of a public historian.

These aspects of a typical career in public history add up to a strong need for peer support in research. Historical commemoration and research skills are the public historian's specialization, but knowledge of sources and historiography are constantly being retooled to deal with new assignments. For the duration of a project, reading and research are closely directed to narrow goals; there is little or no chance to prepare in advance for the transition to a new project.

This kind of shift has little analogy in other disciplines that deal with the past, except perhaps in archives. In order to teach, academic historians maintain a general knowledge beyond their research speciality, and when they shift the emphasis of their research, they do so voluntarily. The research of graduate students is supervised by specialists in the appropriate field. Even institutional historians work continuously within familiar boundaries. By contrast, the public history generalist quite frequently faces the process of retooling for a new project, often in an unfamiliar area and not always in a congenial one. Employing agencies allow time for this retooling, yet information on themes and sources has to be sought quickly, in part through the familiar technique of the literature review, but also by an intensive canvass of other professionals.

4 D. Page, "Whose Handmaiden?: The Archivist and the Institutional Historian," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 162-72.

The other professionals are often archivists. Colleagues in one's own organization cannot always help, and the appropriate academic historians cannot always be located through reviews of secondary literature. When found, they are not necessarily very forthcoming. Most will help up to a point, but many feel an entirely legitimate reluctance to share their current research, even if the public historian's ostensible plan is to approach the material quite differently. In my second major retooling, as a historian of the eastern Arctic, my grounding in sources and themes came from archivists and librarians in the marine museums and public libraries of the New England whaling ports. When my employer's interests broadened into the post-whaling history of Baffin Island, it was again archival advice that opened a wide range of fresh information, and put me in touch with other helpful researchers. Aid from the archival profession, given face-to-face as much as in finding aids and inventories, has been indispensable in meeting the goals of Canada's Parks service for these projects; such help is a scarce resource, but to some extent the success of many publicly-funded projects depends on it.

Archivists play a pivotal role in the flow of information that eventually reaches the student, the reader, or the general public. This is inextricably linked to broader questions of archival priorities and, what is worse, to the debate over archival training.⁵ While it is naive and condescending to want archivists to be handmaids of historians, neither should they be, at the other extreme, morticians for embalmed documents. Researchers usually prefer to deal with archivists who are aware of and intellectually involved with the contents of collections, and they achieve a more immediate rapport with archivists who have shown, through their own writings, a familiarity with the intricacies of research and analysis of historical sources.

It would be anachronistic to expect all archivists to have the training and outlook of seasoned researchers. Just as senior managers will lose touch with shop-floor concerns, the complexity of modern archives compels even the archivist/historian to develop new expertise and insights and, correspondingly, to let older skills atrophy. Moreover, a graduate history degree has never guaranteed full development of a person's critical research skills, nor will the absence of such a degree always thwart the growth of historical insight. In principle, from a user's point of view, the important thing is an archivist's grasp of the contents of collections in his or her care. This comes from talent, temperament, and opportunities in the workplace; the archival profession requires versatility, and the requirements for entry should not be carved in stone.

Most archives have individual mandates and programmes which need not be listed here exhaustively. The mandate to collect and conserve documentary materials is universal and beyond debate; historic documents, like historic parks, can only be fully understood and enjoyed if they survive. Archival publications and exhibitions likewise have an educational and aesthetic value comparable to that of museums and historic sites. They also benefit the researcher in indirect ways, by enhancing the prestige of the archival institution and (what should not be under-estimated) advancing the professional development and professional satisfaction of the archivists who work on them.

Accepting archival studies as a distinct and valid discipline, and conceding that a graduate history degree is not essential for competence as an archivist, leads circuitously

5 Issues in archival training are admirably reviewed in T. Eastwood, "The Origins and Aims of the Master of Archival Studies Programme at the University of British Columbia," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 35-52.

to the principle that there ought to be more formal consultation and collaboration between researchers and archivists. As archives hire more people without recent experience in complex primary source research, it is likely that inventories, indexes, and other research tools will become less “user-friendly.” In proportion to the amount of detail they contain, they may become less efficient instruments for the user.

This is due only in part to well-known changes in the way historical research is conducted. In public agencies as in universities, researchers are now apt to seek material selectively from a wide range of sources rather than to let the structure of a complete body of sources guide the development of historical inquiry. For example, missionary records are now being consulted not merely for solid chunks of missiology, but for fragments of ethnographic data on native cultures to supplement official reports and traders’ correspondence. This approach leads to unconventional patterns in the use of documents; I have puzzled archivists by asking for treasured old whaling log-books and then only skimming a few weeks in the late summer of each voyage — the traditional time for calling at one small harbour now included in a National Park Reserve. In all branches of research, there is a decreasing correlation between the way collections are created, preserved, and organized, and the way researchers want to use them. Unhappily, most archival reference systems were created when historians were still studying periods, not problems. While funding for research tools has fallen behind the pace of acquisitions, traditional methods of describing collections are less useful to historians than they once were.

It would be churlish to dwell on this if experience did not make it clear that some constructive and innovative ideas are being implemented without full consideration of how researchers actually work. In particular, few archives anticipate the need of professional researchers to keep abreast of new accessions for long-term research. It may not be unfair to cite a specific example: the PAC has recently moved to rectify a weakness of the Manuscript Group classification system by compiling thematic reference tools. The “Polar Index,” for instance, collects the one-page inventories for all collections of Arctic or Antarctic interest. My first reference to the Polar Index suggested it was an excellent idea. On a second search through the same 200 pages looking for anything new, I noticed the lack of notes to date the addition or amendment of individual pages. Listings by accession date are particularly important to public historians when they revive an old or dormant project, but few institutions list their holdings in this way. It is hard to imagine a research tool that could better improve researchers’ efficiency at less cost to the archives concerned.⁶

Little effort seems to be made to put archival literature in the reference rooms. *Archivaria* and its foreign counterparts offer a growing body of articles on the provenance and distribution of collections that exist in particular institutions or relate to specific subjects. This literature is not cross-referenced in the inventories of collections, and at least one major repository I use does not keep *Archivaria* on open shelves in any of its public reference rooms. Granted, many researchers would rather interrogate the author of a reference work than be obliged to read it, but as a general rule historians need more encouragement and more opportunity to read the source guides that exist.⁷

6 A few institutions, among them the British Library and the Provincial Archives of British Columbia, catalogue holdings in this eminently sensible way. At the Public Archives of Canada, the National Photography Collection includes acquisition dates in the basic identification of each accession.

7 I have noted this among researchers who want advice on sources without having to wade through my “Labour Records of the Hudson’s Bay Company,” *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980-81), pp. 53-86.

“The desire for information ... is necessarily the desire to exchange information.”⁸ A key to acquiring information from archival collections is the variety and sophistication of available reference tools. Distinctly Canadian problems have resulted in the under-developed state of such tools in this country. First, for characteristically Canadian reasons — post-colonial copying of metropolitan records, and the sheer size of our nation — our archives in the past committed substantial resources to duplicating distant archives’ material. Such copying is obviously useful even to public historians, who are less harassed than many others by the cost of travel.

Less easily understood is the low priority which the Canadian research community as a whole assigns to the inventory and description of manuscript collections. Resources for compiling any reference tools are too scarce, non-archivists are just beginning to take this work seriously, and the completion of this kind of work earns little respect. The evolution of research tools in Canada deserves study as a problem in intellectual and social history; an anecdotal approach is all space allows here.

A comparison between the *Union List of Manuscripts* in Canada, and the National Register of Archives in Britain is instructive. The *Union List* is successful within its mandate, which is apparently to describe tersely all archival manuscript accessions in public repositories in Canada. The holdings of the country’s biggest archives, the Public Archives of Canada, dominate the pages of the *ULM*. The Historical Manuscripts Commission’s National Register of Archives in Great Britain, on the other hand, physically houses under one roof some 30,000 finding aids or handlists from all over England and Wales; voluminous card-indexes reference nominal, geographical, and subject headings to pinpoint individual items in the lists. The holdings of the nation’s two largest institutions are deliberately excluded. The Historical Manuscripts Commission also indexes, but does not retain, finding aids from a parallel National Register of Archives for Scotland. The superiority of the NRA to its Canadian counterparts is due to no disparity of talent in the respective archival communities, but to the different resources that scholars lobbied for and politicians funded.⁹

Individual archives have no particular mandate to compile thematic research tools including each other’s holdings, but where such tools exist they are immensely useful. In Britain I have relied heavily on Crick and Alman’s published guide to records in the United Kingdom relating to North America;¹⁰ in New England I benefited from the late Stuart Sherman’s compilation of the locations of whaling log-books.¹¹ In Canada, for any subject I have worked on, there were no specific surveys compiled on a thematic or regional basis. There are some brighter spots: Canada’s Parks service did systematic bibliographic work on unpublished sources for the Fortress of Louisbourg and the Forges de St. Maurice, where it was clear from the start that research had to proceed quickly, and that duplication of effort was an obvious danger, but one which could be avoided by team-work. Apart from a few articles in *Archivaria* little of the same sort of inventory has been done for other major areas like the Rideau Canal or the prairie fur trade.

8 Marc Bloch writing in 1942, quoted by D. McDowall, “Business History as Public History,” p. 16.

9 Since I used the NRA in the mid-1970s it has curtailed subject listings. See Bruce Wilson, Letter to the Editor, in *Archivaria* 18, p. 15.

10 B.R. Crick and M. Alman, eds., *A Guide to Manuscripts Relating to America in Great Britain and Ireland* (London, 1961).

11 This inventory has been published as *Whaling Logbooks and Journals: An Inventory of Manuscript Records in Public Collections* (New York, 1985).

If the situation is spotty in government service, it has only recently shown signs of improvement in the academic sector. Happily, enterprises such as the Montreal Business History Project¹² and the Vancouver Island Project¹³ show that some scholars are willing to assemble source guides for the use of others. But in this respect all the professional historical disciplines are less energetic than a group they sometimes deride, the genealogists.

One contemporary project epitomizes some flaws in the current approach to reference tools. The *Dictionary of Canadian Biography* is rightly regarded as a monument of collective effort, but it also epitomizes the cottage industry methods which prevailed at the time it was launched, methods which still underpin much research effort in Canadian history. My own contribution to this venture has been a few short biographies of minor fur-traders. I began to suspect something was amiss on discovering that my wife and I, within six weeks of each other, had both spent hours perusing an obscure manuscript which, in the course of our normal duties and interests, neither of us would have wanted to read. We were doubtless not alone; individual researchers have combed the same sources again and again looking for scraps of data on individuals.

Had the same effort been put into collaborative preparation of finding aids a number of reference tools of enduring value would have been created, along with the biographies. I was recently asked (by an archivist) to recommend a list of North American archives and libraries holding North West Company records. The answer is that after seventy years of scholarly research on the North West Company, and despite a resurgence of interest in the early fur trades, no such multi-institutional reference tool exists. Through a lack of planning, foresight, or altruism the historical research community in Canada encourages and rewards unsystematic but creative individual effort at the expense of collaborative preparation of research tools.

This overview of public history and archives suggests that most of the obstacles to efficient research by publicly-funded historians lie in the realm of national or provincial policy and not in dramatic defects in archival training or institutional priorities.¹⁴ Canadian archival practice has some peculiarities, but these can be seen as adjustments to special conditions in Canada, or as ramifications of a wider problem of strategy and attitude among Canadian research historians and the agencies which hire or fund them.

It follows that the conclusion of this presentation should be a series of rather modest proposals. These should begin from the premise that archivists generally are among the victims, not the perpetrators, of a prevailing mentality that undervalues the preparation of source guides and finding aids. Archivists are also penalized by some attitudes within their own institutions, which often fail to credit individuals publicly for creative input into finding aids, exhibitions, and other products of professional skill.

Canadian researchers need a *Union List of Manuscripts* which more nearly approaches Britain's National Register of Archives. With microfiche as an available medium for disseminating finding aids, and computers to update indexes regularly, such a system

12 R. Sweeny, R. Rice, and B. Young, *A Guide to the History and Records of Selected Montreal Businesses before 1947* (Montreal, 1979?).

13 P.A. Baskerville and C.M. Gaffield, "Vancouver Island Project: Historical Research and Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 173-87.

14 See especially W.I. Smith, Letter to the Editors, *Canadian Historical Review* 62, no. 3 (September 1981), pp. 377-81.

could modernize the NRA approach and adapt it to distinctive Canadian conditions. A venture of this kind would be most beneficial if it concentrated initially on smaller repositories, the holdings of the bigger ones being relatively better known.

Archives, particularly the larger ones, should continue their efforts to index collections by geographic and socio-economic categories. This might seem to be the familiar hydra, the users' cry for better finding aids, so some *quid pro quo* may legitimately be sought. Historians need to overcome their traditional disdain for the task of compiling reference tools; some of the initiative may have to come from archivists. They should give constructive guidance to collaborative ventures like the Vancouver Island Project, and should help each other prepare multi-institutional thematic guides.

Archivists may also want to consider involving users to improve the number or quality of research tools. This might evoke feelings of professional horror in some archivists, but others are less choosy. One small British record office, struggling with an enormous collection of private manuscripts covering several centuries, compelled researchers to compile finding aids for any material they read, and to blaze trails into some new material whether they needed to or not. Less draconian are some of the marine archives of New England, where some of the most complete indexes I have ever used are kept up to date by volunteers. It would be appropriate to encourage historians, especially public historians, to turn over at the end of a project any legible research tools they have compiled for their own use. Such proposals may flirt with archival heresy, but the backlogs existing in some institutions warrant a relaxed approach. Volunteer work of this kind could rarely be attacked for taking needed work away from under-employed archivists! While standards of completeness and accuracy would vary, the preparation of finding aids seems often to be assigned to junior or seasonal staff, and any civil servant facing a deadline knows that poor research tools are better than none.

Although each of these proposals would increase researchers' efficiency (and perhaps increase the use of archives as well), I revert in closing to my experience of the importance of personal communication in the exchange of research information. Simply stated, personal communication is still very often the most efficient way of getting a message from one mind to another. The letter, telephone call, and chance personal encounter are relied on by amateur, student, and professional researchers whenever possible. This is not done "to have someone do our research for us," but in order to eliminate unproductive leads and to search efficiently for obscure connexions between what is known and what is sought. An intriguing challenge for both professions is to find ways for historians to contribute as much as they receive in the dissemination of archival knowledge.