

## *Letters to the Editor*

### **Laura Coles, "The Decline of Documentary Publishing"**

I am writing to request that *Archivaria* correct the erroneous statement made in its Winter 1986-87 issue (in the article by Laura Coles, "The Decline of Documentary Publishing," p. 79) that the publishing activity of the Manitoba Record Society "was recently suspended for lack of definite funding." While it was indeed the case that the Society's financial position was a precarious one a few years back, and that we came close to ceasing operations, it is also the case that with the publication of the first volume of *The Selkirk Papers* (a volume noted by your author) in 1984, we attained a new lease on life, and followed that volume with one in 1986, *The Selected Papers of A.J. Cotton*. The second volume of the *Selkirk Papers* will appear later in 1987, and the project is not "apparently waiting further financial assistance," as your author would have it on p. 70n.

For a bibliographer to declare in print (erroneously and prematurely) the death of a publication series is a serious matter that has enormous potential impact on its further activities. In this case, the erroneous information purveyed could have been corrected by a simple letter to the Society, which has to my knowledge never publicly declared a suspension, and has never been asked by the author about its status. In any event, I am certain that your readers will be pleased to know that the Manitoba Record Society is alive and flourishing, and new subscribers are welcomed.

Perhaps I should add that, as a documentary editor, I think the overall impression left by Coles' article of the steady decline and parlous state of documentary editing today is considerably overstated. Her comment (p. 83) that "Today, documentary editing is an historical dinosaur, rarely done, rarely considered, and archives which are interested in it should tread carefully" needs some qualification. I would concur that archives should tread carefully, but contrary to the impression left by the author, documentary editing is carried out by scholars apart from archives and archivists, often with some success. There is no evidence that it is an "historical dinosaur." Indeed, scholarly granting agencies such as SSHRCC have been receptive to properly justified applications for funding (although the mega-projects are dead), and heritage funds in several provinces have been financially helpful.

Moreover, in her assertion of costs and pitfalls, your author is sadly out-of-date. The computer revolution has enormous actual and potential benefits for documentary editing,

especially since important material can now be “desktop published” in quite acceptable form for a fraction of the costs of the hard-bound volumes discussed in your article. It is true that documentary editing in Canada has not yet confronted desktop publishing and its implications for the genre head-on, but to write and publish an article in the mid-1980s on the subject that does not fully explore the possibilities of the new technologies is, in my view, truly being the “dinosaur.”

**J.M. Bumsted**  
General Editor  
Manitoba Record Society

### *Coles Responds*

I am delighted to hear from J.M. Bumsted that the Manitoba Record Society has “attained a new lease on life” and is currently active and flourishing in its publications activities. I congratulate the Manitoba Record Society on its renewed success and encourage those interested in documentary editions to support the society’s publication series through their subscriptions.

I must remind Professor Bumsted that my study of documentary publishing in Canada analyzed the work of provincial archives and historical societies, not independent scholars, between 1869 and 1984 (which organizations I did contact during the course of my research). Professor Bumsted is welcome to compare the fruits of our labours, but I cannot turn my apple into his orange.

As an active participant in, and strong advocate of, the computerization of publishing work, I am well aware of the capabilities and drawbacks of desktop publishing. There is no question that new and simplified typesetting programmes can save time and money by allowing authors and editors to input, edit, and format documents themselves, rather than relying totally on the equipment and expertise of publishers, typesetters, or printers.

However, many proponents of desktop publishing almost seem to believe that they can type the words into their computer, push a button, and watch a bound book roll out of their laser printer. To “desktop publish” means to be author, editor, typesetter, designer, and production manager all at once. Desktop publishers need to understand such production intricacies as picas, fonts, points, kerning, gutters, and widows. All this is not impossible, indeed it can be delightfully entertaining, but it can also be distressingly time-consuming, particularly for archivists with other projects on their plates.

I would encourage archives and historical societies — and independent scholars — interested in documentary editing to consider desktop publishing. But I warn archivists in particular to determine their reasons for publishing before beginning *any* documentary programme. If documentary editing has a high priority in your archives, desktop publishing is undoubtedly a worthwhile direction to consider. But if your publishing activity is sporadic and minimal, with uncertain funding or limited facilities, the cost of computer hardware and software may not be justified.