

Counterpoint

A Room with a View: The 1987 ACA Conference in Hamilton, Ontario

by **RICHARD M. KESNER**

During the week of 1 June 1987, the Association of Canadian Archivists met at McMaster University in Hamilton, Ontario for their twelfth annual conference. The theme of that conference was "Archives in the Information Age." Conference participants addressed issues ranging from the impact of automated techniques and the wider use of machine-readable records on traditional archival principles to the professional, educational, and legal imperatives for archivists wrought by the computer age.

Through his opening comments in the conference's programme guide, Roy Schaeffer of the Law Society of Upper Canada Archives stated the ACA programme committee's objectives in no uncertain terms:

The information age presents a challenge to the archival profession. The conference will seek to provide insights into the problems to be faced and the benefits to be gained in meeting that challenge.... May our twelfth annual meeting, like the archival profession itself, smoothly blend the historic with the highest technology and creatively combine futuristic forecasts with a fond appreciation of the past.¹

In attempting to establish a satisfactory venue for a constructive dialogue on automation and archival administration, the ACA set for itself a formidable task. Certainly an increasing number of archivists recognize, albeit at times grudgingly, the growing importance of electronic information technologies in their professional lives. It was nevertheless a gamble to fashion an entire programme around that theme. To their credit, the conference's planners successfully accomplished their mission, and, indeed, did so with enthusiasm, energy, and good humour.²

Unfortunately, many of the sessions in Hamilton raised important issues and ideas but allowed little opportunity for group discussions. Perhaps in response to these circumstances — which are endemic to crowded professional gatherings — the ACA informally published a set of conference proceedings. Thanks to their foresight, we are afforded the opportunity to carry the conference's offerings home for further contemplation. My purpose in this brief essay is to sift through these materials as well as my own recollections to provide the reader with both a synthesis and an analysis of what transpired. In so doing my focus is not so much on what was specifically said but rather on its implications for future archival practices.

This presumption on my part will be mitigated, it is hoped, by the fact that I was a relatively objective observer of the proceedings in Hamilton. In addition, as a user of information technologies and services, and as a regularly invited speaker/instructor at ACA and National Archives of Canada functions, I am not unfamiliar with either the immediate professional challenges faced by the reader or the considerable accomplishments of his/her Canadian colleagues in the field of archival automation. I therefore come to this undertaking with a keen interest in focusing ongoing automation efforts and encouraging further discussion of the subject. On the other hand, those readers who are familiar with my work as represented in *Archivaria* will recognize that I come to the issues at hand with certain biases.³ Let me assure the reader that my personal views have not clouded my objectivity in appraising the ACA Conference in Hamilton and bringing the importance of its message to you.

In developing the schedule for the Hamilton Conference, the ACA Programme Committee were mindful of their audience as well as the subject matter to be covered. As a result the very structure of the sessions facilitated the collective learning process. The opening day of the annual meeting addressed itself to administrative matters and committee work. Tuesday through Thursday were filled with conference sessions, leaving Friday through Sunday for workshops. Each session day began with a plenary meeting that set the tone and at times the focus for the panel sessions which followed. Thursday's paper sessions concluded with a "Conference Overview," delivered by Harold Naugler of the NA, that built upon some of the major themes from the week's activities.

The workshops that followed dealt with an array of specialized subjects, including planning and implementing automated systems, the management and preservation of machine-readable data, using AACR2 for describing archival materials, indexing in archives and, last but not least, the MARC Format Workshop sponsored by the Society of American Archivists. Thus, the individual conference participant worked his/her way through general, plenary sessions; theme-oriented paper presentations; and, finally, highly focused and specialized workshops. It is noteworthy that during the course of the week there were almost as many workshop attendees as there were total conference participants.

The conception and design of the Twelfth Annual ACA Conference remain significant in two ways. First of all, the meeting marked the first time that any major North American archival organization devoted its entire programme to the theme of automation. It is to the credit of the ACA that it recognized the centrality of electronic information technologies in the future of archivists. By contrast, the Society of American Archivists committed itself to a similar undertaking in 1984 only to back out during actual programme compilation. Perhaps three years of growing personal computer use in archives have made the difference. Nevertheless, in making it the theme of a highly successful conference, the ACA has set a precedent for others to emulate.⁴

Secondly, the ACA Conference broke heuristic ground in its thoughtful positioning of sessions. Based around the general theme of automated records and techniques in archives, each day's offerings evolved sequentially — from the generalities of the plenary sessions to the specificity of individual paper presentations. Interestingly, each day had its own subtheme and these too exhibited a certain symbiosis. Tuesday's sessions, for example, examined the larger implications — professional, educational, and legal — for archivists in the so-called information age. Wednesday focused on the automated control and management of data through the planning and implementing of "system solutions" and computerized indexing. Thursday looked at appraisal, user services, and research. The workshops allowed conference participants to test some of the ideas and employ some of the tools which surfaced in the paper sessions.

The conferences at which one may experience such a tight integration of materials and techniques are unfortunately few and far between. As a workshop leader, I can attest to its effectiveness in preparing participants for the intellectual rigour of the workshop format. By contrast, offering specialized sessions prior to more generalized conference presentations would have necessitated spending a great deal of workshop time on background information. As it happened, participants arrived somewhat conversant with the terminology of automation and with the issues posed by new information technologies fresh in their minds. In short, the conference's programme format made the best use of everyone's time and prepared participants to get the most out of each session.

If the form was satisfying, the substance of the ACA meeting was exciting and thought-provoking. In the space allotted here, I could not do justice to the many fine presentations offered. No doubt many will find their way into print either in *Archivaria* or elsewhere. Indeed, I would personally encourage the ACA to consider the publication of a formal set of proceedings, bringing together all of the conference's speeches and papers, and perhaps relevant workshop materials. For the moment, however, I would just like to summarize what were, in my view, the conference's primary themes.

Stated somewhat boldly, all of the ACA presentations addressed themselves to one or more of the following subjects:

- the impact of new information technologies on the professional practices of archivists;
- harnessing the new information technologies for deployment in archives: planning and implementation;
- managing records, appraisal, and the record life cycle: the impact of automation;
- accessing collections, research, and user services: the role of the computer.

The same may be said of the workshops that followed the paper sessions. In fact, workshop attendance in total underlined the fact that participants were looking to strengthen their skill bases in such areas as automated cataloguing (AACR2, indexing, and MARC) and systems planning.

The first of the aforementioned themes, that of the identity of today's archivist, surfaced during 1984 when a number of articles appeared in *Archivaria* 19 and 20.⁵ One of the key protagonists in that initial debate, Hugh Taylor, also participated in this year's discussion. Not surprisingly, familiar issues re-emerged: Is the role of the archivist unique? Will it survive the computer age? What synergies exist between archivists, records managers, and information managers? What additional preparation and training are required to

prepare archivists better for the impact of new information technologies on archival holdings and practices? What are the legal and ethical ramifications for the profession of recent freedom of information and privacy legislation?

One can safely assume that an exchange of ideas will continue on all of these fronts. Certainly no consensus emerged during the conference. On the other hand, it was a comfort to know that these questions were and are being raised by an ever broadening cross-section of the profession. These developments in turn have helped in the shaping of educational programmes and training publications.⁶

If progress may be acknowledged, so too must the admission that archivists have a long way to go in freeing themselves from a restricted view of their mission. Most speakers, and it would appear the audience as well, continue to draw distinctions between archivists on the one hand and other information service professionals on the other. However, at the same time that they trumpeted the virtues of traditional archival methodology, they confessed that a growing number of information users are being placed in the role of *de facto* archivists and records managers.

Electronic mail and documentation systems make the user responsible for what is saved and what is erased. As I have argued elsewhere, in coping with these issues, archivists must broaden the definition of their responsibilities. More importantly, they must either sensitize users or get involved much earlier in the record life cycle, preferably at the outset of screen format design and record generation. Otherwise, archivists will find themselves unable to fulfil properly their more traditional role when surviving documents ultimately arrive on their doorstep. In my view, conference participants fell short in extending their observations about the changing information management environment to encompass its immediate and long-term implications for the practice of their craft.

In the handling of the second theme, that of planning for new technologies in the work place, it appeared that both speakers and audience were more at ease. This may in part be attributed to the widespread use of microcomputers among ACA members, and the increasing number of archival institutions that deploy electronic data processing equipment in their operations. Admittedly, when compared to our colleagues in libraries and records management programmes, archivists as a group are latecomers to the field. However, times have changed for the better as clearly demonstrated by the number of conference participants with hands-on computer experience and a desire to learn and do more. It was not therefore surprising to hear speakers bandy about such terms as the "strategic planning of automated systems," and the "systems approach" to archival automation.

Indeed, throughout the presentations there was a discernible emphasis on the need to integrate one's automation plan with the rest of one's archives programme. Even those who came without prior experience of computer-based tools went away with a sense of how to approach the intermingling of manual and automated processes. They also learned of the need for a systematic approach to the designing and implementation of computerized information systems. In addition they were obliged to confront the limitations as well as the many benefits of automated indexing and the building of archival data bases.

If a common message came out of these sessions, it was that the opportunities afforded by automating archival practices, procedures, and services can only be realized through a structured and disciplined approach to the entire process. For example, resource allocations must be made in accordance with the organization's larger strategic (long-term) and

tactical (short-term) plans. Specific service enhancements — be they automated or manual — must tie in with the archives' overall mission. Finally, and perhaps most importantly, it was made clear that the success of a conversion from a manual to an automated archival process/service required planning, attention to detail and creativity.

The importance of this last point cannot be emphasized enough. With electronic information technologies, archivists may be able to do some things less expensively and more efficiently, but only if they recognize that they may also be obliged to conceive of and do them differently. Stated another way, the effective use of new technologies depends upon the willingness of the archivist to re-examine his/her routines and make changes. In my experience, the instances of the successful conversions to automated methods without significant restructuring are few. It was therefore encouraging to note the number of times conference participants recognized the operational benefits of a systematic technology assessment — even though such an assessment might not ultimately lead to an actual computer system deployment. For these wise people, the rigour and discipline of the systems planning methodology had its own rewards.

Returning once again to our list of conference themes, perhaps the most troubling aspect of the widespread use of office automation is the problem it creates for record life cycle management and appraisal. The issues raised by papers and subsequent discussion ranged widely: Where does the archivist or records manager insert him/herself into the life cycle process? What are the criteria for selection between paper and machine-readable documents that share the same provenance, evidential value, and informational value? How do we manage electronic databases and do we appraise their contents? What are the implications of electronic mail for the evaluation of paper document evidential value? How do archivists and records managements establish effective control over machine-readable files?

If these questions reflect the diversity and complexity of the issues that confront archivists, my readers will not be comforted by the responses that emerged during the conference. Most speakers articulated problems; few had answers. This should come as no surprise to those acquainted with the types of work environments under discussion. In such offices, decisions are often based on information drawn from a common database. Draft documents and memoranda are passed among participants through an electronic mail system. Data selection and refinement of text takes place on line. The document trail is purged nightly, weekly, and/or monthly. People being people, hard copy documents do emerge from this process but without all of the evidential material that one typically associates with complete *fonds*. Since the office environment described above may be found today in business, industrial, government, and educational institutions of all types and descriptions, the problems faced by archivists and records managers are immediate and considerable.

Interestingly, a consensus did appear to emerge among the appraisal panel on the use of traditional and well-established appraisal techniques in such an office automation setting.⁷ However, none of the speakers appeared to have recognized the dramatic differences between modern information sources. Some so-called databases are static records in machine-readable form (e.g. contemporary tax and immigration files). Other transaction-oriented, interactive systems (e.g. general ledger, inventory control, and electronic mail systems) change from minute to minute. They raise appraisal issues hitherto ignored by most commentators. Similarly, office systems themselves encourage changes in human

behaviour and performance as worker perceptions of what constitutes a record or a file are influenced by technology. These developments in turn suggest that archivists and records managers need to reconsider the scope of their involvement in the life cycle of corporate information. Should they accept this assignment, archivists will find themselves entering a world where image processing, telecommunications and CD-ROM technologies are pushing the frontiers of office automation far afield.

Moving on to the last major theme that emerged from the ACA meetings in Hamilton, automated records and techniques are influencing the services provided by archival institutions. For example, there appears to be a growing requirement for training and expertise in the handling of machine-readable records. While interest in quantitative historical research has diminished in the 1980s, other types of research have come to take its place. Furthermore, since more organizations are generating machine-readable records, archivists and records managers must become more conversant with the media simply to service in-house requests. For the sake of economy and efficiency, even the users of paper records are demanding the types of subject and key word collection control afforded by automated indexing and retrieval systems. Similarly, with the advent of powerful network and telecommunications technologies, the sharing of computer-based finding aids and even the original data have become issues of great interest to some within the profession.

What is propelling this process forward? Certainly, the availability of the technology as indicated above and its acceptance by users has contributed to this trend. Worker familiarity with automated applications has also helped. However, the primary driving force is the very nature of the modern organization; its need to respond to external pressures and demands; and its desire to excel. If one looks at the direction of information systems technology in the private sector over the past few years, the emphasis has been on developing flexible, cost-effective, and rapid responses to market forces. Driven by management requirements, some refer to these capabilities as an institution's "strategic advantage," others its "strategic imperative." Similar pressures are also making themselves felt in government and educational organizations. In these latter settings, the information-driven demands for new and expanded services have caused managers to take up leading-edge technologies and to change programme priorities.

The net effect of these changes has been to alter substantially the context in which archivists must work. As the reader may by now surmise, this year's ACA Conference took a hard look at many of these issues and made a significant contribution towards building awareness and new skills within its membership. But where do we go from here and will we succeed in blending the operational imperatives for more sophisticated information systems with our long cherished commitment to established archival traditions and principles?

In my view, archivists must go forward and embrace the new information technologies as their own without neglecting their past. This arrangement will pull at them from different directions, which is not necessarily a bad thing if it leads to a more thoughtful management of processes and resources. On the other hand, it will also require a much more flexible view as to what constitutes the role and responsibilities of an archivist. Perhaps the best way to illustrate this point is through the following scenario.

Within the next five to ten years, the cost of records storage in a machine-readable format — probably a derivative of CD-ROM technology — will plummet to the point that we will be capable of storing virtually all information economically in a readily

retrievable format. At the same time, we will have developed sophisticated, user-controlled, on line retrieval systems. These utilities will allow users to access information anywhere in their respective networks, manipulate (i.e. process) it, and generate reports at will. At the very least, users will have control over and responsibility for the retention and disposition of their own electronic files.

For those who may consider the aforementioned circumstances a bit futuristic, consider the capabilities of the office automation system soon to be operating within the Canadian Department of Communications. Indeed, take a good look at IBM's PROFS (Professional Office System) or some other large, networked office automation project. Much of what I have described above is in place and working today. The fact is that we are already faced with the challenge of balancing our traditional concerns as archivists against an information technology environment that has taken on a life of its own.

To establish controls and fulfil our mandate, we must adopt flexible and dynamic practices. For example, if individual users control the destiny of their electronic records — as some now do — how are we as archivists to respond? The answer in my view is that we need to make everyone an archivist! Put another way, the traditional concerns of the archivist need to be disseminated down to the level of the information creator because that person will also be the information controller. The role of the archivist (or as I would prefer it, the information services specialist) would be to train the user and to sensitize him/her to the evidential and informational value of documentation. This redefinition of responsibilities would thus entail a blending of technological and operational concerns with an historical, or at least a strategic, perception of the value of information.

In such an environment, the information services specialist serves as the instructor, the administrator, and the designer. Prior to the creation of documents or the collection of data, the specialist would be involved in the development and implementation of policies and procedures governing the operation of information systems in the work place. This person's involvement in the life cycle of a record would in all likelihood begin with user training. Instruction would encompass operational procedures, including archival concepts and hardware and software. The specialist would also involve him/herself in the structure of database and data field layouts, and screen formats.

The systems in use will have built-in intelligence to assist the specialist and his/her users by insuring that all the rules are observed and that the training is appropriate and sufficient for the specific office application. In this regard, the specialist will operate as a quality assurance and compliance officer. He/she would be conversant with the tools available to the user and able to assist in developing an access strategy for the organization's data. Once these files were identified, the specialist would also assist in analyzing their contents. To provide these services, the specialist must be knowledgeable in the informational holdings of the organization, the availability of access tools and networks, and research techniques.

In many respects, this skill base is like that of the traditional archivist with the exception that it is more technology-oriented. Furthermore, there is little or no contact with the *fonds* themselves because, in an electronic record environment, this type of experience is less relevant. Indeed, file reorganization, description, and indexing as we traditionally think of them will prove largely unnecessary. Thus, the irony in this scenario is that the "future archivist" or information services specialist may have direct involvement in the actual creation of records but little contact with them once established in a data or document base.

No doubt some of those with whom I shared a few days in Hamilton last June will have taken from the conference a different view of the present and the future. My own conclusions are drawn from personal experience as well as from what was presented at the ACA meeting. I will be the first to admit that the changes envisioned here will affect some archivists more than others. Nevertheless, I am convinced that changes of great significance are moving the archival profession and its sister disciplines along a similar path. To the extent that archivists view these developments as exciting opportunities to grow, learn, and diversify, they will prosper. Based upon my recent ACA experience, I remain optimistic about the profession's future.

Notes

- 1 Association of Canadian Archivists, *Twelfth Annual Conference, June 1-5, 1987* (Hamilton, Ontario, 1987), p. 1.
- 2 The 1987 ACA Programme Committee included Roy Schaeffer (Chair), Law Society of Upper Canada Archives; Barbara Craig, Archives of Ontario; John Hardy, George Brown College Archives; Mark Hopkins, Metropolitan Toronto Archives; John MacDonald, National Archives of Canada; and Christine Ardern, Art Gallery of Ontario.
- 3 Richard M. Kesner, "Automated Information Management: Is There a Role for the Archivist in the Office of the Future?" *Archivaria* 19 (Winter, 1984-85), pp. 162-72 and "Whither Archivy?: Some Personal Observations Addressed to those Who Would Fiddle While Rome Burns," *Archivaria* 20 (Summer, 1985), pp. 142-48.
- 4 If I may be allowed a personal observation, it has been my experience that the National Archives of Canada, and in particular Harold Naugler and his Machine-Readable Archives Division staff (now integrated in the Government Archives Division), have always taken an enlightened attitude towards automation in archives. Through their efforts and the generally progressive outlook of the Canadian archival establishment, training programmes and automation projects became available in Canada long before they were offered in the United States and elsewhere.
- 5 The debate by no means began with my keynote address before the ACA in Toronto on 24 May 1983, reprinted in *Archivaria* 19. George Bolotenko's essay in *Archivaria* 16, "Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," encouraged a raft of comment from Hugh Taylor, Terry Eastwood, Christopher L. Hives, Tom Nesmith, and Bob Taylor-Vaisey just to name a few.
- 6 Of particular note is the recently released *Archival Informatics Newsletter*. This quarterly publication is the work of David Bearman, one of the leading lights of information science in archives.
- 7 This group included Jay Atherton, Thomas Elton Brown, and Terry Cook.