

# *Archival Material at the Canadian War Museum*

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Like many other institutions which have endured, the Canadian War Museum grew from very modest beginnings. Its origins can be traced to a Militia General Order of 5 November 1880 which announced that a military museum had been established in the Cartier Square Drill Hall at Ottawa.<sup>1</sup> The venture was in reality an unofficial initiative, the fruit of the enthusiasm of a group of officers of the Ottawa garrison. The moving force behind the museum was Colonel Thomas Wily, Director of Stores and Keeper of Militia Properties. Although he retired just before the opening of the one-room museum, he had spent the preceding year gathering the books, records, and artifacts which were to form the nucleus of the national military collections. From the beginnings of the Canadian War Museum, archival documents were among the items actively collected.

In 1896, the Military Museum was closed because of more pressing requirements for space within the Cartier Square Drill Hall. Lieutenant-Colonel John Macpherson, Wily's successor and in effect the museum's first curator, saw to the orderly packing and storage of the collection. Arthur Doughty, the Dominion Archivist, had a distinct flair for tracking down elusive manuscripts and records in out-of-the-way places. In 1909 he came upon the crated Military Museum material while "nosing around a [Militia Stores] building on the canal bank."<sup>2</sup> Doughty arranged presently to be invited by the Militia and Defence authorities to have a closer look, and to "say what you would like to have."<sup>3</sup> We know precisely what he chose on this occasion because of a "List of Articles transferred to the Archives Branch from the Militia and Defence Museum" of 1910.<sup>4</sup>

This list represents the earliest record of the nature and extent of the Military Museum's collection of documentary holdings. Among the items transferred are a manuscript copy on parchment of Walter Patterson's commission as Governor of the Island of St. John (1769); a covering letter from the donor, James D. Irving of Charlottetown (12 March 1891); and William Jarvis' commission as cornet in the Queen's Rangers (1782). The two commissions are inscribed on their reverse sides with the Military Museum numbers 25 and 28 respectively, numbers which correspond to those they are listed under in the 1910 list of articles.<sup>5</sup> The loss of this portion of the military collection was a significant one. Yet clearly this material was better housed, after its rescue by the Dominion

Archivist, than it would have been had it remained another generation in its dank canal-side warehouse. It would be a long time, however, before the Canadian War Museum would again consider collecting documentary material as part of its mandate.

The First World War was the occasion for a rebirth of interest in military collections. In 1916, Doughty began to gather in England and France the records and trophies of Canada's involvement in the war, and in the following year he was appointed Controller of War Trophies. In December 1918, a Commission on War Records and Trophies, of which Doughty himself was a member, was named to "report on the provision of suitable accommodation for such records and trophies," and to see to the collection and acquisition, preservation and care of material suitable for a National War Museum.<sup>6</sup> The Commission recommended distinct treatment for records and for "trophies, paintings and other objects", and already there was a proposal of an additional wing at the Archives to house these records "as soon as they arrive from overseas."<sup>7</sup> Three-dimensional trophies, on the other hand, were being stored rather haphazardly in sheds and on the grounds adjoining the Archives building on Sussex Street. Eventually a small structure, the Trophies Building, was erected, quite insufficient from the start to house the enormous quantities of captured material. The idea of re-establishing the War Museum waned in the general climate of disillusionment in the post war years. The First World War trophy collection was neglected, while the original nineteenth-century collection became lost. Nevertheless, the persistence of members of the Army General Staff led to the revival of the old Military Museum collection in 1934,<sup>8</sup> the creation of the War Trophies Disposal Board (WTDB) in 1935,<sup>9</sup> the refurbishing of the Trophies Building and its eventual unceremonious opening to the public as the Canadian War Museum in 1942.<sup>10</sup>

Sometime after the WTDB began its work, some four thousand cubic feet of documents, heretofore stored in the Trophies Building, were removed to the Public Archives of Canada (now National Archives of Canada) next door.<sup>11</sup> The distinction between artifacts and documents was confirmed by a member of the WTDB, who wrote that "the Dominion Archives have assumed responsibility for the ultimate disposal of all documents, posters, pictures, etc."<sup>12</sup> The separate treatment envisaged for records and artifacts would persist. The Dominion Archivist, as Chairman of both of the WTDB and its successor, the Canadian War Museum Board, remained responsible for the administration of the War Museum until the creation in 1968 of the National Museums Corporation. With both the Archives and the military collections under the same umbrella, any undertaking by the War Museum to collect archival material would clearly amount to overlapping.

The War Museum's reluctant attitude in the matter of archives was further reinforced by a concomitant policy of the Public Archives to turn over any military artifacts it received to the War Museum. Thus, when the Archives closed its History Museum in 1967, the artifacts were distributed between the History Division of the new National Museum of Man (now the Canadian Museum of Civilization) and the Canadian War Museum. Conversely, since becoming a part of the National Museums Corporation, the War Museum has regularly channelled to the Archives a large volume of archival material, though not by any means all that it received.

Nevertheless, the inventory register prepared by the WTDB in 1938 provided for the collection of "books, diagrams, photos, drawings, instructions, maps, etc." and listed some 131 items, mostly photographs and maps of the First World War period.<sup>13</sup> Of particular interest were items from the old Military Museum collection: a series of sixteen

diagrams of nineteenth century ordnance pieces, fuzes, projectiles and related artifacts, (Section 13, nos. 12 to 27), and contemporary descriptions of three prominent monuments of the Seven Years War in Quebec (nos. 127, 128 and 129). When the War Museum's fourth Curator, Lee Murray, inaugurated a revised registration and cataloguing system on 1 January 1959, the twenty-one curatorial sections of material established under the WTDB were re-arranged into fifty-six groups. Among these were Group 58, Books and Documents, and Group 60, Miscellaneous Papers. Making provision for documentary material did not immediately result in a formal change in the museum's policy towards archives. The feeling persisted for many years at the War Museum that the Public Archives remained the competent agency with respect to documents. An ambivalence thus grew: the Canadian War Museum continued officially to eschew the systematic gathering of archival materials, but at the same time acquired anything that was offered to the institution along with three-dimensional artifacts. It may be said that the Museum only grudgingly admitted that it had any interest in documents at all.

About the mid-1950s the War Museum began actively to solicit material from private sources. In peacetime this type of acquisition became more frequent than the accessions of warlike materiel from both the Allied and enemy sides. Papers now made up at least a portion of most individual acquisitions. Certificates, diaries, logs, brochures, private correspondence, and a wide variety of ephemera thus began to accumulate at a very rapid rate. A generation later, these represent an impressive part of the Museum's collections.

It is one thing, however, to have documentary collections accumulating imperceptibly, and quite another to give them curatorial attention by sorting, pruning and arranging, and bringing collections to the notice of research scholars and the general public through the preparation of adequate descriptions. The manner in which the War Museum has processed and cared for archival material has varied from period to period and as the foregoing paragraphs suggest, the attitude has been cavalier by any curatorial standard. Until 1978, archival material from private sources was registered, assigned a catalogue number either in Group 58 or Group 60, and packaged in envelopes, which in turn were placed in cartons. These were then stored on assigned shelving in the semi-basement of the Museum's warehouse at 7 Murray Street, arranged roughly by date of arrival at the Museum. There they remained accessible to the searcher by means of a basic location system. But there was no reference tool — inventory, list, catalogue or index — other than the chronological general acquisitions register.

In 1982, the War Museum was the beneficiary of an important collections management development. This was the acquisition of its spacious curatorial complex, Vimy House, at 221 Champagne Avenue North in Ottawa, and the consequent centralization of the national military collections in a single facility. It was under these encouraging circumstances that some members of the War Museum's staff began to express their concerns about the state of curatorial control, and to take an active interest in the Museum's participation in the Canadian Heritage Information Network (CHIN). This last endeavour was the occasion for a rearrangement of the artifact groups, to be called henceforth classifications. Archival material was to be found in five of the new classifications: Souvenirs (Cl.28), which included a variety of ephemera on paper; Music (Cl.31), a small collection of scores and song sheets; Manuscripts (Cl.58); Maps (Cl.59); and Plans and Blueprints (Cl.64). To this was added a new classification, CWM Records (Cl.57), which provided for the archival treatment of the records produced by the Museum in the daily transaction of its official business. In another realignment, paper ephemera were

withdrawn from Cl.28 and placed with the manuscripts, and a second new archival classification, Technical Archives (Cl. 55), was created.

It was late in 1985 before a start was made in applying modern archival procedures to the mass of documentary material which had accumulated over such a long period. Much of this, hitherto hidden from view, represented an important military archival collection, which needed to be brought to the attention of both the scholarly public and the Museum's own curatorial staff for exhibition purposes. Whilst Curator of Historical Resources, the writer, at his own urging, was assigned to undertake a general survey and preliminary arrangement of this material. He was to endeavour at the same time to establish proper standards of curatorial control of the collections of private papers and the map collection, stored randomly and unnumbered in cartons and unrelated map cabinet drawers. To assist in the task, the War Museum's active volunteer programme produced several individuals who were willing to undertake the arrangement and description of archival materials. Within eighteen months the definitive arrangement of the entire archival holdings was completed. The brief synopsis which follows affords an idea of the extent of these holdings.

There is a small group of musical documents (Cl.31, Gr.B, 0.20 m), mostly sheet music in the patriotic popular vein from both World Wars. Technical Archives (Cl.55, 120 m) consists of material relating directly to the manufacture, maintenance, operation and repair of twentieth-century materiel, a subject of major importance, given the War Museum's material history mandate. Canadian War Museum Records (Cl.57, 90 m) gathers together the documentation of the administrative history of the War Museum (Group A) through five widely different regimes from 1880 to the present time. Group B is the record of the development of the national military collections. The Museum's research and public programming activities over the past century are documented by Group C and Group D.

The most important part of the manuscripts (Cl.58, 40 m) are the collections of personal papers. They include diaries, logs, personal correspondence, reports, memoranda, and reminiscences of more than three hundred Canadian sailors, soldiers, airmen, and women at war. Among notable collections are those concerning the ill-fated operations and subsequent captivity of "C" Force of the Canadian Army, Hong Kong, 1941-1945, as well as papers of Arthur Bourinot, Lloyd Breadner, George Brookes, A. Roy Brown, Lawrence Buchan, E.L.M. Burns, Raymond Collishaw, Arthur Currie, T.W. MacDowell, K.M. Mackenzie-Grieve, A.A. McLeod, A.G.L. McNaughton, E.W.B. Morrison, Alice Sorby, Phyllis Madelaine Taylor and R.E.W. Turner. Other elements in Cl.58 include pre-Confederation manuscripts, propaganda, official forms, personal ephemera, philatelic material, material on formations and units, organizations and associations, papers and manuals pertaining to training and education in the military, and a collection of significant scrapbooks.

Maps (Cl.59, 60 map cabinet drawers) consist of two groups: maps proper, primarily those of the First and Second World Wars; and a "special" group, including such materials as atlases, relief models, maps printed on fabric (escape maps), sets of maps, and personal collections. There is finally a collection of Plans and Blueprints (Cl.64, 300 to 350 map cabinet drawers) which awaits the benefit of curatorial attention and remains accessible with difficulty. Some of the material documents Canada's war industry in the twentieth century.

The War Museum's collections of private manuscripts are important sources of a kind being welcomed by a growing number of military historians. Recent writing in the field reaches beyond what S.F. Wise has called traditional concerns with "high policy, command decisions and the interaction of military and political factors".<sup>14</sup> There is more emphasis today on the actions of the private soldier and on the impact of war upon Canadian politics, society, and economic life. The Museum's personal papers thus complement in a significant way the official sources found elsewhere.

Although the War Museum's archives have received little attention from outside researchers, there have always been a number of specific enquiries from the scholarly community. Within the Museum itself, curatorial staff have increasingly been provided with the facilities required to undertake primary source research. The completion of the *General Guide* considerably facilitates access, as does the continuing effort to produce finding aids such as indexes, shelf lists, and inventories which cover all the Museum's archival holdings.<sup>15</sup>

### Notes

- 1 The early history of the Canadian War Museum has been treated in Bernard Pothier, "Hundred Years Canadian War Museum: The Road to What it is Now," *Canadian Defence Quarterly* (Summer 1980), pp. 36-42.
- 2 Quoted in National Archives (hereafter NA), RG24, vol. 6416, HQ172-2-5, F. Cummins, Memorandum of 16 April 1925 (copy in Canadian War Museum (hereafter CWM), 57A, MM1 1).
- 3 NA, RG37A, vol. 40, file 60.3, D. Macdonald to A.G. Doughty, 14 September 1910 (copy in CWM, *ibid.*).
- 4 *Ibid.*, "List of Articles transferred to the Archives Branch from the Militia and Defence Museum", [1910] (copy in CWM, *ibid.*).
- 5 Today the Patterson document and the Irving letter are part of National Archives MG23 E 1, and the Jarvis commission is part of MG 23 H 1 3, vol. 1.
- 6 CWM, 57A, WTC4 1, Report of the Committee of the Privy Council (P.C.3043), 11 December 1918 (copy).
- 7 NA, RG37A, v. 71, file 60-7-3, "Memorandum for the Minister of Militia and Defence," 23 November 1918 (copy in CWM, *ibid.*).
- 8 NA, RG24, vol. 6416, HQ172-2-5, N.O. Carr, Memorandum, 22 June 1934 (copy in CWM, 57A, MM1 1).
- 9 CWM, 57A, WT4 1, Minutes of a Meeting of the Committee of the Privy Council (P.C.1001), 15 April 1935 (copy).
- 10 *Ibid.*, MMB15 1, Proceedings of 5th Meeting, Military Museum Board, 24 June 1942.
- 11 *Ibid.*, WT1 1, W.A. Kruger, List of War Trophies for Consideration of Board, [n.d.] p. 4; *ibid.*, WT4 1, Proceedings of 5th Meeting, WTDB, 29 January 1936; *ibid.*, Proceedings of 6th Meeting, WTDB, 7 August 1936.
- 12 *Ibid.*, WT7 1, N.O. Carr to Director [Army] Historical Section, 12 July 1935.
- 13 *Ibid.*, 57F 2 2.1, Inventory, War Trophies and Military Museum: Explanation and Table of Contents [1938].
- 14 S.F. Wise, "Canadian Military History: a Comparative Report," *Journal of the Australian War Memorial* (October 1985), p. 7.
- 15 Bernard Pothier, *General Guide to the Archival Holdings of the Canadian War Museum*, CWM Archives Finding Aid No. 1 (typescript, 1988).