

Pot-Pourri

“But We are Fortunately Able to Carry On”: Letters from the PAC’s London Office, 1940

edited by **PETER ROBERTSON**

Throughout World War Two, Doris Godfrey was the senior clerk of the Public Archives of Canada’s London Office, located at the Public Record Office in Chancery Lane. Archivaria thanks Robert S. Gordon for bringing to its attention Miss Godfrey’s regular letters to the Dominion Archivist, Gustave Lanctôt. The source of the following extracts is National Archives of Canada. RG 37, vol. 8, file 50-11-1.

2 January 1940: The Public Record Office have ... opened one small room for the use of the public for a few hours each day if they are fortunate enough to still find papers here which they require. The packing is still going on. Only about four or five people call on any one day. We are still able to continue our copying and will be able to do so for the duration.

6 March 1940: The documents are still being packed and are in readiness to go away but the difficulty is to find places sufficiently safe and far enough away to take them. It is becoming more difficult every week to obtain papers and although the office is now open for a few days a week for a few hours, the public have given up coming as they were unable to find anything.... It is most difficult to work sometimes as the building is still being altered for A.R.P. precautions and we work to the sound of about a dozen men hammering through stone walls a foot thick.¹ They have actually been doing it in the room where we all work this week and we have been smothered with brick dust. Still, we manage to carry on and we do not even grumble nowadays.

31 May 1940: This office is very much on the alert as the safety of the contents must be a first consideration. It is staffed day and night.

18 June 1940: I am very worried about the Paris staff.... If you can let me know the Archives staff are safe I should be so glad as I have met Mr. Beauchesne and some of the others.²

25 June 1940: The High Commissioner’s office sent me the packet of cheques for the Paris staff and asked me to deal with them.... it is impossible to send them to Paris and we do not know where the staff are. The last we heard of Mr. Beauchesne was that he was in Nantes but intended to move on — where, no one knows.

9 September 1940: We are still alive and cheerful in spite of the dreadful air-raids.... I had no idea it was possible to work all day and be up all night with absolutely no sleep for nights on end. I am keeping the little staff going with War Office and Treasury volumes and one volume of S.P.G.³ I see that they are all working as well as possible but I have to show a little latitude to them when they all look so tired. We all get along very well together and it is a case of 'give and take' at the present moment.

19 September 1940: Last night this office was hit and one tower is wrecked. Only one room — the one next to mine — is condemned, but we are fortunately able to carry on. I am sorry to have to say that we have had to shelter a great deal this last week and it has cut into our working hours rather badly, but as soon as the raiders have passed we return to work. Our room is on the top floor and there is no possibility of taking our work down to the shelter, and the Deputy Keeper considers it unsafe for us to remain at the top of the building during a raid. I am trying to arrange for carding to be done in the shelter as we can perhaps manage to do that without documents. It will not waste quite so much time.

18 October 1940: I am afraid that Miss Harrison and Miss O'Brien will not be staying I am very sorry to have to give you this news as it leaves such a tiny staff. I am most certainly staying and Miss Roberts and Miss Mayes will also stay on. We shall do our best for the department. Miss Harrison and Miss O'Brien realize that if they leave they cannot expect to have their posts held for them.... I think they both dislike London now as there are no pleasures at all and the country offers the greater attractions.

24 October 1940: I very much appreciate your leniency regarding the work. We are doing our best and we manage to work in the shelter now. We cannot possibly sleep there as we only have very narrow forms to sit on. The shelter is a long narrow passage with forms and a few tables. As other people are also working there, we have to be as quiet as possible.... some days we are down there nearly all day.

31 December 1940: Your staff of three are still safe! Sunday night was the most terrible air-raid we have yet experienced.... Fires are ghastly affairs when they extend as these did and the roar of the flames was really terrifying.... With very best wishes for 1941.

Notes

- 1 A.R.P. = Air Raid Precautions.
- 2 Arthur Beauchesne was the Associate Archivist at the Paris Office of the Public Archives of Canada.
- 3 At the National Archives of Canada, the War Office transcripts are now part of Manuscript Group 13, and the Treasury transcripts are part of Manuscript Group 15. The transcripts from the papers of the Society for the Propagation of the Gospel in Foreign Parts are part of Manuscript Group 17.