

# *An Archival User Study: Researchers in the Field of Women's History*

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Opportunities for scholarship depend to a large degree on support from professionals and institutions which provide information. The success of new historical initiatives such as women's history depends heavily upon the availability of relevant archival materials. As Joanna Zangrando cogently summarizes:

Archivists after all, stand at the entryway to historical knowledge. They make decisions about acquisitions, they devise cataloguing and retrieval schemes, they operate on certain assumptions about what materials get priority when faced with limited resources. If they fail to deal forthrightly with women in history those who rely on their materials and assistance must suffer.<sup>1</sup>

The growing number of researchers interested in women's history since the 1970s has placed new demands on archival resources in Canada. In 1978, Canadian historian Veronica Strong-Boag called for two actions on the part of archivists in order to deal effectively with the needs of this new group of users; firstly, existing collections need to be reappraised for their value for women's history and, secondly, new materials documenting women must be acquired. Very little, however, has actually been achieved by archivists in these areas in the eleven years since Strong-Boag's plea for action. Few archival repositories have reappraised their holdings for their value for writing women's history, and those institutional guides to women's history sources which have been published in Canada have largely been undertaken by the users of these materials and not by professional archivists. Similarly, a considerable amount of documentation pertinent to the study of women's history has not been sought by archival repositories, particularly at the regional level, in Canada.<sup>2</sup>

In order for archivists to respond adequately to the needs of researchers in the field of women's history, they must first understand the kinds of information which this particular user group requires. This paper attempts to examine the informational needs of historians researching women in archives. The methodology employed combines two types of user studies, the questionnaire or survey, and the reference or citation analysis. The purpose of the survey is to ask questions about researchers' use of and attitude towards archival materials and finding aids. The reference analysis attempts to discover the questionnaire respondents' actual use of primary

sources. A combination of these two methods allows for a comparison of what researchers say they use, as well as what they find useful, with what is in fact used. This data can then be utilized by archivists in their efforts to respond more effectively to the needs of this particular group of archival users.

User studies constitute one method of systematically defining the informational needs of historians researching women in archives. To date, however, very few studies have focussed on the information seeking behaviour of researchers of a specific subject in archives. While archivists realize that users change over time and that new research trends such as women's history place new demands on archival resources, they have never attempted to document these demands empirically. Librarians realized as early as the late 1920s the value of user studies in determining both what scholars use and how materials are located. Faced with an increasing number of publications and inadequate funding, librarians have utilized this research methodology to decide both what materials to collect and how to provide better bibliographic control over their materials.<sup>3</sup> Similarly, archivists faced with an overabundance of twentieth century documentation and scarce resources can utilize user studies to reevaluate current acquisition, appraisal, and descriptive policies and practices.

The two most common types of user studies are questionnaires or surveys, and citation or reference analyses. The questionnaire method solicits data directly from users in an attempt to record the impressions of information consumers. The citation analysis looks at references in serials and monographs in order to determine what materials are actually used. In order for these two types of studies to be useful, their limitations must first be understood. A questionnaire can tell archivists what researchers say they use and what materials they find useful but not what is actually used. Surveys also rely heavily upon individual memory which may be faulty. By way of contrast, a reference analysis can tell us what researchers use when publishing but not necessarily what is most valuable. A citation analysis reveals only that which is cited, which often is only a small portion of what is useful. Authors do not always cite everything that they read.<sup>4</sup>

Citation studies should be interpreted with caution, since the precise relationship between citation and use is not clear. While high use generally represents high quality, the degree to which use represents quality is not clear.<sup>5</sup> Additionally, both questionnaires and citation studies are limited in that they can only reveal what users have seen, and not what they should have seen. They cannot reveal what would have been used if it were available. Researchers in archives may only use materials to which they have access. There are a number of variables which can affect use or access to archival materials, such as geographic proximity, the time period and area of study, and the quality or degree of intellectual access provided by archival finding aids.<sup>6</sup>

Archivists can learn a great deal from studies such as the one done in 1981 by library educator Margaret Stieg. While Stieg's focus is primarily on the informational needs of historians in libraries, she also tells us something about the use of archival materials. Stieg surveyed 767 historians in an attempt to discover their attitude towards and use of library resources such as periodicals, books, manuscript materials, maps, newspapers, theses, dissertations, films, photographs, and sound recordings. Predictably, books and articles were the most frequently used; manuscript materials were ranked third. The other archival materials listed ranked anywhere

between seventh and thirteenth. One interesting fact revealed by the survey was that the formats that were seen by historians as the least convenient to use were the least used. Archival materials were seen as inconvenient by the researchers who responded to Stieg's survey for a number of reasons: they were located only in one place; guides and indexes were often inadequate; and, the quality of reference services was frequently poor.<sup>7</sup> The problem with Stieg's study, however, is that it fails to make any distinction between use and usefulness. While books and articles may be more frequently utilized by historians, this does not necessarily mean that these materials are more useful than other library or archival materials for the historian's research purposes.

Citation studies are also used by librarians in an effort to determine patterns of use for library materials. The majority of citation studies in information and library science, however, have focussed on use patterns in scientific literature. Very few citation analyses have been done in the area of historical scholarship. Additionally, very few of the studies that have been done on historical literature include an analysis of the use of archival materials. In fact, only two citation analyses of historical literature include both published and unpublished materials. A citation analysis done by Arthur McAnnally in 1951 analyzing historical literature published in 1938, revealed that only ten per cent of all references were to manuscript materials.<sup>8</sup> Another more recent study done in 1978, looking at cited references in English history articles published between 1968 and 1969, revealed similar results. This survey revealed that only eleven per cent of all references were to manuscript materials. In light of the fact that historians have traditionally been viewed as the main users of archives, the small proportion of references to unpublished materials would appear to be very low. These findings are also surprisingly low when one considers that records are the historian's primary tools for reconstructing the past.<sup>9</sup>

Richard Lytle outlines a number of reasons why archivists are hesitant to utilize this particular research methodology. The main obstacle is the resistance by many archivists to social and behavioral science techniques, especially those used in library and information science. Some archivists argue that there are too many variables which hinder the usefulness of such studies. It is also generally believed that research needs are difficult to assess within specific fields of historical scholarship because needs are diverse and users unaccustomed to articulating their needs.<sup>10</sup> Although it is true that user studies have their limitations, it is also true that they can provide archivists with empirical data on the information seeking patterns of researchers. While archivists cannot base decisions upon user studies alone, they can contribute to our understanding of users by objectifying and formalizing existing impressions and assumptions.<sup>11</sup>

Only recently have archivists begun to acknowledge the value of user studies. This change of attitude is best represented by two American archivists, Elsie Freeman and William Joyce, in a 1984 issue of the *American Archivist*. Freeman points out that there is currently very little empirical or statistical data on archival users, and argues that archivists need to learn more systematically, as opposed to impressionistically, who their users are, what kinds of projects they undertake, and — more importantly — how they approach records. Archivists must spend less time attempting to analyze what users claim to want, and more time looking at how they actually perform their research. Freeman concludes that "our failure to gather this information

and apply it gives credence to our prejudices, which in turn, govern our practices.”<sup>12</sup> Similarly, Joyce urges archivists to find ways to enhance the cultural value of their materials by learning more about research behaviour and use of archives.<sup>13</sup>

The few archival user studies which have been done have yielded very interesting results on how researchers locate materials. In an effort to discover how historians locate materials, Michael Stevens sent out a questionnaire to 123 historians with doctorates in departments of history at colleges and universities in the state of Wisconsin in 1977. The questionnaire revealed that the most useful sources for locating archival materials were secondary sources such as books and articles and by word of mouth. Of the formal descriptive tools only the *National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections* (NUCMC) received a high rating, and Hamer’s *Guide to Archives and Manuscripts in the United States* and accession lists were the least useful. Stevens’ questionnaire results also reveal that researchers frequently used both name and subject terms as access points when searching for relevant archival materials even if they claimed that they used one more than the other. While he conceded that historians probably used names as search points more often, a considerable minority used subject terms. He therefore concluded that to exclude subject terms from archival descriptive systems would hamper many scholars.<sup>14</sup>

In the 1970s, the Committee on Finding Aids of the Society of American Archivists conducted two studies of users’ access requirements. The first study, done in 1976, asked archivists their opinions of user access requirements; the second, done in 1979, collected data directly from the users themselves. The tentative results of the second survey revealed that most users located materials equally by means of archivists’ and teachers’ suggestions, citations in the literature, and repository guides. These methods, however, all ranked well below suggestions from colleagues. This study also found that NUCMC was not extensively used, and the most useful way of searching a repository’s finding aids was by proper name rather than by topic.<sup>15</sup>

The user studies by Michael Stevens and the Committee on Finding Aids of the Society of American Archivists call into question the usefulness of formal descriptive systems in locating archival materials. Both studies also reveal that researchers find it useful to approach archives in the first instance by proper name, and less often directly by subject. If it is true that researchers more frequently search for materials by proper name, this fact may simply reflect the user’s ability to internalize the limitations of existing archival descriptive systems. Researchers frequently ask only for what they know they can get. While a study might reveal that researchers more often use proper name, it is possible that researchers want or prefer to have better subject access.<sup>16</sup>

There has only been one citation analysis, or for that matter user study, which focussed on the use of archival materials in a specific field of history. In 1981, Clark Elliott analysed footnotes and references cited in fifty articles published between 1976 and 1977 to determine patterns of use in the history of science. Out of some 3,600 references, twenty per cent referred to primary unpublished sources, forty-six per cent referred to primary published, and twenty-six per cent referred to secondary sources. Unpublished and published primary sources together accounted for sixty-nine per cent of all references. Within the category of unpublished and

published primary materials nearly fifty-nine per cent of the references were to personal papers, and forty-one per cent were to corporate records. The main limitation of Elliott's study is that it looks only at the form of the materials, and form cannot always be equated with quality.<sup>17</sup>

When undertaking a user study, a distinction should be made between needs, wants, demands, and uses. Need is a potential demand or what researchers should have for their work. A want is also a potential demand, and is what researchers would like to have. A demand is what researchers ask for, and represents a potential use. A demand should not be equated with a need or want since the information once provided may not satisfy a want or need. A use, as the term implies, is what an individual actually uses and may or may not have been demanded or asked for, but is recognized as a need or want once received. Use, therefore, can be a partial indicator of demand, demand of want, and want of need. Use can be determined by a reference or citation analysis. Demand can be revealed by recording user search requests. Want can be revealed by directly surveying users. In order to get a fuller picture of need, archivists must relate want, demand, and use.<sup>18</sup>

One way to get a fuller understanding of need is to combine a questionnaire which reveals what researchers say they use and what they find useful, with a citation or reference analysis which reveals what they actually use. For this reason, when looking at the informational needs of historians researching women, it was decided to combine a questionnaire with a reference analysis. A combination of these two methods would allow for a comparison of want and use in order to get a better understanding of informational need.

The first step taken by the author in carrying out a survey was selecting the recipients of the questionnaire. The obvious choice when looking at the needs of historians researching women in archives was the Canadian Committee on Women's History (CCWH). The CCWH was founded in 1975 and is affiliated with the Canadian Historical Association. The main purpose of the CCWH is to foster the study of women's history in Canada. The CCWH had sixty-eight members in 1985 when the survey was carried out. Out of the sixty-eight questionnaires sent out, there were forty-one responses, a sixty per cent rate of return.

The majority of CCWH members are historians with extensive experience researching women as a subject in archives. The survey results revealed that over three-quarters of CCWH members who responded to the questionnaire were active in the field of history. The questionnaire results also revealed that CCWH members have considerable experience using archival materials. Almost all of the respondents said they either always or frequently utilized archival materials when doing research.<sup>19</sup> Seventy-five per cent of these same respondents listed women as one of their main areas of research.

The main purpose of the reference or citation analysis was to discover what materials were actually used by historians researching women in archives, since the survey results revealed that almost all CCWH members who responded to the questionnaire had published articles or books. It is important at this point to make a distinction between a reference and a citation analysis. A citation analysis is concerned with the number of times a particular publication or, in the case of unpublished materials, a particular collection, is cited in footnotes, whereas a reference analysis

is concerned more with the characteristics of the material cited. A citation analysis means literally recording every time a work is cited, whereas a reference analysis only counts each reference once. Most citation studies do not make this distinction clear, and therefore some errors can be introduced as a result.<sup>20</sup> Strictly speaking, the method employed in this study is a reference as opposed to a citation analysis in that each reference to a collection was counted only once in any one article rather than every time it was cited. A reference, as opposed to a citation analysis, was decided upon because the purpose of the study was to reveal the characteristics of the materials used, and not to determine the frequency with which a particular collection was cited.

The procedure followed for the selection of articles was fairly straightforward. A list of the forty-one questionnaire respondents was checked against pertinent indexes and bibliographies and a list of articles published by those surveyed was compiled. A total of thirty-three articles were published by the forty-one individuals who responded to the questionnaire. The subject, geographic focus, and time period of each article was noted. The rest of the survey recorded the characteristics of the materials cited. For comparative purposes, the same kind of information revealed by the questionnaire was recorded on the survey form.

Archivists are responsible for deciding what aspects of society are documented in the records preserved for future use. Research can be paralysed by the unwitting destruction of records or the failure to retain records.<sup>21</sup> A well defined acquisition and appraisal policy is essential if archivists are to preserve a representative picture of the past, and to provide users with the sources they require for their research. Traditionally, archivists have only discussed acquisition and appraisal in terms of how best to document society. Archivists have been less concerned with defining acquisition and appraisal in terms of the needs of users.<sup>22</sup> If archivists are going to respond adequately to the needs of users, however, they must understand both the types of materials and the kinds of information researchers need. Acquisition and appraisal principles have also been largely based on an intuitive feeling for the types of information users are seeking. While this intuitive sense will continue to be important when deciding the kinds of records archives should acquire, it must be supplemented by other appraisal information. Acquisition and appraisal decisions will always contain an element of risk, but it is possible to minimize these risks by testing current assumptions with empirical data.<sup>23</sup>

One of the main obstacles confronting historians researching women in archives is the lack of relevant materials. Until relatively recently, very little special effort has been made by archivists to acquire materials specifically on women. Faced with a paucity of relevant materials, historians researching women have reexamined existing archival sources in light of the new questions they are attempting to address, and have extended the range of materials traditionally employed in their research. A number of historians who responded to the questionnaire stated that one of the main obstacles encountered when doing research was the lack of relevant materials. Materials deemed by researchers as pertinent to their research have not yet been acquired by archivists. It is noteworthy that three doctoral theses written in the late 1970s on the history of women in Canada cited materials which had not yet been acquired by archival repositories.<sup>24</sup> For example, the records of influential national women's organizations such as the Women's Christian Temperance Union,

the Girl Guides of Canada, and the Young Women's Christian Association, have not been extensively collected at the regional level in Canada. The records of women's union leagues or the personal papers of female trade unionists are also rarely housed in public repositories. Similarly, little material has been collected which documents women's participation in clubs and associations such as the Loyal Orange Order, the Order of the Maccabees, the Independent Order of Foresters, or the Knights of Columbus. Equally neglected have been women's religious or lay orders, missionary societies, and confraternities in the Catholic church, or Jewish women's groups such as the Zionist Women in Canada.<sup>25</sup>

The most difficult and least recognized problem of collection development currently facing archivists is the structural bias in the national archival record. Archives have too much documentation on certain aspects of our past, and almost nothing on others.<sup>26</sup> Archivists in both Canada and the United States have long acknowledged that archival institutions have preserved an unrepresentative picture of the past. The records of government, prominent individuals, organizations, and associations are frequently viewed by the profession as containing the only significant information required for reconstructing the past. Concerned with documenting the activities of the elite and powerful in society, or white middle class men, archivists have largely ignored women, ethnic minorities, working people, and the poor.<sup>27</sup>

Materials which do exist on women are not representative of women of all socio-economic backgrounds, and therefore reflect the same biases as the materials which exist about men. Collections that document the activities of women in Canada are heavily biased towards middle and upper class women of national and political significance, such as Nellie McClung, Agnes Macphail, and Lady Aberdeen. Archivists should continue to collect these materials, but these records alone will never provide an adequate basis for generalizing about women as a whole.<sup>28</sup> The paucity of information on women from certain social, economic, and cultural backgrounds can also be explained by the fact that often this type of material simply does not exist. Working class and poor women, unlike middle and upper class women, had very little leisure time or education, and thus left fewer personal records behind. Frequently the only time these women created documentation was when they organized into unions or protest groups. The problem, however, with the records of short-lived protest groups is that both the movement and the records disappear before they can be collected. As Ellen Starr Brinton observed almost thirty years ago, the problem with the records of causes and movements is that once the job is done, the cause won or lost, the group and its records disappear.<sup>29</sup>

There has always been a close relationship between the writing of history and the keeping of records. How society perceives its past is largely dependent upon the evidence archivists acquire and make available. As Canadian archivist Derek Reimer cogently states, "the act of conception always follows the path of the richest evidence."<sup>30</sup> The bias of existing archival materials towards documenting the activities of middle and upper class women partially explains the initial concentration of women's history in this area. Women's history, like Canadian history, was originally political and national in scope. Canadian history until the early 1970s was mainly the history of great men and great events. When women did appear in Canadian historical literature the same standards of significance which applied to men were applied to women. Therefore, the early women's history focussed largely on "women

worthies," the female equivalents of the great men of history.<sup>31</sup> While the early women's history aided in correcting the bias of a history which focussed solely on men, it also suffered from the same limitations. This view of the past clearly excluded from serious consideration those women, as well as men, who were without power.<sup>32</sup> Additionally, by focussing largely on women's role in the public sphere, the early women's history succeeded in minimizing women's role in the past. According to Eva Moseley, this type of women's history is inadequate because the majority of women did not play a prominent role in the public sphere. Women's history, therefore, needs to focus on the areas where women have been active, influential, and important, including, for example, the home, voluntary organizations and associations, and professions such as nursing, teaching, and social work.<sup>33</sup>

Developments in women's history since the early 1970s have placed new demands on archival resources in Canada. The new women's history shifted the focus away from the experiences of individual women to the group or collective whole. The biographical studies of unique women that marked the first attempts at writing women's history began to be replaced by the study of experiences common to all women. The new women's history as a part of the developments in the new social history is less concerned with the political achievements of exceptional women and is more concerned with the economic, social, and cultural experiences of ordinary women.<sup>34</sup> This new focus is evident in the subjects of the articles written by CCWH members who responded to the questionnaire. The reference analysis revealed that the articles written by members of the CCWH focussed mainly on women's organizational activities, marriage and motherhood ranked a close second, and work was third. Only a very small number of articles were biographical or political in focus.

In an effort to locate relevant materials, members of the CCWH utilized both traditional and non-traditional forms of documentation. While textual records were most frequently utilized, the questionnaire results revealed that non-textual materials, in particular photographs and oral histories, were also quite extensively used. It is not surprising that private manuscript materials, government records and photographs are the most extensively utilized since these are the materials archivists have most commonly acquired. On the other hand, oral histories which have only relatively recently been acquired by archives are less frequently used.<sup>35</sup>

Within the category of textual records, private manuscript materials were the most useful to historians researching women in archives. Over three-quarters of the respondents ranked manuscript materials as the most useful, while less than half ranked government records in the same category. Similar results were revealed in the reference analysis. A survey of archival materials cited in the footnotes of articles published by CCWH members revealed that there were twice as many references to manuscript materials as there were to government records.<sup>36</sup> There is a great deal of information on women in manuscript collections which can be located by the experienced researcher. Manuscript materials are probably more useful than government records because women's activities take place more frequently in the private sphere of the home, family, factory, voluntary organizations, and associations. In addition to the personal papers of individual women and various women's organizations there is also a considerable amount of documentation preserved in collections which at first glance do not appear to be "women's collections." This includes



everything from the family papers of a colonial administrator to the records of labour unions, political parties, and associations which have women as members or are involved in activities that affect women's role in society.<sup>37</sup>

The survey results revealed that within the category of manuscript materials, the personal papers of individuals and the records of women's organizations were almost equally utilized by historians researching women. The reference analysis, however, revealed somewhat different results. While almost one-half of the references cited organizational records, the personal papers of individuals were only referred to in slightly over one-third of the total number of footnotes. If the more frequent citation of organizational records in footnotes does in fact represent higher quality it could be concluded that organizational records are more useful to historians researching women than the personal papers of individuals.<sup>38</sup> Organizational records are extensively used by historians researching women because they can provide information on a large number of women from various social, economic, political, and cultural backgrounds. These records often contain the only existing documentation about those women who have not left behind personal papers. Frequently the only glimpse historians can get of working class and poor women is through the records of middle and upper class reform and social welfare organizations such as benevolent societies, orphanages, and reform schools which aided these women.<sup>39</sup>

Similarly, personal papers can be used by historians researching women both for the information they contain on the experiences of individual women and for what they can reveal about the experience of women as a whole. Like organizational records, the personal papers of individual women can provide valuable information on those aspects of the female experience for which little documentation exists. The papers of individuals can be used to write the biographies of prominent middle and upper class women, but they can also be utilized from a new perspective to answer questions about health, attitudes towards sexuality and reproduction, abortion, child rearing, and household management.<sup>40</sup>

Government records are also a valuable source for writing women's history. Within the category of government records, departmental operational files were the most frequently used materials. The survey results were again confirmed by the reference analysis. Over two-thirds of all references within the category of government records cited departmental operational files.<sup>41</sup> These records primarily document the activities of government departments, but they also contain considerable information on the private and public lives of women. With the expansion of government, particularly in the twentieth century, into areas such as work, education, health, and welfare, many departments began to deal with policy matters of specific concern to women. The Government Archives Division of the National Archives of Canada recently did a survey of its holdings and discovered a wealth of records containing information pertinent to women. For example, the records of the Department of Labour contain the files of the Women's Bureau, the National Selective Service, and the Employment Relations and Conditions of Work Branch, all of which deal with issues and concerns of specific interest to women in Canada. The records of the Department of National Health and Welfare also contain valuable information on motherhood and family planning in the files of the Child Maternal Health Division.<sup>42</sup>

Demographic sources are a valuable source of information on otherwise obscure or anonymous groups such as working class women and poor women. Government census records have extensive research potential and can provide information on such topics as female mortality rates for various age groups; the number of women married, widowed, divorced, or deserted and at what age; the number of children per mother in relation to mortality rates; how many women worked and at what jobs; and a variety of other topics.<sup>43</sup> While case files may not provide breadth of information in comparison with census materials, they do allow for considerable depth of analysis or sharpening in detail. For example, social welfare case files frequently contain biographical information and are one of the few sources which can be used to create a detailed analysis of the experiences of poor women.<sup>44</sup>

Within the category of government records, census materials and case files ranked almost equally as the second most useful type of records. Over two-thirds of the survey respondents said they had used census records in their research. However, only one-tenth of the articles studied in the reference analysis actually refer to these materials. Similarly, while over two-thirds of the respondents to the questionnaire said they had used social service and court case files in their research, less than one-tenth of the footnotes in the reference analysis actually cite these records.<sup>45</sup> The low number of references to case files and census materials is puzzling, since the questionnaire results revealed these sources to be quite extensively utilized. This discrepancy would suggest that, while CCWH members who responded to the questionnaire used these materials, they did not find them particularly useful for the kinds of topics under investigation in the articles perused for the reference analysis. It is possible that these types of records were simply not available for these particular subject areas of research. Additionally, because computers are really the only effective way to compile the results of this kind of research, the sophisticated methodology required to utilize demographic sources may have prohibited researchers from realizing the value of these sources.

Faced with a scarcity of relevant textual forms of information on women, researchers are turning increasingly to non-textual forms of documentation such as photographs and oral histories. The survey results revealed that photographs and oral histories ranked third and fourth respectively in terms of frequency of use. Approximately three-quarters of the respondents used photographs and almost two-thirds utilized oral histories in their research. These results are again confirmed by the reference analysis. While photographs were cited in one-fourth of the references, oral histories were cited in less than one-tenth.<sup>46</sup> When the same group was asked to rank these materials in order of usefulness, however, different results emerged. The same group of respondents ranked photographs and oral histories equally as the third most useful. Clearly a distinction can be made between use and usefulness. The fact that photographs are more frequently used than oral histories does not necessarily mean they are more useful to researchers. One important factor which determines use is availability. The time period of research is one factor which will affect the types of materials which are available to users. Almost all of the articles in the reference analysis focused on the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. While photographic evidence is available for all of this period, twentieth century forms of documentation such as oral history are not available. Another reason why oral histories may be less frequently used than photographs or textual materials is related

to the resistance of the archival profession to develop active programmes to acquire this type of material. Although few archivists would argue that oral evidence should not be preserved, few institutions have active oral history programmes. A fledgling oral history programme was terminated at the Provincial Archives of Alberta in the late 1970s. At the provincial level, that decision leaves the Provincial Archives of British Columbia as one of the few institutions which have an active oral history programme to acquire oral histories.<sup>47</sup>

Films and maps ranked last both in order of use and usefulness. Not unexpectedly, maps ranked last in both of these categories since this material rarely provides any information on subject areas such as women's history. It was surprising, however, that films ranked so low both in terms of use and usefulness. There is little doubt that films, a combined visual and oral medium, have considerable research potential. Part of the reason why films are infrequently used by historians researching women is, once again, availability. Films, like oral histories, are mainly a twentieth century form of documentation and therefore are rarely available for studies focussing on the nineteenth century. In fact, archivists have only recently started to preserve films in Canada. The film division of the National Archives of Canada was not even established until the early 1970s.

As American archivist Michael Stevens notes, archivists have long been concerned with providing effective intellectual access to the subject matter of their materials. Surprisingly, however, archivists have done very little research on how users actually locate archival materials, and therefore have no way of measuring the usefulness of current descriptive systems. Since assumptions about research strategy determine the types of finding aids produced, archivists should test their assumptions about how users approach materials.<sup>48</sup> A common weakness of many studies of archival finding aids is their failure to ask two very important questions: what descriptive information is needed by users to facilitate their access to archival materials?; and, do users have special requirements or needs that are not being met by existing descriptive tools?<sup>49</sup> In order to respond to these two essential questions, archivists need to have a better understanding of both the types of research projects undertaken by various users groups and the modes of access available. Not all research topics are compatible with traditional descriptive methods. New fields of historical enquiry such as women's history have dramatically altered both the needs and expectations of researchers.

Information on women is frequently lost in archival collections because of the limitations of traditional descriptive systems in providing adequate subject access. The results of the questionnaire sent to members of the CCWH call into question the effectiveness of formal descriptive tools in locating information on women. Two-thirds of the respondents ranked archival finding aids as only fair or poor. Out of the remaining respondents, only one-fourth ranked archival finding aids as good.<sup>50</sup>

The results revealed that formal descriptive tools in archives are less frequently consulted than informal research tools by historians researching women. Most researchers attempt to locate sources on women, firstly, by consulting archivists, secondly through citations in serials or monographs, and, thirdly, through discussions with colleagues. Of the formal descriptive tools, inventories and lists ranked first in terms of frequency of use, catalogues and indexes were second, published

guides were third, and union lists were ranked last.<sup>51</sup> Once again, however, a distinction was made between use and usefulness. The same group responded quite differently when asked to rank these finding aids or research methods in order of usefulness. While informal research methods are more frequently used by historians researching women in archives, they are not more useful than the formal descriptive tools available. Of the informal research methods, consulting the archivist ranked highest with regard to both frequency of use and usefulness. Citations in secondary literature and discussions with colleagues, the other two informal methods of research, dropped to fifth and sixth place respectively. The questionnaire results revealed that, although historians frequently try to locate relevant materials through colleagues and references in serials or monographs, these methods are not as useful as the formal research methods. When the same respondents were asked to rank both formal and informal research tools in order of usefulness, published guides ranked above both inventories or lists and catalogues or indexes.

The questionnaire results confirmed the fact that the archivist plays an essential role in linking subject requests with relevant archival materials. In her article, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," reference archivist Mary Jo Pugh argues:

The archival system is predicated on interaction between the user and the archivist. Indeed, the archivist is necessary, even indispensable for subject retrieval. The archivist is assumed to be a subject specialist who introduces the user to the relevant records through the finding aids and continues to mediate between the user and the archival system throughout the user's research.<sup>52</sup>

It has long been acknowledged by archivists that they must personally assist researchers in locating the fonds or series which are relevant to their research. Theodore Schellenberg believed that subject access came naturally from the archivist's firsthand knowledge of the records. Schellenberg argued that the archivist was an essential intermediary between the user and the records because finding aids, regardless of how well they were prepared, cannot provide all the information possessed by a well informed archivist.<sup>53</sup> Frank Burke also noted that, while archival records were arranged by provenance or organization and function, researchers frequently made subject requests. He therefore maintained that only the archivist with knowledge of the records could link subject requests with archival materials.<sup>54</sup>

Some institutions achieve subject access through the preparation of special subject guides. In the case of women's history, a well prepared guide with a good index is frequently the only comprehensive means of subject access researchers have to a particular institution's holdings on women. Published guides are not extensively used by CCWH members who responded to the questionnaire, but they were ranked the most useful within the category of formal descriptive tools. One of the main reasons that the respondents did not use guides as frequently as other descriptive tools is because few Canadian repositories have published thematic guides to their holdings on women. There are currently only five guides published in Canada specifically on women's history sources, three of which focus on institutions in Ontario. British Columbia and Alberta are the only other provinces which have guides to their holdings on women.<sup>55</sup>

The guides which have been published in Canada are enormously useful; nevertheless, they are not without their shortcomings. All of these publications organize their entries alphabetically by title of the collection and do not include indexes. An essential feature of any published guide is an index, preferably listing both subject and name. Too frequently, guides are simply alphabetical lists by title of collection. As a result, if researchers are interested in a subject area such as domestic labour they must peruse every entry in order to locate fonds or series relevant to their search. If a guide is to fulfil its purpose of providing multiple access points in archives, an index is essential. Additionally, few of these guides include descriptions of government records and therefore a large body of information on women is omitted.

The questionnaire results revealed that inventories and lists ranked higher than catalogues and indexes both in terms of use and usefulness within the category of formal descriptive tools. Current practices as well as archival principles call for arrangement according to provenance or the structure and filing system of the creating agency, and therefore description is frequently by inventories and lists. Inventories, however, because they focus strongly on the organizational and functional aspects of records, are heavily biased in favour of biographical and organizational narrative as opposed to subject oriented research.<sup>56</sup> For example, topics such as women's history frequently transcend individual collections, and therefore, to provide access only through provenance related information contained in inventories is not enough. Additionally, the biographical sketches, administrative histories, series descriptions, and file lists contained in inventories do not always shed light on material within collections pertaining to women. As a result, sources on women frequently remain buried in collections whose general description rarely highlights its existence.

Another major problem with the provenance method of subject access provided by inventories is that they assume researchers can link their subject with the names of individuals and organizations. Archivist Richard Berner, in fact, argues that access by proper name is sufficient since most researchers are able to link subject with the names of organizations and individuals.<sup>57</sup> To a certain degree, Berner's theory is confirmed by the questionnaire results. When researchers were asked how they search for relevant documents in archives, two-thirds of the respondents said that they associate the names of people, organizations, and government agencies with their subject, while less than one-fifth of the respondents said that they approach their subjects directly through available indexes or catalogues. Only one-fifth of CCWH members responded that they used both methods when searching for relevant materials on women.<sup>58</sup> It is possible that in some instances researchers did not approach their subjects directly through catalogues and indexes because these tools did not exist or those which did exist did not provide adequate subject access to materials on women. More importantly, while this fact may prove that researchers are capable of linking subject with the names of individuals and organizations contained in inventories, it does not mean they prefer to use inventories as opposed to catalogues or indexes. As Richard Lytle reminds us, the assertion that researchers prefer access by proper name has never been subject to empirical testing. Lytle in fact suggests that researchers may approach archives by proper names only because they have learnt that archives access techniques are more effective at retrieval by name than by subject.<sup>59</sup>

Indexes and catalogues are clearly one of the most effective ways of providing subject access to fonds or series. Even though there are a larger number of indexes than inventories available to researchers in Canadian repositories, indexes still ranked well below inventories in terms of both use and usefulness.<sup>60</sup> The main reason that historians researching women do not find existing indexes or catalogues to be very useful is because, as one respondent remarked, archivists have been "shockingly negligent" in cataloguing or indexing records containing information relevant to women's activities. Archivists need to be more aware of the needs of this particular user group when cataloguing or indexing materials. Catalogues or indexes often only include the names of notable women. Information on working class or poor women is harder to locate since researchers are less likely to know the names of domestic servants, schoolteachers, millhands, and housewives, all of which are terms suggestive of subject headings. As Eva Moseley points out, if the new women's history is to include ordinary women, the papers by and about them have to be made available through the use of subject entries in catalogues or indexes. Moseley provides archivists with an example of how this can be done effectively. For example, the main entry for the memoirs of an immigrant woman or the diary of a schoolteacher would be under the author's name, but there should also be entries for emigration or immigration and for teachers.<sup>61</sup>

Despite the advent of non-textual sources, the written word still dominates, a state of affairs which tends to emphasize the most literate elements or the elite in society. Locating documentation on the lives of the anonymous is difficult in archives. Although historians researching women continue to rely heavily upon manuscript materials and government records, the questionnaire results revealed that they are also turning increasingly to less traditional forms of documentation such as oral history as a means of overcoming the limitations of existing textual collections. Archivists should therefore acquire oral histories, regardless of whether or not they feel they should actively participate in oral history programmes. As Veronica Strong-Boag notes, any reluctance on the part of archivists to accept oral records as their legitimate preserve will have detrimental effects on the history of women and non-elites.<sup>62</sup>

Repositories should continue to collect the papers of the elite in society since they represent an important part of the nation's culture, but archivists should reassess the priority assigned to the collection of such papers. Too much time and money is spent documenting the well documented. Archivist Linda Henry argues that the emphasis of collection policies should instead be on "broad coverage," a term which means that archivists should collect papers which serve a dual purpose of providing access to the biographical information the records contain on a prominent individual, as well as the broader coverage of the society or field in which the person attained fame.<sup>63</sup>

It should be the aim of any repository to build up within its defined area or field, documentation which is sufficiently complete to give an accurate and balanced response to a research enquiry.<sup>64</sup> Assuming that a repository has a more or less well defined subject or geographic focus, only a small mental leap is required to extend the focus to include women. Some information exists on the activities of middle and upper class women, but very little documentation exists in archival repositories on working class or poor women. If archivists are going to respond adequately to

the needs of historians researching women, they must provide a more balanced documentation of the past, an objective which will require archivists to play a more active role in the acquisition of non-textual materials such as oral history.

Another way in which archivists can respond more effectively to the needs of historians researching women is by developing more subject oriented finding aids. Archivists should publish more guides to women's history sources because they provide researchers with a powerful means of subject access to information on women. Thematic guides which are simply summaries of inventories, however, do not provide adequate subject access. The subject access provided by published guides can be greatly enhanced by the inclusion of a comprehensive index. A guide is as important for its index as its descriptive matter, yet too frequently these indexes are hastily contrived if not omitted altogether. Archivists also tend to be too passive and bureaucratic when writing inventories. Inventories are frequently merely lists and file titles.<sup>65</sup> In order to meet the needs of subject oriented researchers, archivists should rethink the content of finding aids. The scope and content notes of an inventory should be both analytical and descriptive. The inventory should note omissions and reveal biases of record creators. Biographical sketches and agency histories should be more than factual accounts of an individual's or agency's life. They should relate the materials with the specific events or interests of an individual or agency and assess the success of the collection in documenting an individual's or agency's life.<sup>66</sup> Finally, archivists should be more sensitive to the needs of historians researching women when indexing or cataloguing archival materials.

User studies are one method archivists can effectively employ to systematically define the informational needs of researchers in archives. To date, very few studies have focussed on the information seeking behaviour of researchers in archives. However, this research methodology can be used by archivists in deciding both what to collect and how to provide better intellectual access to their materials. The main limitation of user studies is that they can only reveal what users have actually located, and not what they should have seen or what would have been used had it been available. Factors which may affect researcher use or access to archival materials include: geographic proximity; the time period and area of research; and the quality of intellectual access provided by archival finding aids. It should be pointed out that this particular user study does not pretend to be statistically representative of the needs of all historians researching women in archives. The intention of both the questionnaire and the reference analysis was to create data upon which generalizations about the informational needs of this particular user group could be made. Despite the limitations of this research methodology, it can provide archivists with valuable empirical data on the information seeking behaviour of researchers. While archivists should not base decisions upon user studies alone, these studies can clearly improve our understanding of users by objectifying and formalizing current impressions and assumptions.

## Notes

- 1 Joanna Zangrando, "Women in Archives: An Historian's View of the Liberation of Clio," *American Archivist* 36 (April 1973), p. 210.
- 2 Veronica Strong-Boag, "Raising Clio's Consciousness: Women's History and Archives in Canada," *Archivaria* 6 (Summer 1978), p. 74.
- 3 Margaret Stieg, "The Information Needs of Historians," *College & Research Libraries* 42 (November 1981), p. 549.
- 4 Stieg, "The Information Needs of Historians," p. 549.
- 5 David Nicholas *et al.*, *Literature Usage and Interrelationships in the Social Sciences as Shown by Citations in Monographs* (North London: Bath University, 1978), p. 2.
- 6 Clark Elliott, "Citation Patterns and Documentation for the History of Science: Some Methodological Considerations," *American Archivist* 44 (Spring 1981), p. 132.
- 7 Stieg, "The Information Needs of Historians," pp. 551-553.
- 8 Elliott, "Citation Patterns," pp. 133-144.
- 9 Clyve Jones, Michael Chapman, and Pamela Carr Woods, "The Characteristics of the Literature Used by Historians," *Journal of Librarianship* 4 (July 1972), pp. 141-142.
- 10 Richard Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives: I. Provenance and Content Indexing Methods of Subject Retrieval," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980), p. 70.
- 11 Elliott, "Citation Patterns," pp. 132-133.
- 12 Elsie Freeman, "In the Eyes of the Beholder: Archives Administration From the User's Point of View," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984), pp. 111 & 115.
- 13 William Joyce, "Archivists and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984), p. 124.
- 14 Michael Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," *Georgia Archives* 5 (Winter 1977), pp. 68-72.
- 15 Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," p. 67.
- 16 Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," p. 69.
- 17 Elliott, "Citation Patterns," pp. 134-136 & 140.
- 18 Maurice Line, "Draft Definitions: Information and Library Needs, Wants, Demands, and Uses," *Association of Special Libraries & Information Bureaux Proceedings* 26 (1974), p. 87.
- 19 According to the questionnaire results, 46.3 per cent of the respondents always used archives in their research, 46.3 per cent frequently used archives, 4.8 per cent infrequently used archives, and only 2.4 per cent did not use archives at all.
- 20 Jones, Chapman, and Woods, "Characteristics of Literature," p. 130.
- 21 Maynard Brichford, *Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal and Accessioning* (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 1977), p. 1.
- 22 Elsie Freeman, "In the Eyes of the Beholder," pp. 111-112.
- 23 Clark Elliott, "Citation Patterns and Documentation for the History of Science," pp. 132 & 141.
- 24 Theses cited in Veronica Strong-Boag, "Raising Clio's Consciousness," p. 75. These theses included: Veronica Strong-Boag, "The Parliament of Women: The National Council of Women in Canada, 1893-1929," (Doctoral dissertation, University of Toronto, 1975); Carol Bacchi, "Liberation Deferred: The English Canadian Women's Suffrage Movement, 1877-1918," (Doctoral dissertation, McGill University, 1976); Wendy Mitchinson, "Aspects of Reform: Four Women's Organizations in Nineteenth Century Canada," (Doctoral dissertation, York University, 1977).
- 25 Strong-Boag, "Raising Clio's Consciousness," pp. 75-81.
- 26 Some of the archivists who have acknowledged the bias of archival collection policies include: Linda Henry, "Collecting Policies of Special-Subject Repositories," *American Archivist* 43 (Winter 1980), pp. 57-63; Gerald Ham, "The Archival Edge," *American Archivist* 38 (1975), pp. 25-35; Patrick Quinn, "The Archivist as Activist," *Georgia Archives* 5 (1977), pp. 25-35.
- 27 Gerald Ham, "Archival Choices: Managing Historical Records in an Age of Abundance," in *Archival Choices: Managing the Historical Record in An Age of Abundance*, ed. Nancy Peace (Toronto: Lexington Books, 1984), p. 134.
- 28 Strong-Boag, "Raising Clio's Consciousness," p. 72.
- 29 Ellen Starr Brinton, "Archives of Causes and Movements: Difficulties and Some Solutions as Illustrated by the Swarthmore College Peace Collection," *American Archivist* 14 (April 1951), p. 148.
- 30 Derek Reimer, "Oral History and Archives: The Case in Favour," *Journal* 5 (1981-82), p. 32.
- 31 Alison Prentice, "Writing Women into History: The History of Women's Work in Canada," *Atlantis* 3 (Spring 1978), p. 76.



- 32 Strong-Boag, "Raising Clio's Consciousness," pp. 71-72.
- 33 Eva Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" *American Archivist* 43 (Spring 1980), p. 180.
- 34 Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" p. 181.
- 35 The questionnaire results revealed that 94.8 per cent of those members surveyed used government records and manuscript materials, 74.3 per cent used photographs, and 64.1 per cent used oral histories.
- 36 A study of articles published by CCWH members who responded to the survey revealed that 56 per cent of the footnotes referred to manuscript materials while only 24 per cent referred to government records.
- 37 David Walden, *Canadian Committee on Women's History Newsletter* (November 1984), p. 8a.
- 38 The questionnaire results revealed that all of the respondents had used the papers of individuals and 92.1 per cent had used the records of women's organizations. Different results emerged from the reference analysis. While organizational records accounted for a total of 49.9 per cent of all references within the category of manuscript materials, only 36.4 per cent of the references cited the papers of individuals.
- 39 Linda Henry, "Collecting Policies," p. 62.
- 40 Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" p. 62.
- 41 Departmental operational files were used by 86.1 per cent of the questionnaire respondents and accounted for 78 per cent of the total number of references to government records.
- 42 John Smart, *Canadian Committee on Women's History Newsletter* (November 1984), pp. 8f-8m.
- 43 Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" p. 183.
- 44 Joy Parr, "Case Records as Sources for Social History," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977), pp. 122-125.
- 45 The survey results revealed that 66.6 per cent of the respondents had used case files, both social service and court records, and 69.4 per cent had utilized census materials. Within the category of government records 3.1 per cent of the references to archival materials included court records and 9.3 per cent included census materials.
- 46 Photographs were cited in 18.1 per cent of the references and oral histories were cited in 1.5 per cent of the total number of references.
- 47 Ernest Dick, "Oral History in Canada: An Archivist's Commentary," *Archivaria* 4 (Summer 1977), p. 34.
- 48 Michael Stevens, "The Historian and Archival Finding Aids," *Georgia Archives* 5 (Winter 1977), p. 64.
- 49 Nancy Sahli, "Finding Aids: A Multi-Media Systems Perspective," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1981), p. 16.
- 50 The survey results revealed that 6.3 per cent of the respondents ranked archival finding aids as very good, 27.3 per cent ranked them as good, 48.5 per cent rated archival finding aids as fair, and 18.2 per cent said they were poor.
- 51 The questionnaire results revealed the following methods were used to locate material on women: 89.4 per cent consulted archivists; 84.2 per cent used citations in serials or monographs; 76.3 per cent relied on discussions with colleagues; 73.6 per cent used inventories or lists; 71 per cent utilized catalogues and indexes; 65.7 per cent consulted published guides; and only 39.4 per cent used union lists.
- 52 Mary Jo Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience: Subject Access and the Reference Archivist," *American Archivist* 44 (Winter 1982), pp. 35-36.
- 53 Theodore Schellenberg, *The Management of Archives* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1965), p. 109.
- 54 Frank Burke, "The Impact of the Specialist on Archives," *College & Research Libraries* 33 (July 1972), pp. 312-17.
- 55 Guides to women's history sources in Canada include: Linda Hale, *Selected Bibliography of Manuscripts and Pamphlets Pertaining to Women, Held by Archives, Libraries, Museums, and Associations in B.C.* (Toronto: OISE, 1978); Catherine Brown, "Sources on Women in the Toronto City Hall Archives," Canadian Women's History Series, No. 6 (Toronto: Women in Canadian History Project, OISE, 1977); Jean Dryden, *Some Sources For Women's History at the PAA*. Occasional Paper No. 2 (1980); Beth Light, "Sources in Women's History at the Public Archives of Ontario," Canadian Women's History Series, No. 1 (Toronto: Women in Canadian History Project, OISE, 1977); Heather Reilly & Marilyn Hindmarch, *Some Sources for Women's History in the Public Archives of Canada*. Mercury Series. History Division Paper No. 5 (Ottawa: National Museum of Man, 1974).
- 56 Miller, "Social History and Archival Practice," p. 122.

- 57 Richard Berner, "Archivists, Librarians, and NUCMC," *American Archivist* 27 (1964), pp. 401-409.
- 58 Of the questionnaire respondents, 65.7 per cent located relevant materials with the use of proper name, 14.1 per cent used available indexes, 17.1 per cent used both of these methods, and 2.8 per cent used neither.
- 59 Lytle, "Intellectual Access to Archives," p. 69.
- 60 The Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards reported in *Toward Descriptive Standards: Report and Recommendations of the Canadian Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards* (Ottawa: Bureau of Canadian Archivists, 1986) that the most commonly created archival finding aids in Canadian repositories are indexes. Including catalogues, nearly half of all descriptive tools reported are indexes and thirty per cent are inventories. The subject index is the most common type of index which indicates that providing subject access to their materials is a major preoccupation of most archival repositories.
- 61 Moseley, "Sources for the 'New Women's History,'" p. 189.
- 62 Strong-Boag, "Raising Clío's Consciousness," p. 76.
- 63 Henry, "Collecting Policies," p. 58.
- 64 Cook, *Archives Administration*, p. 96.
- 65 Pugh, "The Illusion of Omniscience," pp. 35 & 42.
- 66 William Joyce, "Archivist and Research Use," *American Archivist* 47 (Spring 1984), p. 128.