

Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age

by **TERRY COOK**

Rites of Spring: The Great War and the Birth of the Modern Age. MODRIS EKSTEINS. Toronto: Lester & Orpen Dennys Limited, 1989. xvi, 396 p. ISBN 0-88619-200-5 \$26.95 (cloth).

Information Anxiety. RICHARD SAUL WURMAN. New York, et al.: Doubleday, 1989. 356 p. ISBN 0-385-24394-4 \$26.95 (cloth).

In a curious way, these two books highlight fundamental issues facing the archival profession as it enters the 1990s. They reflect as well the debates about the nature of the profession which have divided many archivists over the past decade. Modris Eksteins, an award-winning Toronto historian, has developed a view of the past which is at once arresting and controversial, and as such his book contains implications for archival appraisal. Richard Saul Wurman, an information specialist by vocation, has written a penetrating discourse on the current information revolution, and as such his volume describes the present landscape in which archivists toil. Neither the historian nor the information specialist addresses archives directly, and neither betrays an awareness of the concerns raised by the other. Yet considering their books together is not an intellectual conceit, for their insights, when combined, offer some provocative suggestions to the archival profession.

It is long past time for archivists to set aside the false dichotomies of historians *versus* information specialists. There was a time, perhaps, when it was necessary, in differing circumstances in different types of archival institutions in Canada, to defend one or the other of these as the only true intellectual font of the profession and as the only true ally of the archivist, to the near total exclusion of the other. It is now time to realize the wisdom both can offer to archival work, and to take the strands from each and weave them into a rich texture archivists can call their own. Few more colourful strands could be presented than the insights contained in Wurman's and Eksteins' volumes.

On his dust jacket and title page, and in the text, Wurman asserts that "information anxiety is produced by the ever-widening gap between what we understand and what we think we should understand. It is the black hole between data and knowledge, and it happens when information doesn't tell us what we want or need to know." So black is that information hole, so overwhelmed are people of the late twentieth century with facts

and data, that Wurman's book has struck a very responsive chord, attracting repeated notice in the popular press since it was first published. The anxiety to which he refers is stark indeed. One weekday edition of the *New York Times* contains more information than the average person was likely to come across in an entire lifetime in seventeenth-century England. Each edition uses 580 tons of newsprint, or the equivalent annually of 692,000,000 hard-cover books. Even the *Times* can outdo itself; its biggest edition (13 November 1987) had 1,612 pages, 2,000,000 lines of type, and over 12,000,000 words. But the *Times* is only symbolic of the tip of the information iceberg. There are 1,000 books published internationally every day. There are 9,600 different periodicals published just in the United States each year. And the world's total printed knowledge doubles every eight years. On that basis, there is more new information in the past thirty years than in the previous 5,000.

Even more astonishing figures can be advanced for unpublished, broadcast and computerized information, but these no archivist needs to hear: he or she confronts that dimension of the information explosion daily. To take but one example, it was once calculated that if merely the current paper records of the Government of Canada were laid end-to-end, they would circle the globe 144 times or complete eight round trips to the moon. This is the equivalent of 60,000,000 books, or roughly 2,000,000 books per archivist to appraise — and that total is about equal to the entire holdings of a very large university library — for each government records archivist!

Based on actual survey results, Wurman asserts that a senior professional in most fields should be reading fifty periodicals and at least 100 books annually, just to keep up with his or her speciality within that field, to say nothing of conference papers, circulating drafts, operational memoranda, and the daily diet of newspapers, magazines, radio and television — as well as other books outside the field that are read for pleasure. In all this and more — attending a meeting, searching an airline schedule, scanning a road map, pondering a menu — we are the information processors of the Information Age. While the industrial age was fueled by the mining of finite natural resources which were processed into tangible products, the information resources of the new age are infinite, and their potential boundless and often intangible.

Wurman makes it clear that it is not simply the increase in information that is the problem, but technical advances in its transmission and storage. People are affected by the flow of information from every direction quite as much as by its sheer quantity. In the days of the town crier, the amount of anxiety-producing information was limited and there was, in effect, only one channel. Now there are many channels in numerous media, each with differing and often conflicting versions of the "facts." This overwhelming avalanche and the impossibility of digesting it cripples many professionals as they search desperately for a "low-fat information diet." Failing to find it, they risk very real health problems. These are both physical, due to high stress and excessive overwork in attempting to keep up with the flow and quantity of information, and psychological, due to the guilt bred by not keeping up (for no one can) and the resulting destructive self-image as a posturing expert living in constant fear of humiliating exposure.

Many sufferers of information anxiety aggravate their affliction by relying on several time-worn (although they may think they are time-tested) mechanisms. Understanding is vainly sought by stressing the need for accurate information, rather than getting beyond facts (accurate or otherwise) to their essential meaning. Reliance on the exactitude of information, which, with new technology is now possible to many decimal

points or precise dollar and body counts, is really an attempt to hide basic insecurities which in the end overwhelms with unnecessary trivia more than it informs. Another false turn in the Information Age is the widespread apprehension of theory and purpose; too many people focus on their antithesis: administrative and operational detail. Indeed, ideas and theories are distrusted as subjective, whereas facts, data and statistics are embraced as objective (which of course they are not). Yet without theory and ideals, there are no organizing constructs by which to separate and digest the relevant information from the vast amount that is not relevant. There is also an unhealthy emphasis on presentation — if it looks good, it must be informative — rather than on the substance of the communication being presented. And most dangerous of all, there is the unspoken assumption that “more” information is better, that “improved” systems will deliver the information results that people crave. This has produced a mindset which asks only those questions that lead to the very answers that reinforce it. This mindset is geared to products and product improvement (process), to use Wurman’s terms, rather than to performance and communication (substance). We seem not to have learned that more police has not led to less crime, or that more freeways have not solved mobility problems; indeed, more roads simply seem to bring on more cars, so that now, as Wurman delights to tell in a typical aside, the average speed on the Los Angeles freeway in rush-hour approximates that of the horse and buggy. More and more information, sped faster and faster between sender and receiver, similarly cannot and should not be seen as the panacea to the predicaments of our society. “We attempt to solve problems,” Wurman chides, “with solutions that are only improved versions of what didn’t work in the first place. . . . And a better version of what doesn’t work is like putting polka dots on an Edsel.”

What, then, does work? Having so set the reader up, Wurman’s guide is of course an attempt to answer that question. But, first, a note of caution is in order. There may be a temptation for some readers to dismiss his approach as that of a light-weight popularizer, for his volume has all the appearances of those self-help books which flood the market these days. Described by one reviewer as a “user-friendly tool” to the Information Age, its structure also mirrors its central thesis and it is anything but a standard academic tome. Filled with intriguing marginalia, designed to be read starting at any page, equipped accordingly with a 21-page annotated table of contents, sprinkled throughout with provocative quotations, and permeated with diagrams, charts, and a tri-coloured text, the medium is certainly designed to reflect its message: establish incisive shortcuts to gain control over the information monster. And there is in the volume a large measure of folksy story-telling and humorous anecdotes, and even more practical advice and winsome exhortation, all designed to reform the personal information habits of the reader, from conducting better meetings to preparing lists to identify the sources of one’s own information overload. Although his solutions are thus largely aimed at the busy professional trying to cope with information anxiety, Wurman’s analysis may, however, be extrapolated to corporate settings.

It is in these corporate implications, behind the surface patina of self-help and future-gazing, that may be found the central insights for archivists in this book. Before Wurman became an information specialist, he was trained in and taught architecture, graphic design, and cartography at leading universities. Later, he put these skills to use in developing the popular ACCESS guides to cities and the new SMART Yellow Pages. Both are conceptual road maps through information forests. Not surprisingly, with this background, Wurman’s chapter on maps is the most interesting in his volume. A map to

Wurman is more than the standard geographical representation of a portion of the earth's surface; it may be a chart, form, manual, graph or other visual presentation. Ideas and concepts may be mapped as well as physical places. But whatever form it takes, a map is a shared perception of organized information. It suppresses useless information, imposes patterns of understanding on what remains, and conveys the essence of these to the viewer. Despite their appearance of scientific objectivity, maps are metaphors. They are not "mirrors of reality," Wurman reminds us, but rather "a means of understanding it. To accomplish this, mapmakers can reduce, distill, exaggerate, or abstract reality. Their mission is to capture the salient aspects of a particular reality that would enable someone to understand it . . ."

On a wider scale, the solution advanced to information overload reflects the map-maker's approach. One commentator cited by Wurman asserts that "if we are to retain any kind of perspective on the role of humankind in the future, we must sometimes stand back and view the landscape, not merely a tree." Another puts the matter this way: "Information is not knowledge. You can mass-produce raw data and incredible quantities of facts and figures. You cannot mass produce knowledge, which is created by individual minds, drawing on individual experience, separating the significant from the irrelevant, making value judgements." This distinction between information and knowledge, between the clutter of millions of trees and clearly charted paths through the forests, between holistic and atomistic approaches, has already attracted the attention of some archivists as the central metaphor for their profession. That Wurman, the information professional, arrives at the same point from vastly different training, experiences and assumptions should reassure archivists, but hardly make them complacent. The errors noted earlier which he accuses many professionals of committing in trying to cope with the Information Age still apply to no small number of archival endeavours.

If the mission for Wurman's information map-makers "is to capture the salient aspects of a particular reality," Modris Eksteins must be a sterling example of such conceptual map-making, this time within an historical context. Of course, all historians filter facts, suppress undue trivia and impose interpretative patterns. All strive to find meaning in the welter of information preserved in archives, libraries, galleries and other places. But Eksteins goes considerably further than most, and thus his methodology — much more than his particular historical interpretation or time period — is of interest to archivists.

Rites of Spring attempts nothing less than an explanation of the spirit of the modern age. Seeing the First World War as pivotal in the consciousness of this century, Eksteins wonders how the *mentalité* of the nineteenth century was completely changed into the "modernism" which characterizes that of the twentieth century. How does one account for the ascendancy after 1900 of transience, technology, newness, speed, inwardness and, above all, of the *avant-garde* sense of liberation, of freedom from the earlier constraints of religion, history, tradition, public stability and moral responsibility? How does one explain the paradoxical movement whereby in striving for that freedom we have acquired the power of ultimate destruction? How does one explain Hitler? The *avant-garde* of twentieth-century cultural modernism has a positive ring for most, whereas Nazi storm-troopers strike a frightening tone. Eksteins argues that the two had much in common, for the primitivism, introspection, abstraction and mythologizing of the arts and politics crossed over on to each other in modernism. The symbol of the century is thus "the dance of death, with its orgiastic-nihilistic irony. *The*

Rite of Spring, which was first performed [by Nijinsky] in Paris in May 1913, a year before the outbreak of war, is, with its rebellious energy and its celebration of life through sacrificial death, perhaps the emblematic *oeuvre* of a twentieth-century world that, in its pursuit of life, has killed off millions of its best human beings.” This opening image in Eksteins’ book comes full circle at its end. With the Third Reich crumbling in ruins around them, the senior Nazi officers danced in the cafeteria of the Berlin bunker, knowing that in the room below their beloved *Fuhrer* was about to kill himself. Yet how does one “prove” such sweeping cultural generalizations in a form of history which Hugh Taylor once approvingly (and correctly) called “mythopaic”? And what kinds of sources does the archivist acquire on which such proof may rest?

Eksteins asserts that gauging the spirit of an age requires searching out the society’s sense of priorities. Cultural history of this sort must “unearth manners and morals, customs and values, both articulated and assumed.” Its sources are rather ballet, film, literature, music and popular heroes than “official” acts (and records) of governments and institutions and leaders. Yet social priorities will not be found in the ballet and popular fiction *per se*, but in the society’s **response** to these powerful symbols. The audience and its reaction are more important than the play and its intention. For example, the key to understanding the First World War and its impact on this century lies less with the traditional narrow focus on strategy and weapons, generals and politicians, tanks and battles, as with the morale and motivations, the reactions and enduring legacies, of the soldiers in the trenches. From this perspective, Eksteins believes that “the history of modern culture ought then to be as much a history of response as of challenge, an account of the reader as of the novel, of the viewer as of the film, of the spectator as of the actor.”

While it is impossible to do justice in this space to the great subtlety of his arguments, Eksteins chooses, against a sensitively drawn analysis of British, French and German mores on entering the war and of the soul-destroying life in the trenches, four broad cultural symbols as his touchstones: Stravinsky’s wildly popular *avant-garde* ballet premiered in 1913, as already noted; the strange, unexpected and hushed-up Christmas Truce of 1914 between sworn enemies in the trenches; the unrestrained enthusiasm of an entire generation that greeted Charles Lindbergh’s solo flight to Paris in 1927; and the unprecedented (to that time) bestseller status accorded to Erich Maria Remarque’s *All Quiet on the Western Front* after its publication in 1929. With an extremely careful and innovative use of sources to probe the significance of these four symbols, Eksteins develops a convincing thesis that the cultural impact of the First World War led to the technocratic sterility of modernism gone mad, with its apotheosis in the artistic kitsch and death camps of the Nazis.

Why these four symbols? Why not gauge the popular reaction to the Treaty of Versailles or the Stock Market Crash or the Nuremberg rallies or a hundred seemingly more significant historical events between 1900 and 1945 than a ballet, a truce, a flight or a novel? Eksteins’ point is that the reaction to these four events was all out of proportion to what might have been expected. There had been lots of war memoirs; why did Remarque’s touch the popular nerve so deeply? Other Russian ballets had played in Western Europe; why was the *Rite of Spring* lionized beyond compare? Other aviation feats equalled or soon surpassed Lindbergh’s; why did his fire the imagination of a generation? And why, given all the rhetoric and propaganda of hatred, national rivalries, and recent mutual slaughter, did the trench veterans stop fighting in December 1914? It is in such unexpected events and especially in the reactions to them — and it was the

reactions that made the events significant, not so much the events themselves — that the cultural and mythic values of a people or era may be judged. One expects the Treaty of Versailles to provoke many reactions, and most of these are thoroughly predictable. It is where the reaction could not have been predicted, and seems quite out of proportion to the stimulus, that an historian like Eksteins finds meaning. This symbol analysis permits him, in Wurman's terms, "to capture the salient aspects of a particular reality." In the information overload Eksteins personally faced there was every possible event and person in politics and the arts, in war and society, in Germany, France, Britain and, to a lesser extent, the United States, for over half a century; he perforce had to step back and view the landscape, not the forest or trees. Should archivists do the same? Should they seek first to identify and then document similar "unexpected" symbols, and equally the unexpected mass reactions to them? What would be the choices for the 1980s? Madonna? Terry Fox? The "Elvis is Alive" phenomenon? Perhaps such symbols can only be identified after the fact in the perspective of time, and thus remain the purview of the historian, not the archivist. But who, then, will ensure the retention of the right documentation to provide meaning and understanding to such symbols, from among the avalanche of ephemeral information that Wurman describes?

These two volumes thus highlight provocative issues for archivists to consider. Together, they may serve as archivists' rites of passage into the new Information Age. Symbolically, they may help to heal old wounds in the profession, for the information scientist and the historian have arrived at the same conceptual spot. Jointly, they may remind us to grapple more realistically with the deeper implications of Gerald Ham's assertion that the Information Age will be a "post-custodial" one for archivists. This implies that we no longer can receive information, no matter how well "managed," with the luxury of sifting it out later to separate wheat from chaff. We must impose meaning before we acquire rather than after. In Wurman's words and following Eksteins' example, that requires us to "reduce, distill, exaggerate, or abstract reality" as a means of understanding reality, and leading our researchers to similar understanding. This is a long way from Jenkinson's sense of the archivist's neutrality, but then the Information Age is a long way from parchment rolls and court registers! Equally, we must turn from being passive recipients of institutional records to becoming active documenters of the past, as increasing work in the profession on acquisition and documentation strategies foreshadows. We must reorient description towards contextual analyses of fonds and series, and not be content with item and file level control of a growing mountain of mere information. We may have to focus less on records as custodial artifacts, and on acquiring these physically into our care, and more on records creators, and the concepts (or "mapping") that underpin records and information creation.

This does not mean abandoning archival principles, but rather reasserting them, based on deeper research and analysis. Wurman's contention that the solution to information anxiety is "context, context, context" should sound reassuring to archivists, for fully exploiting the power of the principle of provenance means nothing more. As David Bearman and I said in these pages some years ago, archivists are uniquely positioned, given their contextual approach to information, to flourish in the Information Age — and, indeed, as a result, to lower the level of information anxiety felt by their users, their sponsors and themselves. This will only be possible, however, if archivists boldly assert, as Wurman boasts of himself, that they are in the **understanding** business, not the **information** business. Such a transformation will then become their rite of passage to the new age.