A Documentary Approach to Aboriginal Archives

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This paper focuses on the recent aboriginal documentary heritage, and particularly on the archives created by aboriginal record creators during the twenty-year span from 1969 to 1989. It looks at how the composition of the aboriginal documentary heritage changed dramatically during that time period, to include a greater proportion of archives created by and about aboriginal peoples. Following that, it will consider two methodologies for appraising this heritage, and finally will discuss the role of the archivist in appraising aboriginal archives.

Hugh Taylor introduced a 1984 article with the quote "To define is to kill; to suggest is to create."[1] This paper aims to do both. I shall therefore begin by putting a few technical terms out of their misery. "Archives" will be used with regard to records rather than the place they are kept, as meaning the same as "fonds." For the benefit of non-archivists, the *Rules for Archival Description* defines a fonds as "the whole of the records, regardless of form or medium, automatically and organically created and/or accumulated and used by a particular individual, family or corporate body in the course of that creator's activities or functions."[2]

"Evidential value" is not the same in archives as in history or law. As an archival concept, it refers to the capacity of records to reflect accurately and adequately the organization and functioning of their creator. The evidential value of archival records is represented by their provenance and original order,[3] and derives from the originary bonds that exist among items in an archival series, and between each series and the entirety of the fonds d'archives.

The concept of "total archives," as described by Wilfred Smith and Terry Cook, may be defined in terms of five guidelines for appraisal: (1) archival materials should be acquired from all public and private sources within the jurisdictional mandate of the archival institution; (2) all forms and media of material may be acquired; (3) all subjects of human endeavour should be covered; (4) the entire life cycle of archives should be taken into account; and (5) an institutionalized network should cooperate on all levels to develop strategies for preserving society's institutional and non-institutional records.[4]

The final term, "documentary heritage," has been defined by Hans Booms as "the totality of existing evidence of historical activity, or ... all the surviving (archival) documentation of past events."[5]

Having thus introduced the products of creation, the paper will turn to the creators. Since 1969 there has been a considerable increase in the creation, accumulation and use of aboriginal archives and of records generated by non-aboriginal creators about aboriginal peoples. This phenomenon is traceable to several events and trends originating around the early 1970s.

The Statement on Indian Policy presented to Parliament in 1969, known as the White Paper, and the reaction of native peoples to this plan to eliminate their special status, were watershed events in contemporary aboriginal history. The government's rejection of the White Paper marked the end of its official assimilation policy. As native people became more politically active and activist, a new cultural nationalism and pan-aboriginal identity began to develop.

In the early 1970s, the federal government began funding native organizations and their research into land claims. This helped to elevate political activity from the band to the national level. Meanwhile, in 1969, the Nisga'a of British Columbia initiated legal proceedings against the province to reclaim their traditional territory. In 1973, the landmark Supreme Court of Canada decision of this case affirmed the existence of rights based on aboriginal occupancy. This provided native organizations with confidence and a legal precedent for claiming aboriginal rights.

Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, the Department of Indian Affairs transferred programmes and services to band councils, and withdrew its agents from Indian communities. During this period, bands began to manage growing bodies of administrative and operational records.

Such developments encouraged more communication and record creation among aboriginal groups, as well as more use of the aboriginal documentary heritage by academic researchers and litigators. In the early 1970s, the new historical sub-discipline of ethnohistory emerged in Canada. Research and publication in this and related fields has had repercussions throughout Canadian society, raising our awareness of aboriginal culture and heritage.

Participation in subsequent catalytic events, such as the Constitutional negotiations and conferences, various government commissions, land claims and demonstrations against the government, has contributed to further increases in the creation and management of records by aboriginal political groups.

The process of identifying the important events and concerns in a given aboriginal society, as well as identifying the categories of groups functioning in response to these events and concerns, sheds light on the types of records created in that society. Aboriginal record creators are to be found in all fields of human endeavour in Canada. Most fall into one of the following categories: governing bodies, voluntary associations, private businesses, and individuals or families.

Governing bodies at the local level are Indian bands or First Nations with elected or traditionally selected executives. Band governments are regulated by the *Indian Act*. Bands and band members may belong to tribal councils and other wider ranging political organizations, such as the national Assembly of First Nations.

Susan Hart has differentiated among eight overlapping types of voluntary association according to function: Political Action, Professional or Occupational Research, Economic, Religious, Service, Self-Help, and Social.[6] Among contemporary aboriginal peoples, "Political Action" groups, commonly known as "native organizations," have been the most prominent and influential type of voluntary association. By 1980, 179 major native political organizations had been created in Canada.[7] These organizations, which may represent Indians, Inuit and/or Métis people, occur at the national, provincial, tribal, and local levels. Their key concerns — during the period of this study — have included the pursuit of aboriginal rights, such as land claims and self-government; *Indian Act* revision; the protection of treaty rights; and control of aboriginal education and economic development. Lines of communication among these organizations have helped strengthen pan-aboriginal networks, and have provided avenues for discourse with various levels of government.

Aboriginal voluntary associations also fall within Hart's other functional categories. Common threads running through their programmes are education, aboriginal solidarity and cultural survival.

Based on the definition of "documentary heritage" given above, the aboriginal documentary heritage in Canada may be interpreted as being the totality of the existing documentary evidence of aboriginal historical activity, or all the surviving archival documentation of past events pertaining to aboriginal society in this country. Whereas, historically, the vast majority of records relating to native peoples was created by non-natives such as fur traders, government agents and missionaries, the recent heritage has been defined increasingly by and for aboriginal record creators.

Teresa Thompson has aptly combined total archives with the documentation approach, saying that the "concept of total archives ... can be linked directly to the premises of ... information professionals exploring the area ... (of) 'documentation strategy". She contends "that the systematic application of the total archives philosophy will become possible with the addition of documentation strategy."[8]

In archival literature, there are two innovative, active approaches to appraising documentation related to a specific subject area or society. The **documentation strategy** has been proposed by Richard Cox, Helen Samuels, Tim Ericson and others from the United States, and Hans Booms of Germany has proposed a **documentation** or **documentary plan**. In filtering each through the requirements of fonds-level acquisition, evidential value and total archives it becomes apparent that these approaches might be adjusted better to serve the situation of aboriginal archives in Canada.

While it is not the purpose of this paper to give a detailed description of the two methodologies, the following will summarize a few salient points from each that could be informative for the appraisal of aboriginal archives.

A documentation strategy is formulated to assure the adequate documentation of an ongoing activity, subject or geographical area. It is designed, promoted and, in part, implemented by a team of records creators and administrators, archivists, users and specialists, and other interested parties. The strategy depends on cooperation among the institutions and people that influence records creation, management, retention sched-

uling and accessioning.[9] Once a topic is defined, the team establishes a control centre, structures the inquiry, examines the nature of available documentation and instructs repositories on acquiring targeted material.[10]

The goals of documentation strategy are to ensure that an adequate amount of documentation exists for a given subject area, that the interconnectedness of institutions is reflected,[11] that documents containing targeted information are created and preserved and, generally, that documentation needs are analysed and resources directed to address those needs.[12] Users are significant to every stage. If a strategy team were to discover a gap in an important area, then it would take steps to have the information created.[13]

The main aim of Booms's documentary plan is to address not research needs but rather the needs of the society whose documentary heritage is under analysis. He advocates appraisal using standards of the past, saying that

> [o]nly the society from which the material originated and for whose sake it is preserved can provide archivists with the necessary tools to assess the conceptions by which they bring the past into present. ... Measuring the societal significance of past facts by analysing the value which their contemporaries attached to them should serve as the foundation for all archival efforts towards forming the documentary heritage.[14]

Booms's methodology is only concerned with archival documents. It involves forming a comprehensive view of the evolution of a segment of society, and deciding which specific events and development patterns should be reflected in select documentation. The documentary plan chooses a five- to twenty-year-long period, organizes historical events onto a grid of societal significance and arranges groups of records along a parallel hierarchy. An advisory council of experts in several fields collaborates in constructing the historical grid according to the values of the targeted society. Its final product is a model to aid the archivist in shaping the documentary heritage.

Certain aspects of the strategy and the plan may be adapted for use in analysing aboriginal record creators and appraising the aboriginal documentary heritage. The strategy's team and the plan's council might include representatives from assorted heritage and administrative fields. In analysing aboriginal society, experts such as librarians, museum curators, anthropologists, historians, journalists, government officials, lawyers and records managers, as well as aboriginal elders and story-tellers, could all be consulted. Given such a potential array of advisers, care must be taken not to overshadow the aboriginal perspective.

Booms would employ experts to compile a prototypical historical model. Archivists involved in strategy projects, on the other hand, would use the recommendations of experts, record creators and users in the acquisition and appraisal of archival materials and in the creation of non-archival materials.

A documentation strategy does not require assembling materials at a central facility.[15] This is consistent with the objective of total archives to develop local archives programmes. Documentation strategies thus encourage networking and the formulation of acquisition mandates. They may be applied at manageable levels and later coordinated with each other in broader spheres.[16] Projects at the First Nations or tribal

level could be centred in cultural-educational centres or tribal councils, for example, and these in turn could be coordinated provincially.

Although documentation strategy analyses all types of documentation, not just archives, its techniques may help to orient cooperative acquisition planning among archival institutions. It could aid archivists in identifying the aboriginal and non-aboriginal record creators whose fonds contribute to the aboriginal documentary heritage. Although Booms's perspective is that of a government archivist, his basic methodology may be extended to accommodate total archives. In the context of an aboriginal society, it could encompass the institutional records of a system of aboriginal governing bodies as well as the pertinent fonds of extra-institutional record creators.

Booms's principle of appraising archives according to the socio-political values contemporary with them is also an important notion for archivists appraising the aboriginal documentary heritage. It can help to target record creators whose fonds reflect events in the aboriginal historical grid and complement those of aboriginal institutions during a given period. Furthermore, all aboriginal repositories in a tribal or provincial area could make appraisal decisions using similar documentation models.

While both the above approaches acknowledge the subjective nature of appraisal, and while strategists attempt to increase objectivity by more effectively addressing current documentation needs, Booms offers a means to maximize objectivity by employing the values of the creating society. Whereas documentation strategies are designed for revision in order to respond to changing needs, the standards of the past are constant.

Aboriginal archives have been created by individuals, families and corporate bodies operating through oral as well as systems of communication. Although modern native organizations, businesses and First Nations tend to record their administrative and operational transactions, research findings and most official matters on paper and machine-readable media, many aboriginal documents continue to be preserved and transmitted by means of oral tradition.

Hugh Taylor compares appraisal in pre-literate and post-literate societies. He writes,

> In this age of automation, we are beginning to move into a 'post-literate' mode which ... reintroduces the immediacy of rapid interactive networking and feedback analogous to oral exchange. ... Our understanding is more holistic and planetary. ... Pre-literate communities depended, and still depend, on memory and the spoken word accompanied by gesture and action to communicate with each other. ... The emphasis on the user in ... ancient patterns of speech was evident in map making by native peoples. ... They were ephemeral and dependent on memory. ... [Quoting D.W. Moodie, he continues,] "[W]hen a map was committed to media ... detail was elaborated only where necessary. ..." [Taylor concluded] Retrieval from the automated record is likewise at its most effective when only that which is required is displayed.[17]

In another article Taylor notes, "In an oral society where the daily chatter and decision-making is without written record, the human memory preserves only that which is absolutely necessary for cultural survival."[18]

Some archivists feel they should correct imbalances in documentation by recording interviews, taking photographs and even collecting survey data.[19] In Canadian archival institutions, where most of the records documenting aboriginal peoples have been created by others, the gaps could be seen as information in themselves. Archivists who take responsibility for recording oral traditions and recollections are reshaping the documentary heritage. The creation of documents is an inventive and interpretative enterprise.[20] It involves adding significance to people and events, intentionally or unconsciously recording personal bias, and altering the constitution and quality of the body of evidence a society has left behind. The oral history interviewer literally transforms fluid voices into a fixed configuration, and produces a concrete document. A recording of an oral tradition is a contradiction in terms.

Records created spontaneously, as part of rather than as end-products of a practical activity, are more evidentially reliable than those created for research. As Lester Cappon observes, the "inherent virtue of the 'innocent document' not designed for history ... is a prime factor in the weighing of historical evidence; the document slanted for history is suspect to both the archivist and the historian."[21] If researchers or record creators perceive sufficient need for records to be created in order to facilitate their research or cultural well-being, then the records will be created as part of their practical activities. The keeper of the records should not also be their creator, but archivists may retain their objectivity in the role of technical adviser, disseminating non-judgemental information by historians on creating documentary records. Archivists may also be active in soliciting fonds which contain oral histories.

More fundamentally, the duties of archivists include service to sponsoring institutions as well as society. Aboriginal records created in the 1970s and 1980s are still largely active or semi-active, and therefore not readily available for research. Some records may never be opened to the public, but this does not detract from their evidential value nor their intrinsic value to members of the creating communities. Archivists working as records analysts may appraise active records and provide advice on retention and disposition. John Fleckner has pointed out that aboriginal communities could use their own archives to support administrative efficiency and cultural self-determination, provide accessible educational resources and afford the community greater control over outside research into itself.[23]

At present, native organizations are mainly concerned with the primary value of their records. Since the 1970s, aboriginal-governmental relationships have been increasingly litigious, and the records of aboriginal governments, organizations and families have become potential legal evidence. Aboriginal people have more reason than ever to safeguard their records in the interest of protecting the rights, privileges and identity of future generations. The lives of Indians have been excessively regulated by the federal government. Placing their records in a government archives would make them dependent on yet another non-native institution.

Contemporary aboriginal societies have living roots in their traditional juridical systems and have adopted to varying degrees the language, technology and values of Euro-Canadian society. The aboriginal world view is holistic and spiritual. Archivists

must respect the organic nature of the aboriginal heritage and the traditional procedures of record creation and selection. They must also be aware of all types of records along the pre-literate-post-literate continuum, and must heed the responsibility of record creators to respect the needs of past, present and future generations.

It is characteristic of literate Canadian culture to separate art from artifact from document, but it is a sympton of our post-literate evolution that archivists are expanding their ideas of documentary forms, and striving for total archives by networking and fostering community programmes. The role of the aboriginal archivist involves cooperating with theorists and practitioners in adjacent fields to define the total heritage of aboriginal society. In the information age, however, archivists must also make use of standards of theory and practice, not only to communicate within institutional networks, but also in the interest of applying the greatest possible degree of objectivity to their subjective tasks.

Whereas this paper has dealt with theoretical issues, appraisal decisions are often controlled by financial constraints. Nevertheless, the more archivists can base practical decisions on sound theory, the more likely that their decisions will have long-term effectiveness. It is to be hoped that aboriginal archival repositories will become vital components in the Canadian archival system, and benefit from community archives funding and educational programmes. It is also to be hoped that, when hard appraisal decisions must be made, priority will be given to acquiring organic fonds, the utmost consideration having been given to their evidential value and to their creating society. Such decisions must also give due weight to the appraisal criteria of aboriginal elders who saved the oral traditions which their societies needed to survive and understand themselves.

Notes

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1   Stéphane Mallarmé, quoted in Hugh Taylor, "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), p. 25.

2   Bureau of Canadian Archivists, Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards, *Rules for Archival Description* (Ottawa, 1990), p. D-3.

3   Terry Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives,'" *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), p. 141.

4   Ibid., pp. 141-42.

5   Hans Booms (Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhouwer, eds. and trans.), "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), p. 76.

6   Susan Hart, "The Archives of Voluntary Associations," *Association of British Columbia Archivists Newsletter* 16, no. 2 (Autumn 1990), p. 4.

7   James S. Frideres, *Native Peoples in Canada: Contemporary Conflicts*, 3rd ed. (Scarborough, 1988), p. 268.

8   Teresa Thompson, "Ecumenical Records and Documentation Strategy: Applying 'Total Archives,'" *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), p. 104.

9   Helen Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," *The American Archivist* 49, no. 2 (Spring 1986), p. 115; Larry Hackman and Joan Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process: A Model and a Case Study," *The American Archivist* 50, no. 1 (Winter 1987), p. 14.

10 Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," p. 116.

11 Ibid., p. 112.

12 Hackman & Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," p. 18.

13 Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," p. 122; Hackman & Warnow-Blewett, "The Documentation Strategy Process," p. 23.

14   Booms, "Society and the Formation," p. 104.
15   Samuels, "Who Controls the Past," p. 118.
16   Philip N. Alexander and Helen W. Samuels, "The Roots of 128: A Hypothetical Documentation Strategy," *The American Archivist* 50, no. 4 (Fall 1987), p. 519.
17   Hugh Taylor, "'My very Act and Deed': Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Affairs," *The American Archivist* 51, no. 4 (Fall 1988), pp. 457-58.
18   Hugh Taylor, "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift?" *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), p. 17.
19   For example, Gerald F. Ham, "The Archival Edge," Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds., *A Modern Archives Reader* (Washington, 1984), pp. 330-31; Derek Reimer, "Oral History and Archives: The Case in Favor," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal* 5, no. 1 (1981-82), pp. 30-33.
20   Jean Dryden, "Oral History and Archives: The Case Against," *Canadian Oral History Association Journal*, no. 1 (1981-82), p. 35.
21   Lester J. Cappon, "The Archivist as Collector," *The American Archivist* 39, no. 4 (October 1976), p. 432.
22   John A. Fleckner, *Native American Archives: An Introduction* (Chicago, 1984), pp. iii-vii.