

Acquiring and Preserving Private Records - A Debate

The first two short articles appearing below were originally published in the AABC Newsletter early in 1994. They are reprinted here for the interest of our readers, together with a rebuttal by the author who originated the exchange of views. Editor

Who is Preserving Private Records?*

In late November [1993] approximately fifty people gathered at the Vancouver City Archives to unveil the records of Yip Sang, a Chinese merchant who from his arrival in Vancouver in 1888 until his death in 1927 created a family of four wives, twenty-three children, and sixty-seven grandchildren, started at least fourteen companies, and became one of Chinatown's wealthiest entrepreneurs. He constructed two buildings to house his family and businesses, presiding over the former in the manner of a grand patriarch. The 103 boxes of material recently retrieved from the Wing Sang Co. headquarters on East Pender Street now constitute one of the Vancouver City Archives's most important collections.

What struck me about this significant acquisition is how much it seems to run against the tide of diminishing commitment by British Columbia's publicly-funded institutions to collect private records. Evidence is most forthcoming from the British Columbia Archives and Records Service (BCARS) in Victoria, where private records have been receiving less and less funding and staff time for a number of years. John Bovey asserted at the archives session of the B.C. Studies Conference in November 1990 that BCARS does collect private records. He could rightfully say the same today. Yet, what BCARS does not do any more is collect private records systematically, a lack of commitment underlined in 1993 when its Historical Records Division was eliminated as part of a general administrative re-organization. This trend represents a departure from the Canadian tradition of preserving government and private records in state-funded provincial and national archives.

One reason for this change has been the emergence since the 1970s of a more professional approach to public record-keeping. Managing the flow of government documents through their life cycle from creation to disposal or preservation has been an important innovation in record-keeping that has increased the quantity of public records to be managed and taxed the resources of publicly-funded institutions whose mandate it is to look after them. Passage of the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* has sharpened still further the focus of BCARS on public records. A similar strain on resources can be expected at the municipal level when freedom of information and privacy legislation is extended to cover local government records. Limited storage capacity and shifting priorities at UBC's Special Collections, a leader in preserving the province's industrial, labour, and literary heritage, is also diminishing that institution's capacity to acquire additional private records.

The fate of private records is also being determined, in my view, by another less easily documented but no less important change in the archives field over the last quarter-century: the professionalization of the record keepers. This emergence of archival work as a profession in its own right, independent of the profession of history with which it had been associated, can be traced through the formation of the Archives Association of British Columbia in 1974, the Association of Canadian Archivists in 1975, and the inception of UBC's Master of Archival Studies Programme in 1981. The advantages of a more theoretically grounded professional training of archivists are too obvious to require comment. In particular, professionalization has accompanied and encouraged the better and more thorough processing of systematically-generated public records. The emphasis that UBC's Archival Studies Programme places on records management reflects this link. But more professional handling of public materials has come, one might argue, at the expense of commitment by many recently-trained archivists to the goal of locating and preserving private records.

The increased priority that publicly-funded institutions have given to the management of their own records and the budgetary crises that all governments currently face suggest that the resources required to collect and manage private records are going to remain in short supply throughout the nineties. For all of us who believe that the records of lumber companies, voluntary associations, women's groups, the visual media, and local political activists, among others, can play an important role in helping future generations to define their place in British Columbia society, the task is clear: we must become more vocal in articulating the value of private records to our society, and more committed to overcoming the impediments that stand in the way of preserving such records. The VCA's success in acquiring the Yip Sang collection suggests that local archives may offer the best opportunity for preserving non-governmental records. Yet, the VCA is also British Columbia's largest municipal archives, its generous resources of staff, funding, and storage space but a dream to most local archives and museums around the province.

Historians and archivists must join together in recognizing the need for more determined initiatives if the collection and preservation of private records is to receive the level of public support they deserve. We might begin by urging that provincial archives and records legislation, promised for the coming year, define

the mandate of the British Columbia Archives and Records Service to include the collection and management of private records. Legislation should articulate such a role for BCARS in clear, forceful, and unequivocal language.

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*Reprinted from: "Viewpoint — Who is Preserving Private Records?" *AABC Newsletter* 4, no. 1 (Winter 1994), p. 3.

“Thinking Globally, Acting Locally”*

In the last issue of the *AABC Newsletter*, historian Robert McDonald expressed his concern about what he sees as “a tide of diminishing commitment by British Columbia’s publicly-funded institutions to collect private records.” He intimates that in a bygone era private papers were collected systematically in the province. McDonald goes on to suggest that the confluence of the increasingly systematic approach to the management of records, the professionalization of records keepers and increasingly scarce resources have caused public institutions to focus on the management of their own records at the expense of the acquisition of private records. McDonald calls on historians and archivists to lobby “for more determined initiatives if the collection and preservation of private records is to receive the level of public support they deserve.” He cites specifically the need to embed BCARS’ obligation to collect private records in legislation.

McDonald’s short article provides an excellent opportunity to reflect on the development of archives in British Columbia and to begin to plan for the future of the provincial archival system. It also brings to the surface some underlying tensions and concerns which have of late begun to emerge in and between the archival and historical communities. McDonald has identified the decreased activity of some of the larger provincial repositories in the area of private records acquisition as a cause for concern amongst historians. As one of our larger user groups, archivists should listen carefully to determine how best to address the historians’ concerns in a constructive manner.

While I share with McDonald a concern for the preservation of private records and applaud his call to action, I believe that he has proposed too simplistic a solution that ignores significant changes which have taken place in the archival community and in the bureaucracies within which many institutional repositories operate.

First, I would argue that despite McDonald’s complaint that BCARS no longer collects “private records systematically,” there has never been a truly systematic collection of this material in the province. Certainly a small number of publicly-funded repositories have developed areas of specialization based on geographic or thematic criteria but this does not mean that records were acquired systematically. If there were, in fact, a “golden age” in which private records were acquired systematically we would now have a more comprehensive documentary record than is