

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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“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

now the case. Important fonds such as that of Yip Sang which McDonald cites in his article would have long since been ensconced in a repository. If UBC Special Collections had been systematically acquiring records documenting the province's industrial and labour history, the holdings would, by now, occupy the entire Main Library and several other buildings on campus. It is wrong, therefore, to suggest that private records were acquired systematically. In reality only a few large publicly-funded repositories in the province collected private records and they set for themselves very broad collection mandates. Given these broad mandates systematic acquisition would have been impossible. It is more accurate to characterize past acquisition programmes as selective and largely passive.

I would most certainly agree with McDonald that there was a period in the past when these publicly-funded repositories were more active in the acquisition of private records. During that time institutional records were more or less ignored in favour of the private material. It is no longer possible to suggest a return to this period for a number of reasons.

First, there have been significant changes in the bureaucracies in which publicly-funded repositories are located. The proliferation of recorded information has caused large bureaucracies to expend increasing resources in the systematic management of the records they create, collect, and use. These new priorities have, in turn, affected archival priorities: cultural priorities, once considered paramount, have, of necessity, been supplanted by administrative priorities with respect to the management of recorded information throughout its life cycle. In addition, changes in societal attitudes are forcing public bodies to become more accountable to the citizens in whose interests they act. This increased accountability manifests itself in various provincial statutes, most recently the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act*. This legislation is predicated on the responsibility of public bodies to manage information systematically and provide efficient access to it. Consequently, it must be recognized that the management and preservation of the institution's records is and must be the primary responsibility for archives of government and publicly-funded bodies.

In addition to changes emanating from within bureaucracies, and outside pressures imposed on them, there have also been significant changes in the provincial archival community. Where fifteen or twenty years ago there were only a few large repositories with necessarily broad acquisition mandates, there are now over one hundred repositories. Granted some of these may be small operations but each has its own collection policy and it is necessary to revisit some of the older omnibus acquisition mandates to determine if they are still relevant in light of the significant increase in the number of provincial repositories.

For these reasons it is not possible nor is it even desirable to return to a bygone era. The proliferation of recorded information, new demands for accountability, decreased resources, and the expansion of the provincial archival community have made it impossible to return to a period when a few publicly-funded repositories played a major role in the collection of private papers. It is no longer possible for many large institutions to allocate resources to collect in anything but a very selective manner. Moreover, it might be suggested that these institutions have already done their fair share in the collection of private material. It should also be pointed

out that past collecting activities translate into a continuing custodial commitment, with all its attendant costs with respect to servicing and storing this material.

This is not to suggest that we should ignore private records – indeed we should not. We must, however, be realistic and marshal our limited resources for use in innovative and imaginative ways. In seeking solutions for the preservation of private material we might employ a two-part strategy, best capsulized by the environmental movement slogan “think globally, act locally.”

The answer to concerns about the fate of private records is not to be found in a call for a return to a period when a few publicly-funded repositories were primarily responsible for the collection of this material. Instead we must shift our focus away from individual repositories and towards a more holistic approach which embodies a collective or shared responsibility for the preservation of private records. This represents not a departure from the “total archives” concept as feared by McDonald but rather a natural evolution of the concept.¹ Realistically, our larger institutions have only a very limited capacity to absorb significant accumulations of private material as a result of past collecting activities and the establishment of new priorities. Therefore, we must look for opportunities to pool our collective resources in the acquisition of private records. It will be necessary to think more globally and rely on improved communications and the development of a provincial archival network.

One of the most important manifestations of the emergence of a provincial archival network is the advent of the British Columbia Archival Union List (BCAUL). Begun by the AABC in 1991 with financial support from the provincial and federal governments, this project is, perhaps, one of the most significant archival research tools developed in Canada. When completed it will provide online descriptions of all private archival records held in approximately 130 provincial institutions.

More than a research tool that will allow for the effective exploitation of the province’s archival heritage, the BCAUL will also provide a foundation for inter-institutional development. For instance, an understanding of current holdings is necessary in the development of a province-wide acquisition strategy. With access to comprehensive information about archival holdings, repositories can collectively rationalize their acquisition programmes to avoid overlapping collecting practices and also identify material which may be falling through the cracks in the provincial archival system.

Simply put it is unlikely that our larger institutions are going to have made available to them significant new resources for the preservation of private records. We must, therefore, ensure that whatever resources we have available for this purpose are used in the most judicious, effective, and efficient means possible. The preservation of private records must be viewed as the collective responsibility of the archival community as a whole not the individual responsibility of any one repository.

In addition to thinking about our responsibility for the preservation of private material in ‘global’ terms, we must seek ways to reduce the volume of records that must be cared for by publicly-funded repositories. Unless we have access to unlimited storage facilities, it is unrealistic to think it will be possible for established

archives to acquire all the documentary evidence of societal activity: the sheer volume renders the on-going collection of such material impossible.

Instead, large organizations such as labour unions, businesses, voluntary associations, school boards, and colleges must be persuaded to assume a greater financial responsibility for their own records. We should encourage these organizations to "act locally" in the preservation of their own records. This could take a number of forms including the establishment of in-house archival programmes, the development of cooperative or cost-shared arrangements with other organizations, or partnerships with existing repositories to help defray the cost of maintaining the records. Some users might argue that to encourage bodies to maintain their own records will make access to the material more difficult—either because of access restrictions imposed by the records creators or because of its inconvenient physical accessibility (when it is no longer collected by a central repository). While appreciating these concerns, there are, in fact, no real alternatives. By encouraging organizations to preserve their own records we might reduce to a manageable level the volume of private records which must be housed in central repositories.

Keeping archival material within its creating organization or at least in the geographical location in which it was created will also help to preserve certain contextual information that is invariably lost if it is 'collected' and transferred to a large central repository. Furthermore, it should be pointed out that institutional memory is increasingly being stored in electronic form. Preservation of this material onsite will become critical to the preservation of the records' context and it will become increasingly unrealistic to expect that central repositories will be able to manage electronic information in a useable form given its hardware and software dependency. The lobbying activities of historians and other user groups might most usefully be employed in helping to persuade organizations to participate in the preservation of the province's heritage either by establishing their own archives or by contributing resources to help existing repositories care for their records. The Archives Association of British Columbia also has an important role to play in the provision of infrastructural support, leadership, and educational opportunities to help foster an environment in which records creators can develop their own archives.

Finally, I cannot leave this critique of McDonald's article without making reference to his comments about professionalization. He suggests that the professionalization of records keepers has played a role in the devaluing of private records. More specifically, he has articulated some of the concerns in the community with the orientation of graduates of the MAS Programme. In commenting on the "emergence of archival work as a profession in its own right, independent of history" McDonald observed that:

"...professionalism 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 the more professional handling of public material has come...at the expense of commitment by many recently trained archivists to the goal of locating and preserving private records."

While I may be unduly sensitive about the perception of the graduates of the MAS Programme it should be pointed out that the programme has only a one-term course in records management which represents three out of sixty units required for graduation. In addition, most students entering the programme continue to have an academic background in history and many have found work in community archives and other archival settings where the historical aspects of their jobs are very important. As evidence of a continuing commitment on the part of the new professional records keepers to private records I would point out that the BCAUL project which focuses entirely on private records was conceived, developed, and executed by graduates of the MAS Programme. In addition, it has been supported by AABC executives composed largely of graduates of the MAS Programme. Suggestions that MAS graduates are too focused on institutional records to the detriment of private papers is a sweeping and entirely erroneous generalization. To really understand the evolving orientation of archivists one must understand the changing corporate cultures in those organizations in which archivists are finding employment.

That government and other publicly-funded repositories should include as part of their mandate the acquisition of private materials goes without saying. Without such materials the archival record would be impoverished. We must, however, be realistic in what is possible given the current realities. Public bodies are beginning to take seriously their obligation to properly manage institutional records. During a period of static or declining funding the amount of resources which can be allocated to the collection of private material is limited. The preservation of the institutional record is and must be their primary responsibility.

To ensure the preservation of private records we should look not to the experience of the past but rather seek innovative solutions more suited to current realities. We can begin by adopting a two-part strategy based loosely on the slogan of the environmental movement, "think globally, act locally." In an archival context the slogan suggests that we should view the acquisition of private records not as the responsibility of individual repositories but rather as the collective responsibility of the entire archival community. Secondly, records creators should be encouraged to assume responsibility for the preservation of their own records. Our success in achieving these two objectives will, in large part, determine the quality and quantity of private materials preserved for posterity.

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Notes

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1 This is not a new idea. Almost fifteen years ago Terry Cook in an article entitled "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives'," *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), suggested that we include as part of the definition of 'total archives' a notion of networked repositories so as to establish "an institutional system of archives...to ensure that the records of all significant human endeavour are preserved," pp. 141-42.