

Canadian Archives: Where We Come From and Some Things We Need for the Next Part of the Journey

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Canadian Archives in 1992. MARCEL CAYA, gen. ed., MARION BEYEA and STAN HANSON, assoc. eds. Ottawa: Canadian Council of Archives, 1992.

The eight essays in this elegant volume discuss Canada's archives and their history from the point of view of knowledgeable practitioners who helped shape the Canadian archival system. Sponsored by the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA), the book's concept, and to a large extent its execution too, emerged naturally as a result of the decision of the International Council on Archives (ICA) to hold its twelfth congress in Montreal in September 1992. In keeping with their purpose to honour archives in Canada, these essays emphasize our achievements. But they are also more than a puff of pride. Each author in his or her own way demonstrates their careful reading of recent events in Canadian archives. The result is a celebratory compilation marked by unusual candour, for the authors do not gloss over areas that are weak or problems yet to be resolved. The tone is conversational, candid talk among good friends, and the impression conveyed by the book is one of confidence in the future of Canada's archives.

First, some information about the shape of the work. It is a thoroughly professional product that appeals to the eye and feels good in the hand. The illustrations, many in full colour, have been beautifully produced. Indeed, the sixteen plates and thirty other photographs and illustrations show the true richness and diversity of the documents held in Canadian institutions. Although the book has a soft-cover, the binding withstood the distress of review and I conclude that it can take the heavy use it deserves. I missed chapter numbers and the names of the authors/collaborators in the contents. These appear on the page facing each chapter. Unfortunately, the wall-paper pattern chosen as the background was a design mistake because its dense regularity obscures the letters, making it virtually impossible to read the names. I was surprised that proofing did not catch Brymner's change of name from Douglas to David. But these are minor caveats. In all, the book is a handsome, useful volume, if in an unusual landscape (10" x 7.5") format.

The text, for the most part, is hung on the frame of our institutions and this is a logical arrangement. Following a preface and introduction by Guy Diné, 1992 Chair of the CCA, the volume begins appropriately with two essays on the public and private archives in Canada. Both were written by Brian Speirs, who gratefully acknowledges the generous assistance he received from archivists in the various types of institution covered in each chapter. "Public Archives in Canada" deals with the National Archives of Canada (NA), with the archives of the ten provinces and two territories, and with the archives of municipalities and other public bodies. The general history of the NA is particularly useful. It has a sound overview of the statutes and rules which have shaped the NA's work in records management, in acquisitions and in its newly formalized role in archival leadership. Speirs highlights the 1987 *National Archives Act*, giving it a special emphasis as the platform which will support the work of the institution into the next century. A brief historical sketch of each provincial and territorial archives provides us with the skeleton of the public archives network across Canada. By contrast to the national and provincial levels, local authority archives have consistently suffered from the lack of consistent official interest. However, change may be imminent as Freedom of Information legislation and regulations work their way down to the local level.

Speirs certainly conveys a good sense of the variety of niches public institutions occupy within their government structure. One might well not agree with the conclusion that diversity of placement encourages a healthy variety in points of view. However, the many scenarios of organization testifies to the adaptability of Canadian archives. Overall, the essay draws our attention to the lack of balance in the picture of public archives in Canada. Over double the quantity of holdings of the National Archives is spread out among many institutions whose staff and budgets total only half to one fifth that of the NA itself.

"Private Archives in Canada" covers college and university repositories (which make up the largest group), religious archives, business archives, and those archives organized around a theme. The diversity of institutions and their unique histories makes it difficult to identify features they share. Speirs gives a sense of the number and variety, but emphasizes the common thread of poverty which unites these institutions. Poverty is particularly striking in the discussion of college and university archives, which have a large percentage of holdings nationally, but only a small percentage of support. Business archives are more noted by their absence in Canada, something the author points out candidly.

Next, Marion Beyea provides a useful essay on the "Canadian Archival System," defining the totality of the concept and discussing programmes and plans in the context of the continuing influence of traditions and the imperatives of geography and population. She is clear-sighted about the ambiguities associated with the placement of archives within a cultural domain, because they are then exposed to the strain of political battles over cultural powers. Her chapter is particularly important for its overview of archival developments since the Symons Report on Canadian studies (1973), which effectively inaugurated a period of archives growth lasting at least until the late 1980s. In keeping with the tone of candour, she does not gloss over the tensions inherent in such a diverse archival system. The National Archives programme of "diffusion," seen as a notable achievement from

the national perspective, seems less so from the viewpoint of the recipients, who argue that the plan was always inadequate to the needs of the provinces for access to federal records.

The other chapters all have interest for Canadian archivists. "Records Management in Context," by Guy Diné and Ginette Noël, is particularly useful for English-speaking Canadians because of its informative coverage of records management in Quebec, a very powerful factor in the development of modern archives in that province. The extensive notes for this chapter are particularly useful. "Archival Education and Training in Canada," by Bryan Corbett, provides the context for the burst of energy and commitment to archives education in Canada. Guidelines, programmes, and the profession's plans for on-going education appear as strong statements of a mature consensus. This is by way of contrast to the earlier period, which was marked by fragmented venues for learning, various modes of apprenticeship, and the occupation of the archive disciplinary homeland by other professions and interests.

"Conservation in Canadian Archives," by Carman V. Carroll, places the problems of preservation and the development of remedial measures within a historical and institutional framework, emphasizing the projects of the CCA's Conservation Committee (recently renamed the Preservation Committee), which is moving forward and gathering strength and speed. "Out of the Ivory Tower: Public Programmes in Canadian Archives," by Gabrielle Blais, David Enns, and Don Richan, is a particularly important chapter. As with the essay on conservation, it breaks the institutional focus of the book by examining archives from the perspective of a theme and its associated programmes. While the authors are critical of the neglect of public programming in Canadian archives, arguing persuasively that more and more we will need to demonstrate our relevance to an increasingly heritage conscious society, they also point to the encouraging results of such programmes at the NA which show that archives have the potential for more popular appeal than was thought to be the case.

Michael Swift provides the conclusion to the volume in "Into the Twenty-first Century, Canadian Archivists Look Ahead and Beyond." He raises questions about the continuing relevance of archives in a society shot-through with technology, communications, and new political agendas. He predicts that the burst of fire from the front lines of the future will blow holes in our traditional walls. Inevitably, Canada's archives will move into quite a new environment, whose climate is unknown. Swift's assessment is based on the lessons of experience combined with his characteristic prescience. Even the unknown future, however, does not dampen the enthusiasm of this archives seer. Swift's evident concern for the future of archives in Canada is tempered by the innate optimism evident throughout this book. His vision is cautious but genuinely hopeful.

Whether this book offer us a truly useful "picture of the current state of archives endeavour in Canada" is a moot point. The editors and the authors acknowledge that it is impossible to do justice to the totality of Canada's archives in one volume and, at 165 pages, a slim one at that. This is indeed the case. Those who know the archival scene in Canada, or aspects of it, will miss the detail. Specialists will find much to challenge in the general treatment of complex subjects and histories. I

missed the personalities, the archivists who are the protagonists of the many plots in this story. I also noted the lack of even a brief view out beyond the fringe, a sense of archives and archival activities beyond the traditional pale of "church and state." The archives of first nations appear only briefly on page fifty-two and there is little mention of women, marginal groups, and community based organizations. Although I want and need much more information than this book provides, I recognize that it was not intended to be encyclopedic. Certainly from the point of view of readers who have no knowledge of Canada and its archives, the book is a solid and readable introduction. And I predict that as a snapshot, *Canadian Archives* is assured a place in our history.

Rather than pointing out areas that might have been covered and the weaknesses or glosses in those that are dealt with, I want to draw out some general points about Canadian archives that are clearly highlighted by this volume, either explicitly or as a sub-text. While the authors may not have set out to prepare an agenda for Canada's archives, they have done so. The importance of this volume, beyond the justified celebration of work well done, is that it clearly shows the equipment we need for the journey into the future. The implied work plan may be divided into sections: empirical knowledge, ways and means, research, and conceptual revitalization through history.

Our knowledge of ourselves as a group comes in one of three ways: through personal experience, from historical study, and from general data collected systematically about our institutions, holdings, practices and clientele. Again and again the authors revert to statistics derived from the SSHRCC consultative group report in the early 1980s and from the needs assessment surveys undertaken by the provincial archives councils in 1987. These figures were already out of date when this book was in preparation. Nevertheless, two intense surveys conducted within one decade brought unprecedented light into the gloom of ignorance about archives in Canada. Canadian archivists need more than the periodic profiles developed as the result of individual data gathering exercises. We need unambiguous statistics determined by proper empirical methods, and we need regularity in collection. Statistics are essential in-put into establishing needs, benchmarks, and best practices. However, just any numbers will not do. The section on private archives draws on information collected for this volume, presenting statistics on exhibits and displays in college and university archives. I have some questions about how these were collected and what they mean. This is just a small example that highlights a bigger issue. The important point is that we do not have and we desperately need quantifiable and regularly gathered information about our archives. We are hampered in our own institutions and in political forums because we do not have regular, accurate, verifiable, and generally accepted statistical bases. The process of regular collection must soon be worked out, probably by the CCA and its provincial/territorial partners. It is imperative that the archives community develop and maintain a detailed profile of the country's archives as the base of data for future planning, lobbying, and research.

The essays as a group echo three themes about Canadian archives. The first is the key role of the NA, as stimulator, leader, and public relations "advance man" for the archives community in Canada. The second is the increasing importance of the

CCA as a focus for change and development. Finally, each chapter shows the critical importance of money to the success of archives. While Canadian archives and archivists have vision, they do not have the ways and the means. Money would make *me* happy, I confess it! Archives in Canada are underfunded and chronically impoverished.

Ultimately, the book demonstrates the need we have for solid research on archives topics, about archives as records, as institutions, and as a socially important professional practice. Perhaps given the institutional focus of this book, themes such as research, uses of archives, and our social role have rightly been left out. However, I am not sure that we can dismiss the effort as pointless by claiming baldly that Canadian practices are essentially the same as international practices. They may or may not be. Canadian archives theory and practices could also have nuances that may be unlike any other manifestations. The truth is that we do not know. In fact, “we do not know” could be the answer to many questions about Canadian archives and their histories. This *terra incognita* needs to be identified and explored so we understand ourselves in the context of the past and the future.

Guy Dinel offers this volume as partial redress to the neglect of one area of archives research, that of Canadian archives history. He is right in pointing to inconsistency in our historical frame of mind. The gap is surely wide between our long history and our brief explorations of it. Partial knowledge of archives history is surprising in a profession sensitive to the contingencies of history elsewhere. This volume does contribute to our understanding of Canada’s archives development, particularly because its authors have been participants in the events of our recent past. It only scratches the surface, as the authors themselves acknowledge. Neither the variety of archives and their rich programmes and practices, nor their history can possibly be dealt with in one volume. *Canadian Archives* delivers the broad picture it promises to do. The panorama shot is one taken from a long distance. There are no close up views. I, for one, hope that I will not have to wait until the ICA meets in Canada again before we get on with the exciting job of analyzing ourselves and our past. Both are critical input to equip us best for the journey into the future.