Beyond Intrinsic Value Towards the Development of Acquisition Strategies in the Private Sector: the Experience of the Manuscript Division, National Archives of Canada

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Introduction

The term *intrinsic value* has been used to refer to "permanently valuable records that have qualities and characteristics that make the records in their original physical form the only archivally acceptable form of preservation." These qualities and characteristics have been identified as physical or intellectual— "the physical base of the record ... or the information contained in the record."[1] While records have "functional, evidential, and informational properties," it is the evidential and informational "or secondary, values of records, as distinguished from primary values for the originating agency"[2] that especially interest the archivist.

No matter how intrinsic value is defined, archival repositories will have to focus less on the preservation of the original, physical form of a permanently valuable record and more on "the conceptual context of its creation."[3] Indeed, the notion of an original physical form diminishes with the proliferation of records in electronic format. Information contained in the record must be related to clearly articulated acquisition mandates, policies, and procedures. Archival repositories that acquire private sector archival documents will have to choose fonds based on their institutional acquisition mandates.

A major factor driving archival repositories to develop precise guidelines, policies, or acquisition strategies for private sector archival records is the economic necessity to accomplish more with less financial, human, and material resources. The abundance of resources in some repositories in the 1970s gave way in the 1980s and more especially the 1990s to fewer resources, as fiscally restrained governments found themselves with less and less money to fund cultural institutions. The National Archives of Canada began to experience resource reductions in the 1980s—including, periodically, a lack of space to house new acquisitions. In the 1990s, successive federal governments have given new meaning to the term restraint, with severe pressure on the resource base of the National Archives of Canada expected until the end of the decade. Annual budgetary exercises in resource allocation as depicted in Part III of the Estimates, "The Expenditure Plan of the National Archives of Canada," have taken their toll on the acquisition of private sector papers, as fewer dollars are spread among competing activities. To place private sector acquisition within the context of the programme of the National Archives, one need only look at the Operational Plan Framework, which identifies the basic activity structure of the Archives. One of the four major activities of this framework is *Holdings Development and Management*. Within this activity there are several *subactivities*, including that of acquisition. This subactivity is further subdivided into government records, private records, and ministerial records.

The development of acquisition strategies and mandates is driven not only by economic pressures but also by the development of networks in the archival community, which permit the exchange of information about possible acquisitions among archivists throughout the country. Increasingly, in the 1990s archivists communicate by phone, fax, and electronic mail to advise colleagues about the existence of private fonds that might logically be placed in one repository as opposed to another: archival repositories do not want to acquire private archival fonds that take up valuable shelf space and will require processing and conservation, if those fonds do not serve the research needs of their clientele and do not fit with their acquisition mandates. Interinstitutional cooperation in the acquisition of private fonds is encouraged by economic necessity and an increasingly effective network of professional archivists. A growing atmosphere of archival cooperation is also accompanied by a debate in the archival profession about the acquisition of private fonds. In question is whether major repositories such as the provincial and national archives should acquire private fonds, or whether these fonds should be acquired by repositories in the regions where they were created.

To rationalize and to place the acquisition function, public and private, within the larger mission of the repository, the National Archives of Canada has developed several documents that define, limit, and to a certain extent circumscribe the acquisition function. Among these documents are: the Acquisition Policy of 1988, the "Acquisition Strategy for Private Fonds," later becoming the "Private Sector Acquisition Strategy: Application" (March 1994), and the development of appraisal/selection criteria for specific private fonds. I shall place my comments about these documents within the mandate of the Manuscript Division of the National Archives, which acquires nationally significant textual and electronic records from the private sector, as well as ministerial records, pre-Confederation public records from the French and British colonial periods, and copies of documents about Canada from foreign repositories.

The Manuscript Division

The Manuscript Division was formally established in 1907 with a mandate to collect "documents on colonial history and manuscripts on other periods of our history."[4] From about 1950, a greater emphasis was placed in the division on the acquisition of private papers in the post-Confederation period. Most of this acquisition focused on political and military history. If family papers were acquired, for example, with the papers of a notable politician, they were retained but accorded scant attention in the arrangement and description processes that follow acquisition. The emphasis on political and military history resulted in the acquisition of many core fonds, notably the papers of most of the prime ministers.

The decade of the 1960s brought important historiographical changes to Canada. The new demand by scholars for documentation on Canadian social, labour, ethnic, and gender history was reflected in a broadened acquisition mandate in the division. In 1968, the division developed the Systematic National Acquisition Programme to acquire archival fonds in a wide variety of areas of Canadian endeavour. Where once the acquisition of private fonds had been negotiated primarily by the Dominion Archivist, the Systematic National Acquisition Programme put this activity under the direction of the division. Historical knowledge of a specialized nature and long experience in acquisition matters were the major ingredients in a formula that placed the working level archivist in the position of making most acquisition decisions. During the 1970s, the division created new archival portfolios for social, cultural, economic, and scientific archives to complement the traditional political and military acquisition portfolios. Archival documents relating to aspects of Canadian life that had been acquired previously only accidentally, in the papers of more traditional acquisition targets, were now actively sought, including archival fonds documenting the labour movement, business, multicultural groups, women's history, the performing arts, literature, fine arts, sports, medicine, science, and legal history, as well as less typical Canadian experiences such as counterculture movements. By the early 1980s, some major and unique fonds rich in research value and embracing several themes or subjects were acquired, such as the papers of Marshall McLuhan, communications scholar, philosopher, author, and professor. Controversial acquisitions included the acquisition of two hundred metres of papers of the defunct law firm, Gravel et associés, and with it the problems associated with solicitor-client privilege.

In both the private and public sectors of acquisition, archivists acquired massive amounts of archival records. In the private sector, little effort was made to discriminate between several fonds of similar research value: if all seemed to have national significance all were acquired. As a result, the division took in more linear metres of archival records in the 1970s than it had during all of its previous existence. Moreover, the term *national significance* often meant national in scope only (not necessarily in significance). Thus, many organizations that were national in scope made long-term agreements with the division to preserve successive accruals of their corporate records. Of the nearly five hundred fonds of post-confederation societies and associations acquired by the division, the vast majority of them were acquired after 1969. With no common appraisal criteria to guide the archivist in selecting archival material of lasting historical value, the division acquired some corporate records of dubious research value (being only administrative in content and reflecting the internal organization of the association). The acquisition activity of the 1970s and early 1980s in both the private and the public sectors was brought under some control during the latter part of the 1980s with the introduction of changes to the way the National Archives managed its operations.

While the *National Archives Act* of 1987 formalized the commitment of the National Archives to the acquisition of both private and public, archival, nationally significant fonds, it clearly placed the acquisition function within the context of a larger mission. That mission included the mandate to acquire, preserve, and make accessible records of national significance, from the public (federal) as well as private sectors, including ministerial records, as well as a mandate to help departments and agencies of the federal government in the management of their information holdings, and to support the Canadian archival community. A major difference between the acquisition of the private and the public record, however, is that the National Archives has exclusive jurisdiction over federal records, retaining the official record documenting the role of the federal government in Canadian society and scheduling for destruction those records that have no long-term historical significance. By contrast, the National Archives shares responsibility for the acquisition of private archival records with other archival repositories; it must first target records to acquire and then negotiate successfully with the owner or creator of the private record. Therefore, acquisition planning is critical to the success of acquisition programmes of private papers.

Acquisition Policy

In 1988, the National Archives of Canada adopted an acquisition policy that recognized the role of other archival institutions in Canada in the acquisition of nationally significant private fonds. The policy provided a generalized definition of the term *national significance* and excluded records of a purely provincial or local interest, which should be housed in appropriate repositories other than the National Archives. Moreover, it applied the concept of *total archives*, defining it as the acquisition of selected public and private records of national significance in all media. The policy also stated that the content of new types of records was more important than their medium, thereby providing a focus to the meaning of intrinsic value.

The acquisition policy of 1988 signalled the beginning of a shift away from the influence of the professional judgement of the individual specialist archivist towards an institutional perspective on the acquisition of private archival fonds. As the National Archives of Canada does not have unlimited space to house its holdings, it must pick and choose, from among nationally significant fonds, those which will be preserved permanently in its care. There is also the necessity to work with other archival repositories to determine how nationally significant private archival fonds will be preserved, and by which repository.

Private Sector Acquisition Strategy for Private Fonds

To provide substance to the acquisition policy, a private sector acquisition strategy was drafted to cope with an "age of superabundant documentation."[5] Its primary goal is to locate records creators in the private sector "which commonly produce records of high archival value in relation...to the meaning of national significance."[6] While recognizing a universe that it describes as "infinite and undefinable,"[7] the strategy attempts, nevertheless, to define broad elements of Canadian society that could be documented by the private sector. Examples include:

the natural-physical, social, cultural, political, economic, and scientific development of Canada as a country;

the evolution of a sense of Canadian national identity (French-English relations);

Canadian-American relations;

native-white relations; multiculturalism;

issues, events and experiences typical or representative of life in Canada (rituals/rites of passage, *la vie quotidienne* shared by Canadians and enduring over time);

Canadian society as it is represented and defined in all its integral parts (regionality);

national and international images of Canada, its land and its people;

the interaction between the Canadian federal government and civil society;

the development and maintenance of national standards (human rights, health care, justice, etc.);

the sphere of national politics (later amended to read national public life, including politics);

the Canadian contribution to world development and international affairs; and

national treasures.[8]

In addition to seeking records creators, the private sector acquisition strategy redefines or more fully defines the term *private record.* The concept has been divided into two types for purposes of development of the strategy: records of public life and records of civil society. Records of public life are "created as a direct result of governmental activities, by individuals or organizations participating in those activities, be they legislative, judicial, or executive in nature, but which are not records of government institutions or ministerial records." They include "records of colonial administrations, predecessor governments, politicians, public servants, and other record creators prominent in Canadian public life." On the other hand, records of civil society reflect "individuals and organizations that have made contributions of national significance to Canadian civil society in areas of social, cultural, economic, or scientific development."[9]

The holdings of the Manuscript Division include a number of examples of private sector fonds containing or consisting of private records relating to public life, that is, which either supplement or complement the public record. Two might be cited here. The papers of Elsie Gregory MacGill, Canada's first female aeronautical engineer, contain records relating to her role as a member of the Royal Commission on the Status of Women in Canada, including an annotated set of the detailed minutes of the meetings of the commissioners over the period of its existence, 1967-1970. A copy of these minutes is not found in the records of the royal commission, since the commissioners unanimously decided to destroy them. The existence of the set of minutes in MacGill's papers is an accident—a fortuitous one for researchers studying the deliberations of the commissioners. The division also acquired the papers of Gordon Robertson for the period 1930-1980. Robertson has had a long career in the senior public service, from being an advisor to Mackenzie King in the 1940s to his role as Clerk of the Privy Council, 1963-1975, and Secretary to the Cabinet for Federal-Provincial Relations, 1975-1979. In addition to documenting the constitutional process and federal-provincial relations, the Robertson fonds complements those of three prime ministers, as well as official records of the Privy Council Office and other federal agencies. The information in his diary illustrates Robertson's approach to his role and provides information about the federal government not available in public sources. This multi-media fonds provides a record of Robertson's perception of the role of a senior public servant, his adaptation to changes in government, his interest in organization and administration, and his expertise in legal and constitutional matters.

Because of the length of time required to create an overall departmental acquisition strategy for private fonds, a number of more specific strategies have been developed to locate records creators in specific areas of Canadian public life. Not surprisingly, acquisition strategies for private sector fonds have been developed, to some extent, for the most traditional acquisition portfolios: military and political archives. For Military Archives, archivists engaged in the acquisition of private military archival records do so within the following framework:

> the records of **Government**, that is, the predecessors of present day government: (British War Office and Admiralty, the French Archives de la guerre);
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> the **Operational Unit**: records of regiments, squadrons or ships - documenting procedures and tasks;
>
> the **Individual**: private records of the individual soldier; and
>
> the **Associated Infrastructure**: records of defence industries, veterans and peace groups, etc. This includes documents concerning the activities and organization of the Canadian Army, Royal Canadian Navy, and the Royal Canadian Air Force, and particularly the day-to-day activities of soldiers, sailors and air force personnel.[10]

An acquisition strategy to document the Canadian political and parliamentary process, including the Privy Council and cabinet, is in two parts. First, the division seeks to document the political process through the archival records of prime ministers (personal and political), leaders of the major political parties, senior cabinet ministers (personal and political), and major political parties. Second, to be acquired as resources allow, and taking into account other archival institutions' interest in acquiring them, are the archival records created by junior cabinet ministers (personal and political), spokespersons for the opposition parties, senators and members of parliament, and other political parties. In all cases, appraisal criteria are to be applied to the acquisition of specific fonds to ensure that records of lasting historical significance are retained.

Appraisal or Selection Criteria

Appraisal criteria are used to determine whether or not a specific fonds merits acquisition. They also serve to identify portions of a potential fonds that do not have archival value. Appraisal criteria include the following steps and elements:

- a content analysis of the papers.

- provenance/theme: do the records fall within the acquisition mandate of the division? Might they more appropriately be housed elsewhere? Consultation with other archival repositories may be helpful.

- the physical condition of the records: is the material legible, and in the case of machine-readable records, is there documentation? Does the material require extensive conservation treatment?

- their informational, evidential, and legal values, authenticity, organization, comprehensiveness, age, rarity and uniqueness, and, most importantly, their complementarity with existing fonds.

- the degree to which better sources might become available to researchers, and whether the fonds have the potential to reach a wide variety of researchers.

- potential access restrictions arising from such issues as donor wishes, sensitive personal information, the possible existence of stray cabinet documents and confidential or secret information related to the operation of the federal government of Canada. Will the records have to be closed for a lengthy period of time?

In contrast with earlier decades, in the 1990s archivists in the Manuscript Division formally justify the acquisition of all fonds. Within the framework of the departmental acquisition policy and the developing acquisition strategies for private sector fonds, the archivist identifies those appraisal criteria that most appropriately support the acquisition of a particular fonds. The resulting acquisition reports, prepared by the archivists, provide a very rich source of information and analysis of the holdings of the division over the last five years. They clearly indicate that the vast majority of the fonds recommended for acquisition are accepted by the division. A study of them would undoubtedly demonstrate that fonds of high quality are being acquired because of the strict adherence to appraisal criteria.

Conclusion

The concept of intrinsic value in the private sector appears to be evolving, taking into account the need to identify fonds of high archival value in relation to the mandate of a given archival repository. The Private Sector Acquisition Strategy for Private Fonds identifies only one type of records creator that can be construed as being based on intrinsic value as it applies to the original physical form of documents: national treasures.

The development of an acquisition strategy for private fonds must become a strategy of cooperation among the Canadian repositories that acquire private fonds. The goal should be to document Canadian reality: "the preservation of a comprehensive collection of documentation relating to Canada's development."[11] Archival repositories, including the National Archives, must now seek to acquire historical documentation selectively in a period where the record is abundant but the space, acquisition budgets, and personnel are not. Making wise choices is imperative. The choice of what to acquire is the immediate concern not only of the working archivist but also of the manager, who must ask for more space and who must be accountable for the use of all resources—human, financial, and material. Quality as opposed to quantity is certainly the object of acquisition policy in the 1990s.

Notes

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1 "Intrinsic Value in Archival Materials," in Maygene F. Daniels and Timothy Walch, eds. *A Modern Archives Reader: Basic Readings on Archival Theory and Practice* (Washington, 1984), p. 92.

2 Maynard J. Brichford, "Archives & Manuscripts: Appraisal & Accessioning," *Basic Manual Series* (Chicago, 1977), p. 4.

3 Terry Cook, "Documentation Strategy," in *Archivaria* 34 (Summer 1992), p. 183.

4 Grace Hyam and Jean-Marie LeBlanc, *General Guide Series 1983: Manuscript Division*, p. 1.

5 David Brown, Richard Brown, and Peter Robertson, "Acquisition Strategy Research Plan," (31 October 1990), p. 1.

6 Charles MacKinnon et al., "Private Sector Acquisition Strategy," (February 1993), p. 2.

7 Ibid., p. 2.

8 Ibid., p. 6.

9 National Archives of Canada, "Private Sector Acquisition Strategy: Application," (March 1994), p. 4.

10 Timothy Dubé of the State and Military Archives Programme in the Manuscript Division furnished the framework for an acquisition strategy for military archives in the division.

11 Ibid., p. 9.