

## ***The MAS and After: Transubstantiating Theory and Practice into an Archival Culture***

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### ***Résumé***

Une Maîtrise en études archivistiques produit-elle des théoriciens sans connaissances pratiques? Pour répondre à cette question, l'auteur explore sa propre démarche de diplômé en études archivistiques et son expérience d'archiviste. Il soutient que son expérience transcende l'acquisition d'un savoir théorique ou pratique. Pareille dichotomie n'existe pas. L'ensemble du processus s'avère plutôt une initiation à la culture archivistique. L'effort théorique et l'exercice de la pratique outrepassent les idées reçues, les faits, ou les méthodes; elles constituent davantage des rituels et des épreuves initiatiques sur la route de la maturité archivistique. Le développement de cette identité, conjointement avec les théories, les pratiques, et les grands noms de la culture archivistique soutiennent les diplômés durant leurs carrières professionnelles.

### ***Abstract***

Does the Master of Archival Studies (MAS) Programme produce archival graduates who are all theory and no practice? To deal with this charge, the author explores his own history as an MAS graduate and archival practitioner. He contends that the MAS experience transcended merely acquiring theoretical or practical knowledge and that, therefore, the dichotomy does not really apply. The whole process served as a kind of initiation into an archival culture. The graduate student's theorizing and practicing go beyond learning ideas, facts, or methods; they are rituals and ordeals on the road to archival adulthood. The development of this identity with the theories, practices, and personalities of archival culture sustains graduates as they live out their careers in the larger world.

Ostensibly, my task in this article is to analyze and judge whether my years as a Master of Archival Science graduate student at the University of British Columbia provided the correct dosages of the theoretical and the practical in preparation for my archival career. My journey into the subject, however, followed a circuitous route. I first presented these ideas as part of an Association of Canadian Archivists Conference session entitled "Losing Your Religion." At the time, of course, I took this to be an open invitation to evoke the tortured experiences of my Calvinist upbringing. As it turned out, there seemed to be much more to the link between professional education and religion than merely an excuse for the shameful self-indulgence of a lapsed Dutch Calvinist. Education and religion have, historically, nurtured one another and, although educational institutions have been thoroughly secularized, a kind of religious culture still pervades the university. Thinking along these lines, I began to see that my MAS education was a kind of quasi-religious initiation into an archival culture and, at the same time, a process of revealing and defining archival culture as a personal identity. Placed within this larger context, the trade-offs between theory and practice as a problem of professional archival education are diminished considerably. Although my understanding of anthropology does not rise much beyond the level of *Star Trek*, the following is a personal attempt to demonstrate how this works.

Describing this process of archival acculturation and how it affected me as a student and an archivist requires something more than simple linear reasoning. I think we have witnessed an awful lot of scholarly, rational hyper-ventilation over the role of theory and practice in archival education already. What I present to you is a kind of personal narrative/myth of my own experiences with the usual explanatory glosses scribbled in the margins.

Before we engage, I think it is only fair to lay out some of the baggage I carried with me throughout my archival education and subsequent entry into archival practice. By the time I applied to the MAS programme in 1983, my religion and education had fostered a natural bent (some would say warp) towards concepts, ideas, and theory rather than practice. I had received a master's degree in European history from the University of Western Ontario in 1982 and was moving quite aimlessly through a series of research contracts in Winnipeg, filling in the gaps with university film studies and German language courses. The research projects involved extensive forays into government and university archives, and I became fascinated with the whole concept of archives and archival work. I even read Muller, Feith, and Fruin's manual on archives. Instead of the deathly administrative banality one might expect from a manual, I found a professional passion bordering on missionary zeal. Looking back at it, I think I was excited about an occupation that integrated theory, concepts, and principles so closely with material practice.

At the time, the MAS programme was the only graduate level archival education programme in Canada, and had been in operation for only three years. The programme was still in the early stages of its development in the content and structure of its courses. Beyond Jenkinson, Schellenberg, and the Society of American Archivists basic manuals series, there was little in the way of professional English-language literature about the concept and work of archives. Every archival course, research paper, and project we took on seemed to enter uncharted territory;

although he helped us read the lay of the land, Chair Terry Eastwood could not always point out a clear path to follow. This is not a criticism; on the contrary. For me at least, this enhanced the value of the programme, but I shall explain this further later.

In such circumstances, there is a constant tendency to focus on theoretical issues rather than practical problems because in order to do theory, one must address fundamental questions: What is the nature of archives? What is the value of archives? What is the historical role of archives and archivists? I do not think I am going out on a limb by suggesting that, in contrast to other professional or academic fields, particularly librarianship or history, these foundational issues play an inordinately large role in archival education because: (1) there is not an established consensus about how they are dealt with “in the field;” (2) there is not the critical mass of professional colleagues out there to hold this consensus; and (3) there has been no dedicated, graduate-level programme of professional education of long-enough standing to hand down this consensus from generation to generation as a kind of genetic imprint on new recruits. As a result, students in the MAS programme did not have the luxury to assume a solid foundation from which to dive confidently into learning techniques and procedures, that is, the “craft” of archives.

There are some who would say that, no matter what the circumstances, so much emphasis on the conceptual grounding in graduate archival studies is simply elevated navel-gazing.<sup>1</sup> To be sure, the self-conscious quest for identity often leads out of the main current and into the backwater eddies. As identity-starved Canadians, we should be able to recognize the dangers immediately. The definitions of archives as “not books” and archivists as “not historians” do seem to resonate with the same downright cocky assertiveness of Canadians defining themselves as Americans—NOT. But I think it is fair comment to say that post-Meech, post-Charlottetown, and soon, post-referendum Canada can and probably should carry on without a grand Canada clause setting out the definitive, positive statement of Canadian nationalism: for the most part, the “stuff” of our economic, political, or cultural lives is not really affected by it.

Can the same be said about doing archives and learning how to do archives? All I can say is that, as a student, what actually constitutes the “stuff” of archives work was by no means a foregone conclusion. Anyone wading into archives for the first time, as a researcher, staff member, or administrator, would confirm this. So it is clear that, if one is to learn how to do archives, the archival stuff has to be defined in some way or another.

It would seem, then, that, as a graduate student in a new professional programme, I was consigned to a kind of unresolvable constitutional purgatory largely detached from the real world. If I had read no further in my first few weeks of course work than the official definitions of archives (“records, in any media form, created, received, and used by agencies or persons in the course of their official activity ... ”), this would have been an apt description. Such definitions provided neither inspiration nor direction. But soon it became clear that the real “stuff” of archives is buried somewhere in what were called the “principles” governing archival work: the principles of provenance and, in a more roundabout way, *respect des fonds*. Every major archival manual or text, when discussing these

principles, waxed eloquent, mystical, and, in the case of Schellenberg, incoherent about “organic wholes,” the impartiality of archival evidence, the glorious history of their discovery in the nineteenth century, and their moral sanctity as the essential law of archival practice.

This was not bloodless theory anymore; this was beginning to take on the characteristics of a credo, a cultic chant. By the time I got into my thesis research—which involved, among other things, an epic journey into the archival mind of Hans Booms—the religious/cultural scale of the archival *weltanschauung* based on the concept of provenance became manifest. It was an historical expression of the archivist’s connectedness with “The Record,” not through system or construct, but through intuition and perception. In fact, the idea of archives-as-provenance was and is a kind of anti-theory. It is much like a tenet of systematic theology, which simply attempts to reveal something that, in the end, can only be experienced: the way to God.

So for the MAS student of 1984, the conceptual field of endeavour seemed vast, wild, and relatively unexplored. As I said before, the expedition guides had not really taken this route either, and this, I submit, was an advantage. No attempt was made to conform our thinking towards an established orthodoxy of terminology, system, or technique. Working with the concept of provenance as the moral principle of archival enterprise, and with no one predominant, internally consistent theory of archives, no one wellspring of scholarly authority to intimidate us into submission, there was a great deal of potential for creative theorizing. There was a strong commitment to the idea of archives as something inextricably linked to its origins, but the specific theoretical and practical applications worked out by Jenkinson and Schellenberg, and within various institutional settings, were always subject to intense critical analysis.

We did a lot of this theorizing, and it was pretty darn interesting, if at times frustrating and confusing. Let’s face it, the very concept of archives is full of tensions, some would say paradoxes, resulting from pairings that are conceptually inseparable and incompatible at the same time. Take for instance original use/archival use, the whole/the parts, context/content, permanence/organicism, preservation/access. Yet it is precisely the challenge of somehow reconciling or controlling the energy generated by these tensions that elicits creative theorizing.

Having already described the archival enterprise based on the principle of provenance as anti-theoretical, I have perhaps set up the ultimate paradox: theorizing about anti-theory. To get myself out of this quagmire, perhaps I should merely suggest that there is a difference between learning archival theory and theorizing about archives. The objective of learning theory is to acquire a pre-cast analytical system, and perhaps to apply it; that of theorizing, simply to practice the art of analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing concepts and ideas, without necessarily constructing some grand theory. Given the irrationalities and tension inherent in the modern concept of archives, graduate school theorizing about archives was more ritual than catechism. These two years of theoretical exploration, away from the pressures of a working archives, in fact forged a strong link with archival practice. This activity imitated and encouraged the thinking and rethinking of archival principles and policies, the collecting and discarding of archival ideas, the critical evaluation of archival concepts and models that is so much a feature of daily archival work.

From this perspective, activities directly involving the practice of archives serve a similar function to those involving conceptualizing and theorizing. In an anthropological sense, it is a rite of passage that nurtures the spirit and confidence of the archival recruit and affirms community acceptance in preparation for professional adulthood. Again, it was not and cannot be simply a process of acquiring knowledge of archival techniques and procedures, although this may be a by-product.

The MAS programme offered plenty of opportunities to complete technical projects and perform practical archival work in all its courses, most notably automation and archives, conservation, records management, and many of the management components of the core archives course. However, the practicum was the course specifically designed to baptize students in the fire of front-line archival practice. The best way to express what a practicum means to an archival student is to relate what actually happened.

I served my practicum at what was then still called the Public Archives of Canada, Federal Archives Division. Besides conducting a seemingly futile search for an apartment in Ottawa on a short-term summer lease, my most immediate and persistent challenge as a naive student was to adjust to the formidable government office environment. Some of the most bewildering features of this environment were the hierarchies of authority, the security checks, the work schedules, the corridors, the typing pool, the forms, the personnel appraisals, and, just as important, the office politics, informal power structures, the unspoken expectations. This was by no means always a pleasant experience, but it was at least an effective lesson in adaptation and survival.

My attitude toward my assigned archival colleagues at FED constituted a mixture of awe and intimidation. I was studying to be an archivist—these people actually *were* archivists: they were responsible for building the archival record, they handled them, got to know them intimately, could call themselves archivists at cocktail parties, and, in the end, even got paid for it. I cannot speak for them, but at the time, I suspected they regarded me as a kind of snotty-nosed novice with a little knowledge who needed to be taught a lesson about *real* archives.

I could not decide whether my assigned task was meant to be a cruel test or a humble offering laid at the feet of my superior professional training. I was to help develop a strategy for appraising a very large quantity of relatively recent records of the far-flung Department of Regional Economic Expansion, dissolved in 1980. After a few weeks of analyzing the history, functions, and structure of the department's programmes and a number of visits to the successor records management units, I pronounced myself ready to start looking at some of the actual records. I noticed that most of the accession descriptions for the departmental records carried little Ws and Es and Vs at the end of their identification numbers. It was explained to me, quite cheerfully, that these letters stood for Winnipeg, Edmonton, and Vancouver, the locations of the regional PAC record centres—the records they described were not in Ottawa at all, but scattered across the face of the country!

At first I thought, "Wow, these guys are really good. They do not even have to look at the records to appraise them. Talk about the triumph of theory over practice!" This view was revised quite quickly when I witnessed the look of terror on the faces of the section when they realized I was not going to finish this project for

them. Off-loading this massive appraisal problem on me was not an act of hazing or of malice; it was an act of simple, paralyzing desperation. They may have thought that I had picked up what they did not have the time to look for themselves: the ultimate, grand system for identifying records of archival value that does not involve opening the boxes. (Recent literature on the National Archives acquisition initiatives suggests they may still be searching for the elusive, hands-off appraisal system).

I did learn some very practical “craft” skills, though, such as: finding and synthesizing archival information for written reference inquiries; being careful and consistent about details when writing administrative histories and file-level descriptions; the workings of KWIC and KWOC indexes; the intricacies of constructing and revising a PAC record group inventory; that if you are over six feet tall, you should wear a helmet around the north-west corner of the seventh floor stack area. But it is perhaps stating the obvious that many of the particular techniques and procedures simply did not apply directly to other archival settings. The National Archives of Canada is a world unto itself; most other institutions do not come close to the scale of its mandate and operation. You do not have to do a systematic survey of archival institutions in Canada to demonstrate that jumping from one to another would require a significant amount of practical retraining. The rationale behind certain policies and procedures is certainly useful and applicable to many institutional settings, but you do not actually have to perform these procedures to learn them. One could go only so far as to say that the practicum provided some examples of the kinds of processes and materials only talked about in the classroom. For example, I still regularly turn to the NAC inventories (*RAD*less and all) as good examples of archival finding aids.

In the end, the most important feature of the practicum was simply its experience. Sure, this can be used practically and profitably as “work experience” in the employment sense. It makes a nice first entry on your resumé and, depending on how much damage you inflicted on the staff and records, should yield a good reference. By the term “experience” I mean something more intangible, something more in line with what hockey commentators look for from veterans, something that is absorbed into the character emotionally and psychologically, and eventually produces the confidence and heart (and elbows) of a Gordie Howe, along with the respect of his colleagues.

Most of this experience you will pick up later, of course, but the experience of the practicum, like any initiation rite, is a necessary transition stage worked out in the context of a play or simulation. Without this kind of setting, the shock and pressure of the first job could lead the recruit off the road and into the ditch very quickly. The practicum forces the initiate to face all the familiar anxieties: Do I really want to do this? Can I cut the mustard? Do I belong here? However, an initiation rite also involves the participation of the community, for it is a visible and graphic demonstration of incorporation into a peer group and a commitment leading to full membership in the professional community. In my case, in spite of all the difficulties, mistakes, and pressures, I can say that the practicum provided all of these things.

I hesitate to wade into a discussion of the thesis component. I am at a loss to find a place for it in the process of archival acculturation I have described above. In all

other disciplines, the thesis is a real test of how the recruit uses professional skills of research, analysis, and writing to complete a disciplinary project. In history, for example, students must develop methodology, gather and organize evidence, and come up with an original and convincing interpretation on a defined historical subject. Writing a graduate history thesis resembles the process of creating a unique historical work. When the students become professional or academic historians, this is what they will do and in such a way expand historical knowledge. MAS graduate students use the same skills and methods for completing a thesis; the difference is that the process of completing major analytical study on an archival subject does not resemble anything the graduate will actually do as a practicing archivist, e.g., acquiring, appraising, arranging, describing, managing, and developing archives and archival institutions.

On the grounds of basic graduate school pedagogy, therefore, the MAS thesis does not fulfil the traditional role as essentially a practical disciplinary exercise. I have heard the rationale that, since practicing archivists do not have the time to undertake analytical or theoretical studies on archives, MAS theses serve a crucial function in expanding the knowledge-base of the archival profession. This argument only makes the concept of the MAS thesis as an educational process seem even more absurd, for two obvious reasons: (1) to expect such things from inexperienced archival students is unrealistic, unfair, and paralyzing; and (2) any profession that relies on its second-year recruits to advance its literature is in trouble. I am not saying that MAS students are incapable of producing ground-breaking works of archival enquiry, but when this happens, as with all other graduate thesis programmes in the arts or the sciences, it is a bonus, not a requirement.

I suppose that, on another level the thesis has assumed an important role in the culture of archival education. The whole angst-ridden ordeal associated with completing the MAS thesis has attained almost mythic status. Working archivists discuss the latest figures of uncompleted theses in hushed tones; first-year students exchange stories of ancient graduates' battles with the fierce beast; advisors ensure that thesis success remains sufficiently elusive and, at the same, time, attempt to crutch the faltering by encouragement, guilt, and appeals to professional pride. In my case, writing a thesis revealed a great deal about myself and my commitment to archives. Maybe it is a kind of vision-quest: a personal, lonely, unrepeatable, meditative ordeal that, when completed, will form the spiritual foundation for later professional life. Even if it served something of this function for me and a few other MAS graduates, I am certain that most other students would have benefitted much more from a whole range of alternative exercises and projects. I understand that the thesis is no longer a compulsory element of the MAS programme. As long as the alternative projects are handled as rigorously and imaginatively as the thesis, I believe this is a necessary and positive change in the MAS curriculum.

Now, with all this preoccupation with the past, I realize I have left little room for the second half of my task here: did my archival graduate education, as I have described it, actually prove useful or beneficial in the early stages of my archival career? I suppose that, from the way I have attempted to portray my education as an initiation into archival culture, I hope the answer would be obvious. Yes, I think I had the advantage of theoretical and practical knowledge about archives at the

start, but certainly the knowledge and expertise of the many leading archivists who do not have graduate archival training is not somehow insufficient or incomplete just because they learned it through other means: reading, conferences, collegial discussion, and work experience. The real value of an academic archival programme has been summed up nicely by Tom Nesmith: “the student’s task is not to learn to be an archivist, once and for all time, but to learn how to continue becoming one.”<sup>2</sup> Archives school forms the basis of commitment, confidence, and, most importantly, overall vision that is so necessary for this process of “archivist-becoming.”

What many students hear from working archivists during their studies and shortly after entering the workforce, goes something like this: “All those principles and ideals you have now fall by the wayside pretty quickly when you have to deal with the problems of real archival work.” I think such sentiments, when expressed, are well-intentioned—the kind of “tough love” statement your parents throw at you to prepare you for the shock of post-college life. Ironically, it is precisely those principles and ideals, incorporated into the very essence of one’s professional identity by two years of archival study, that stay with you for the rest of your career. I have worked as a line archivist and as a programme director in both government and private institutions and have served on many professional bodies in my checkered career so far; in whatever I have done, I have gone to the well of my graduate school years many times to sustain my energy and commitment to what I am doing. This is not to say that I have no doubts about whether it was all worth it, whether anyone cares, etc., but I have had the opportunity to climb the mountain of archival exploration, to talk about, feel, and participate in archives as a powerful expression of humanity, and to be and become part of a larger mission, a community, a professional culture that believes in archives. In the end, it is a faith based on identity with something bigger than yourself. And if that is not religion, I do not know what is.

### Notes

- 1 American John Roberts is a recent, and probably the snarkest, proponent of this view in his article “Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving,” *American Archivist* 50 (1987), pp. 66-74.
- 2 Tom Nesmith, “Hugh Taylor’s Contextual Idea for Archives and the Foundation of Graduate Education in Archival Studies,” in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 25.