

# *Counterpoint*

## *The Abdication Crisis: Are Archivists Giving Up Their Cultural Responsibility?*

by SHIRLEY SPRAGGE\*

This perhaps overly dramatic title came to me when I was choosing this theme at the same time as the Royal House of Windsor was experiencing another paroxysm of embarrassment that made them seem less of an asset to Britain, and promoted calls for a reenactment of the 1937 Abdication. There are lots of bad jokes about abdication and there is no point in repeating them, but I think the term is appropriate for what I see in the archival role. Abdication in its purest sense means renouncing sovereignty--a little too dramatic for archivists--but in a broader sense it means giving up "a right, or office formally or by default, or to renounce a function," and that is what I fear archivists are doing. The archival mission was to be guardian of the past, the keeper of the collective memory of the community, people, nation (read what you like), and the "total archives," the great Canadian contribution to archival concepts.

In the 1980 Report of the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives, better known as the Wilson Report, the "total archives" approach is described thus:

### **The "Total Archives" Approach**

From this tradition, Canada has given the world the concept inelegantly termed "total archives." These are archives which, unlike many European or United States' archives, actively acquire both the official records and an extensive range of private materials in all documentary media bearing on the life of their institution or region. "Total archives" have an active, comprehensive acquisition mandate, however the archives may define its mandate: geographically, institutionally, or on a theme basis. By casting a broad net, "total archives" attempt to document all aspects of historical development, seeking the records not just of officialdom or of a governing elite but of all segments of a community. Combining official administrative records and related private files, manuscripts, photographs, sound recordings, computer files, architectural drawings, maps, microfilm and other documentary forms all touching on the development of the organization or region, "total archives"

make efficient use of limited archival resources, taking full advantage of the economies of scale in providing proper archival facilities.<sup>1</sup>

By 1992, the Canadian Council of Archives' publication, *Canadian Archives in 1992*, was sounding a note of realism:

Another distinct influence on archival development in Canada is the "total archives" concept which provides our public institutions with a mandate to acquire and care for government records and related private sector records while bringing together in one repository records created in all media. Adherence to a "total archives" concept has meant that most public and private archives in Canada have had to adjust to new and seemingly ever-changing technologies. Although some forms of reprography have exacerbated certain obstacles, others have presented new and exciting alternatives for conservation through reformatting. Similarly, computers have introduced new techniques for the management of records and experimentation with automated archival administration and access applications.<sup>2</sup>

The next paragraph in the CCA publication admits that not all archives fall into the total archives concept; some specialize in content and media.

The enthusiasm, energy, and money of the 1970s and 1980s accounted for archival expansion (often without thought for the consequences, for records, like the brooms and pails of the ill-fated Sorcerer's Apprentice, just keep coming). Electronic technology has opened a Pandora's box of problems and possibilities, many of which lead to a reassessment and possible redirection of the role of the archivist. The archival world may be turned upside down but archivists still have the responsibility to view the whole archival world and think carefully before renouncing some functions.

What am I going to say to you? Gary Mitchell and I are touching on themes that will reoccur in this conference: national acquisition strategies, strains in administrative structure, technologies (of course).<sup>3</sup> We are just lucky to get an early crack at the subject. I am not going to tell you that archives are the handmaiden of the history profession, although I may be tempted to quote from Frank Burke. I am going to outline how the archival focus has changed over my long career and admit that change is not only inevitable but essential. I shall then mount my nationalist hobby horse and declare that documenting national identity is essential. How the three anglophone graduate programmes in archival studies approach preparation for this is interesting. Finally, I shall outline community developments in British Columbia and Ontario that I hope point to ways to avoid the Abdication Crisis.

I really do not accept the idea that archives burst onto the Canadian scene mid-twentieth century. After all, our National Archives date from 1872 and the church archives I serve wrote of "archives" in its by-laws in 1885. The Canadian historian Robert Christie, perhaps the first Canadian historian to use original documents, was pleading in the 1840s for the preservation of the records of Lower Canada, doomed to impossible storage conditions, an all too familiar description. But what the archival record *is* has certainly developed. In the Queen's University Archives, where I worked for many years, are the papers of Adam Shortt, economist, distinguished civil servant, user of archives, and supporter of the National Archives early in this century. His papers contain files of autographs of famous persons clipped from the original

documents, which were then discarded. What tales went with the discarded documents we do not know; the fame was in the signatures. In the Queen's accession files, I came across a letter written many years later by a distinguished archivist enthusiastically thanking a donor for the offer of a letter from a famous personage who had no connection to Canada, Ontario, or the Queen's curriculum. A document without context is an artifact or a symbol. And every archives has had to fight back the tide of artifacts; I believe that the bullet that reputedly killed Thomas D'Arcy McGee is still at the Archives of Ontario.

How successful have archives and archivists been in documenting society? Donald MacLeod of the Ontario Archives in two articles in *Archivaria* has examined the acquisition policy of the National Archives and the Archives of Ontario during the years 1872 to 1935.<sup>4</sup> The Public Archives (as it was then) did not do too well, but the Archives of Ontario did receive a barely passing grade. Under the very long tenure of Provincial Archivist Alexander Fraser from 1903 to 1935, it made at least a conscious effort to represent Ontario society. That actually meant, according to Don, that there was too much concentration on settlement and pioneer days, local history, and printed and largely secondary sources. Fraser, however, was handicapped by inadequate staffing, chronic underfunding, and having very little control over government records, and was tied to emphasizing the British connection.<sup>5</sup>

But Fraser's shortcomings do not match those of folklorist Helen Creighton and her sins of cultural appropriation in Nova Scotia as described by Ian McKay in *The Quest of the Folk: Antimodernism and Cultural Selection in Twentieth-Century Nova Scotia*. Helen Creighton carved a career for herself by collecting the folk songs of Nova Scotia outports but selecting them according to her conservative, middle class outlook that, according to McKay "constructed a particular kind of Folk in Nova Scotia: the Folk who were as unchanging and natural as the rockbound shores surrounding them--and almost as politically and socially inert."<sup>6</sup> What, he asks, would Creighton have collected if she had visited the prisons, the unions, and the coal mines?

So there are pitfalls and problems in searching for the personal, the private records. Hopefully with our current knowledge we are not doomed to make the mistakes of our past, but I am sure we shall create our own. Recognition of the challenges of acquisition policies has brought forth two newly-defined approaches: documentation strategy and documentation profile, each a systematized approach to acquisition. As these are being tested and taught in archival studies, archivists must also grapple with how personal papers in electronic media will be acquired. In an article in the May 1994 issue of *Archives and Manuscripts*, the Journal of the Australian Society of Archivists, on "Electronic Recordkeeping Issues and Perspectives," Adrian Cunningham of the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau takes on the issue and makes some suggestions. He strongly advocates that personal records archivists become active in the pre-custodial phase.

This requires a shift from the policy of targeting potential donors towards the end of their working life to a strategy of approaching them at the earliest possible time after it becomes clear from their achievements and activities that their records are worthy of preservation. Having secured an in-principle agreement for the eventual transfer of the person's records to the archives,

the archivist will then need to build a lasting partnership with the donor whereby assistance is lent with the design of a recordkeeping system that satisfies predetermined standards and with the production of adequate support documentation. This partnership would probably also involve the periodic transfer of non-current records appraised (ideally before their creation) as being worthy of permanent preservation.<sup>7</sup>

Cunningham does concede that some donors may balk at the thought of “the ongoing interference of a nosy archivist in their busy routines.”<sup>8</sup> I balk at the assumption that it is possible to discern early when achievements and activities make records worthy of preservation. How is that for elitism? Norman Mailer has just published an 800-page book on the life of Lee Harvey Oswald, the alleged assassin of President John F. Kennedy who was himself assassinated in 1963. Mailer was apparently assiduous in searching for documents revealing the life of Oswald but found it very difficult after the passage of thirty years. No one had guessed that the restless and unhappy Oswald would gain a place in history and no one preserved his records.

If we admit that all our biases, our blindness, and the randomness of history make acquisition of personal and private papers difficult, why are we trying; what is this collective memory we are trying to preserve? For me it is a sense of identity and, more importantly, a Canadian national identity, one that does not deny injustice, bloodshed, and stupidity--no, pigheadedness--but still tells who we are. In feeling this way, I reveal my age--my father was a fierce nationalist, and I grew up during World War II when national pride and propaganda were pumped into school children and all the history text books were written by Liberal historians, historians with Whig points of view (when I married into the family of a Tory historian it was a revelation). Perhaps World War II was a watershed for Canada. Michael Valpy, a columnist for the Toronto *Globe and Mail*, lamented at the close of activities commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the end of the war in Europe on 8 May 1945, that that was the last time Canada was all together, as one. If that is so, it is very sad. By contrast, Americans have a clear sense of national identity, as I learned when I lived in the United States--but perhaps that is part of their “Americocentrism.”

If I am so obsessed with the need to know and document what Canada is, I wondered how this was handled at our three anglophone graduate programmes in archival studies. So I sent a questionnaire to all three directors who replied generously and promptly (it is amazing how E-mail makes quick answers). I asked five simple questions, which I shall summarize, and yes, they were about the extent of history in their programmes. (I happen to agree with the question of the young daughter in Steinbeck’s *Grapes of Wrath*: how do we know who we are unless we know who we have been?) I asked:

1. What graduate school requirements are there, if any, for prerequisites in history for your programme?
2. What requirements are there in your programme to study history?
3. What opportunities are there in your programme to study history?
4. Is the focus of history national or local?

5. Does student interest in history in your opinion vary according to academic background?

The three schools are: the University of Manitoba, headed by Tom Nesmith, the University of Toronto, with Barbara Craig, and the University of British Columbia, with Terry Eastwood. These three professors of archival studies are leaders among our brightest and best of archivists; we have all listened to them and read their articles, and we know their viewpoints vary. Also, each school operates within the framework of its university.

At Manitoba, a history degree or its equivalent is a prerequisite to admission and students take a full graduate level course in history, a type of their choosing. Tom Nesmith sees this as the necessary base for administrative and technical information. For Tom, the history of the record is the intellectual foundation of archival work, linking all aspects of archival administration. Without a good understanding of Canadian history, how can Canadian archivists understand the complex origins and original characteristics of Canadian archival history, he asks. From the structure of the programme, the students tend to be a homogeneous group and the focus, if any, is the West.

For the Faculty of Information Studies at Toronto there are no specific requirements for entrance beyond an upper B graduate degree, but according to Barbara Craig, students traditionally come from English and history. Students have the opportunity (not the requirement) to take history courses among the four courses taken outside the faculty. Barbara encourages historiographical knowledge, supplying readings for those who lack it and the faculty offers specific historical studies, now including the history of records and record-keeping. Barbara's writings have clearly defined her emphasis on the context of the document, but she says that there is a world of difference between history and the document.

Terry Eastwood at the University of British Columbia explained that the MAS programme has no prerequisites for courses in history and never has had from its inception, although the Department of History co-generated and sponsored the initial programme. There are no requirements to take courses in history in the school although, again, historical study appears in other courses such as the evolution of archival institutions or the Canadian social system. In their courses (three courses comprising six credits) taken outside the school, students may opt for history and, according to Terry, do so "now and then." The school's perspective, especially in teaching subjects like record-keeping and archival concepts, is not just national but international. Students without a history background find this is a disadvantage but according to Terry, the Canadian history they discover in research projects does spark their interest. As an aside, I have seen this technique of integrating history with the topic or course at hand used successfully in the history of medicine (e.g., how was the stethoscope devised and what was it intended to solve), but doctors are not appraising records.

If Canadian archivists lack background in understanding the development of the national identity, we lack a vital component in judging what represents our current identity--or perhaps I should say identities, since we have admitted that the homogeneous society (French or English) is a myth. This, of course, is what makes

the acquisition of private records so much more difficult than transferring a sponsor's records.

If the rational collection of private papers is difficult and the "total archives" concept is fading, are there alternatives? This issue of "abdication" has already been debated by Christopher Hives of the University of British Columbia Archives with a colleague in history.<sup>9</sup> Chris's response is that private papers are being acquired, but perhaps differently and perhaps better.

There are options. The concept of "total archives" has served well in creating a climate of valuing and caring for the documentary heritage at the community level. There are two models of approaches to creating an archives that I shall describe, where the archives are not the sponsor's records but a diverse group of record creators joining together to provide for their individual holdings.

Jane Turner in her paper for the 1994 ACA Conference, "Working Cooperatively for a Sustainable Future: Total Archives in Nanaimo" gave a striking picture of how a community worked together to preserve their documentary heritage.<sup>10</sup> As Jane describes it, the community reacted from a scepticism that government either cared about or took any responsibility for heritage.

...the archival community has much to learn from the Nanaimo Community Archives Society, which developed during the 1980s from a strong sense of community and a concomitant commitment to total archives. The Archives Society began with a bold and passionate vision: to preserve the documentary heritage of the central Vancouver Island community, and to build a strong, viable, centre of archival expertise that could serve, advise and educate sponsoring agencies, community organizations and regional archives and archivists.

Personal and institutional networks formed a basis for the effort and dynamic leadership, first by Elizabeth Patterson who spearheaded the project. She identified five requirements for success that molded the Nanaimo Community Archives Society, which was incorporated in January 1991. They are:

1. Commitment by the stakeholders to the project.
2. Authority and structure that would ensure each stakeholder could contribute equally to decision making.
3. Community support to maintain pressure on the stakeholders to continue their commitment.
4. Qualified archivist to direct the project and provide leadership.
5. Secure funding.

The conversion of the City Clerk to the project and his report in 1990 recommending the City join the task force to investigate the feasibility of hiring, with other community organizations, a professional archivist was a vital component, as was the participation of John Thomson, administrator of the Pacific Biological Station, who secured ongoing support for the project in 1993.

Jane concluded, to use her own words, that

A high level of community participation was the final element that promoted total archives, reflecting the broad and deeply felt support of the community for the project. The participation came in many shapes and forms, from donating valuable private records to the Archives, to volunteering time to archival work, to engaging in lobbying efforts to maintain and increase support from the stakeholders in order to achieve the goal of stable funding. This community participation was a vital part of the strength and stability of the project. The greater the participation, the stronger the links between the institutional and social networks that continue to be the life-blood of the Archives Society.

The cooperative administrative structure and a well-developed volunteer programme gave an opportunity for “total archives” based not on an institution but on a community.

The Ontario example, at Laurentian University, is more an example of fortuitous circumstances for archives arousing responses. As part of an Ontario government initiative (and I have lost track of which government) to decentralize government functions, at Laurentian University in Sudbury, archival quarters were added to the university library. The government initiative was abandoned; there was to be no Ontario Archives North, so the well-equipped archival quarters stood empty. Nature hates a vacuum and with a supportive Library and University administration, the idea of a site for North Eastern Ontario archival fonds was attractive. I have to thank Harry Huskins, priest, archivist of the Anglican Diocese of Algoma, and lecturer at Laurentian for a description of the current state. The acquisition and research mandate is for North Eastern Ontario, bilingual, and defined by following government districts. The Archives Committee, which is a sub-group of the University Senate Library Committee, has set the guidelines and recently hired Marthe Brown, formerly of McGill and an ACA member, as their first University Archivist.

Each contributor to the archival holdings owns its material, controls the access to the material by designating some material not open to the public, and has responsibility for the broad management of the fonds by appointing an archivist to collaborate and work with the University Archivist. The University for its part acquires research access as agreed upon, and in turn provides housing and servicing, i.e., personnel to administer access, create finding aids, and provide archival storage supplies and conservation treatment. Over time, microfilming will be undertaken. There is no annual fee for contributors. The Archives has attracted papers and records from International Nickel Corporation, regional politicians, CBC material, Franco-Ontarian papers, and the records of the Anglican Diocese of Moosonee. Other denominational records are being sought, including United Church and Roman Catholic records, as part of the active search for others to contribute.<sup>11</sup>

In effect, we have two regional archives, each consisting of archives of discrete groups. As those who attended the 1994 ACA Conference and heard his paper will remember, Hugh Taylor, viewing with concern the trend for provincial or even “middling size” university and other archives to abandon acquiring private sector papers, recommended collecting on a “bioregional” basis. It is not that regional archives are a new idea. In 1949 the editor of *Ontario History Society Papers and Records*, the venerable publication of the Ontario Historical Society, asked “Could

We. Too, Have Regional Records Repositories?"<sup>12</sup> What was described was the rise of the English local, usually county, record offices, which were under separate, not local government, administration with a governing board including users. Churches and semi-public and private owners were asked to cooperate. The editor concluded, "In Ontario, it is probably desirable that we too should have regional repositories for the proper care and preservation of local records."<sup>13</sup> The topic provoked some discussion in the next issue but then interest lapsed. If the time did not come in 1949, perhaps it has now.

So what have I said to you to persuade archivists not to renounce the function of collecting personal and private papers? Yes, there are problems and pitfalls in attempting to document society, but it is a worthwhile effort. Canadian history as a tool or a basis is viewed differently by our three professional schools; practitioners should listen to all three. In practical terms, I have pointed to two community groups that have taken on this archival task. And I emphasize archival and, again, Canadian archival tradition. We in Canada are so easily exposed to the American tradition, where personal papers and manuscripts were the purview of libraries and historical societies, not archives. And our Australian colleagues from whom such stimulating writing is coming, belong in the tradition of the separation of archives and manuscripts too.

This tension is recognized in Sue McKemish and Michael Pigott's book, *The Records Continuum*:

Lee [Macgregor]'s and Helen [Nosworthy]'s chapters describe responses to political environments representing two classic viewpoints within the continuum of roles of government archival authorities--whether they exist to service the administration of the day or broader democratic and cultural purposes.<sup>14</sup>

But if we archivists ask ourselves, what is the point of capturing and collecting all these files, sponsors' or private, that eventually are dead files, Hugh Taylor has an answer for us (does he not always?).

In the 1994 special issue of *American Archivist* entitled "2020 Vision," which offers perspectives on change, Hugh Taylor gives "Some Concluding Thoughts." As I mentioned, he expresses concern at the loss of private sector material. If we are leaving the era of print and literacy, indeed returning as archivists to the reemergence of the oral tradition of the storyteller, he says,

I personally believe that we need once more an overarching cosmology with a spiritual dimension, if we are to have something approaching 20/20 vision. Neil Postman has remarked that museums should answer the question, 'What does it mean to be a human being?' In answering the question, each museum should offer a different facet of the human condition. Perhaps this is a good question for archives to confront as well.<sup>15</sup>

So let us not have an abdication crisis. Remember the last scene of the film "The Madness of King George," where Nigel Hawthorne as King George III who has recovered his health and returned to the palace says to Helen Mirren, his Queen, as the people cheer them, "Smile at the people. Wave to them, let them see we're here."

That is good advice for archivists.

## Notes

- \* This article was originally delivered as a paper at the Annual Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Regina, 15 June 1995. Shirley Spragge died as the result of a long illness on 11 August 1995. The article, which has been edited for publication, is published with the kind permission of her husband, Godfrey Spragge.
- 1 Consultative Committee on Canadian Archives, *Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council* (Ottawa, 1980).
  - 2 Canadian Council of Archives, *Canadian Archives in 1992* (Ottawa, 1992), p. 12.
  - 3 Gary Mitchell of the British Columbia Archives and Records Service delivered a paper entitled, "Private Acquisition and Funding: Cut in Now or Cut it Later."
  - 4 Donald MacLeod, "Our Man in the Maritimes: 'Down East' with the Public Archives of Canada 1872-1932," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 86-105, and "'Quaint Specimens of the Early Days': Priorities in Collecting the Ontario Archival Record 1872-1935," *Archivaria* 22 (Summer 1986), pp. 12-39.
  - 5 MacLeod, "Quaint Specimen," p. 34.
  - 6 Ian McKay, *The Quest of the Folk* (Kingston and Montreal, 1994), p. 137.
  - 7 Adrian Cunningham, "The Archival Management of Personal Records in Electronic Form: Some Suggestions," in Glenda Acland, ed., *Archives and Manuscripts* 22, no. 1 (May 1994), p. 101.
  - 8 *Ibid.*, p. 101.
  - 9 Christopher Hives and Robert A.J. McDonald, "Acquiring and Preserving Private Records -- A Debate," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994), pp. 155-63.
  - 10 Jane Turner's paper appears in *Archivaria* 39 (Spring 1995), pp. 177-83.
  - 11 Much of this information was taken from the Memorandum of Agreement between Laurentian University and the Synod and Bishop of the Diocese of Moosonee, draft, 1993. Other memoranda may differ.
  - 12 *Ontario History Society Papers and Records* 41, no. 2, p. 103.
  - 13 *Ibid.*, p. 105.
  - 14 Sue McKemish and Michael Pigot, *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First 50 Years* (Victoria, Australia, 1994), p. xi.
  - 15 Hugh Taylor, "Some Concluding Thoughts," *American Archivist* 57 (Winter 1994), p. 143.