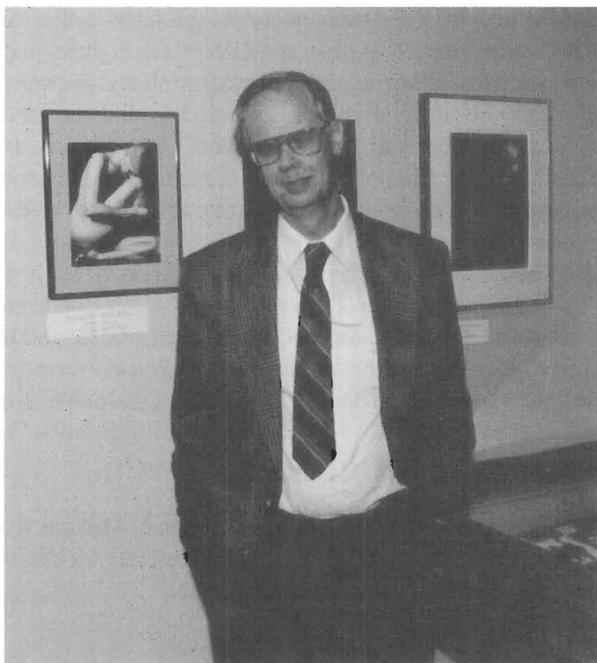


# Obituary

## Bruce Gordon Wilson, 1946–1998



Staff at the National Archives of Canada, and indeed many archivists and historians across the country and around the world, were deeply saddened to learn of the sudden and untimely death of Dr. Bruce Gordon Wilson on 14 January 1998. As the news broke, and for many hours afterwards, people spoke to each other in hushed whispers, almost as if speaking in normal voice would

give too harsh a reality to this unwelcome news. Archivists have lost a colleague of great accomplishment and gentle personality.

Bruce joined the National (then Public) Archives of Canada in 1975. He brought with him, based on his doctoral studies at the University of Toronto, a fine knowledge of early Canadian history in the 1760-1850 period. In the field of Canadian history (here and later I am quoting from leading figures, nationally and internationally, in the academic and archival worlds, who wrote letters of reference for Bruce in early 1996), a prominent historian has asserted that "Dr. Wilson has a distinguished record of historical publications of the first rank." Bruce's first book, *Robert Hamilton: Study of Wealth and Power in Early Upper Canada*, the story of an enterprising merchant in the Niagara area, significantly changed the overall interpretation of Upper Canadian history; the book, one scholar has asserted, "remains a classic study of early Canadian business practice and has served as a model which others have since emulated." His next book, *As She Began: An Illustrated Introduction to Loyalist Ontario*, combined, in the best way, sound academic scholarship with popular appeal, and has been judged "the best general study of the Upper Canadian loyalists presently in print." For many years after joining the Archives, Bruce continued to publish articles and edit books on the history of early Ontario, and especially the Niagara Peninsula area. One well-placed observer said of Bruce's historical work that he brought "skill and dedication to his craft. He writes effortlessly from meticulous, exceptionally thorough research, and issues products of very high quality. This has always been evident but the diversity of his writing and activity in recent years ... reinforces appreciation of Bruce's talent for tenaciously pulling-off some tough assignments with flair and precision."

The National Archives was very fortunate that Bruce's talents evident in his historical scholarship – careful research, tenacity, precision, diligence, dedication – were transferred to archival theory and practice. Up to 1993, Bruce worked successively at the National Archives in six areas: cartography, documentary art, British archival manuscripts, the Archives' overseas London Office, public programming, and modern government records. In these six assignments, Bruce applied his great intelligence, his diligence, and his imagination to a wide range of work: from his very first job of re-establishing the provenance of maps that had been removed decades earlier from the old "Q Series" and left as orphans to his work as the author of, and driving force behind, the monumental, decade-long project of the "British Guide" (*Manuscripts and Government Records in the United Kingdom and Ireland relating to Canada*); from his imaginative research for the production of volumes in the colour microfiche series on early Canadian documentary artists to his important work with government records relating to Aboriginal archives and band-agency finding aids, and on yet again to another book, this one reflecting a large-scale exhibition he researched and created in the "Records of our History" series: *Colonial Identities: Canada from 1760 to 1815*.

Based on the unique breadth (and I use “unique” advisedly) of Bruce’s experience across government and private records, and across many archival media, and on his ability to produce good work through consensus with many players for the good of the institution, Bruce was chosen in 1993 to be the pivotal person in conceptualizing and implementing intellectual control standards for the National Archives. This was a very difficult job – the development of policies and procedures to describe all types and media of archives in a single, standardized way after decades of not doing so. This massive project required someone of Bruce’s credibility and steadfastness to make it work. And it has. As he died, he was beginning work on a similar “megaproject,” this time to develop an integrated electronic records programme for the National Archives. In each of these assignments, Bruce left important legacies for the institution, and thus for our researchers and ultimately for a better understanding of ourselves as Canadians and of our past.

In the wider profession, Bruce served as General Editor of *Archivaria*, as well as in several other senior positions with the journal. A previous editor noted of Bruce’s tenure that “remarkably ... with patience and perseverance, he was able to involve a good many archival colleagues across the country in fashioning the journal – and contributing to it. No mean feat! I have no hesitation in seeing his period with *Archivaria* as one of the most engaging throughout its ... history.” Bruce also gave many scholarly papers about archives nationally and internationally, and published a rich range of articles on archival issues. For these many archival accomplishments, and for his historical work previously mentioned, among other awards and certificates, Bruce earned in 1996 a very rarely granted merit promotion by Committee of Peers to the highest possible level available in his category within the public service: of some 250 archivists who have worked for the National Archives since 1967 when this merit promotion possibility was established, Bruce is one of only four to achieve it. In that promotion, his work was described over and over by world figures in our profession, in their testimonial letters of reference, as authoritative, meticulous, precise, imaginative, thorough, comprehensive, admirable, outstanding, even magnificent.

But these accomplishments and honours and recognitions aside, despite their lasting significance, Bruce will be best remembered for his gentleness and kindness, for his dedication and seriousness, for his empathy in always assuming the best in others, for his openness and honesty, for his masking enormous intellectual power behind a ready collegiality and humility. He was a man seemingly devoid of self-promotion, who did things because of a sense of duty, of obligation, of responsibility, to some higher cause and calling.

This sense of duty and mission was reflected in a major way in his private life. He gave hundreds of hours in selfless volunteer work each year to Ottawa’s James Street Recovery Programme for addicted individuals and to many groups and committees of his beloved First United Church. His empathy

for others was remarkable. The image of the slightly gangly, somewhat professorial, conservatively attired archivist bashing a volleyball around with addicted street kids or comforting a destitute immigrant family come to mind, among many others. A gifted amateur photographer whose work was exhibited and awarded prizes, he loved jazz and, typically, studied hard to know everything he could about it. He was an aficionado of the theatre, skilled in caring for his garden, and his and Mary Sue's home was a beacon of warmth and good food for friends from many spheres of his life. And above all else, he was loyal and loving to Mary Sue and an immensely devoted and encouraging father to Seth and Rachael.

One senior historian has written of Bruce that in the eyes of "professional archivists and university-based historians alike, his industry, intelligence, and spirit of cooperative collegiality have long characterized the excellence of his work." While we at the National Archives and no doubt other colleagues certainly value the excellence of Bruce's accomplishments, I think it is that sense of "cooperative collegiality" that we will best remember of him, and miss most. He sought to draw the best out of people, and so often he did.

A close archival colleague of Bruce's reflected in a message to me that Bruce "made my life and career so much richer than I ever imagined it could be. I looked up to him. I admired him. I wanted him to think well of me." Another close colleague and friend wrote of "how honourable and dignified he was as a human being. What a colossal loss to archives, to his spiritual community, to the board of the James Street Recovery Programme, to his family, to photography, and to humankind. When I took a few minutes to sit in the guest chair in his office yesterday afternoon with the door shut, I couldn't help but wonder, who will fill his void in our lives?" This is an archivist speaking, but she is reflecting less on the loss of a first-class archivist as on the loss of Bruce's humanity. It is as a fine human being, more than as an archivist, historian, photographer, or board administrator, that we will remember Bruce. And he would have wanted it that way.

**Terry Cook**  
National Archives of Canada