

OBITUARY

Wilfred I. Smith, 1919–1998



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On 28 July the Canadian archival profession lost one of its most respected members. Dr. Wilfred Smith was killed in a tragic car collision on Highway 17 near Ottawa while he was returning from a golf game with a longtime friend.

Dr. Smith, a former Dominion Archivist, was a distinguished archivist and historian. He will certainly be remembered for his many accomplishments both as an archivist and as a scholar, but many of us who worked with him will also remember him as a man of great dignity, a wise administrator, a patient mentor, and a trusting friend.

Those of us who knew him primarily as an archivist were aware that his career had many other facets. He had been trained as a teacher in his native Nova Scotia and maintained an interest in teaching throughout his life. One of his keen interests was the promotion of professional education of archivists and he worked consistently for that cause. He was instrumental in the development of the "archives course" sponsored by the Public Archives of Canada and conducted originally in cooperation with Carleton University, and he staunchly supported the continuation of that course during his term as Dominion Archivist. Later in his career he was a strong supporter of archival education at the international level.

He was also a historian, having received an MA from Acadia University and a PhD from the University of Minnesota where he studied under one of the fathers of Canadian historiography, Professor A.L. Burt. While he was a student, he developed an interest in the career of Sir Charles Tupper and maintained that interest, gathering research material throughout his career. He was on the verge of finishing the writing of a full length biography of Tupper when he died.

Dr. Smith combined his love of history with a lifelong attachment to the military. He served overseas with distinction in World War II and maintained a connection with the Governor General's Foot Guards while he lived in Ottawa. During World War II he was called upon to be part of the "CAN-LOAN" program which trained Canadian officers who were sent "on loan" to bolster the ranks of the depleted British Army. He often spoke with great affection of his comrades in the program and particularly of Col. Milton F. Gregg who commanded the training program. One of his most recent publications was a history of the CANLOAN operation.

As was the case with so many other aspects of his life, he was very modest about his part in the war. He spoke very little about it to friends and colleagues, but those few who have been privileged to see the diary which he kept faithfully during the war have been moved by the description of events and the acts of bravery which he recorded daily. The diary has been described as an eloquent description of the tragedy which is war, elegant in its simplicity. While serving with the British Army, Dr. Smith was severely wounded in France and was sent back to hospital in England to recover. It was during that period that he met his future wife, Joan. They were married following the war while Wilf was attending university in Minnesota.

Wilf joined the Public Archives of Canada in 1950 when it was still a relatively small organization operating out of the building on Sussex Street which

now houses the Canadian War Museum. In the years following the War, the Archives was emerging from a period of relative obscurity. Dr. W.K. Lamb had been appointed Dominion Archivist in 1948 and was in the process of building a modern archives program, one which would be characterized by a strong emphasis on a key role in records management for the government of Canada. In order to accomplish that task he gathered together a core of energetic young archivist-administrators with strong academic backgrounds to lead the revitalization of the PAC. Wilf Smith was one of "Dr. Lamb's boys" and over a period of more than thirty years he played a key role in the building of one of the leading national archival programs in the world. In his early years as an archivist-administrator he put in place a vibrant acquisition program which has succeeded in building a research collection of inestimable value for the country. At the same time, understanding the key importance of a sound records management program, he provided leadership in building a core program based on a network of records centres across the country. That program has resulted in the creation of a records retention and disposal system that is widely respected in the archival community. Governments from many parts of the world continue to send people to Ottawa to study and learn from the experience of the Canadian archives in the field of records management.

The decades of the 1960s and 1970s were characterized by growth, not only of programs but also of the buildings to house them. A major accomplishment of the 1960's was the construction of the present Archives and Library building on Wellington Street. At the same time the network of buildings to house the records centres was being built both in Ottawa and in cities from Halifax to Vancouver. In 1970, Dr. Smith succeeded Dr. Lamb as Dominion Archivist. His appointment coincided with the beginning of a period of phenomenal growth in the programs of the federal government. Not surprisingly, the programs of the Public Archives grew in proportion. I recall that, when I joined the Archives in the mid-1960s, there was a staff of about 100 people, and Dr. Lamb proudly announced on one occasion that the annual budget had for the first time reached a level of \$1 million. One can comprehend the magnitude of the growth that Dr. Smith managed during his term as Dominion Archivist by considering the size of the institution when he retired in 1984. At that time there were 800 people on the staff of the Archives and the annual budget was approximately \$60 million.

Through all of that period of growth and change, Wilf Smith guided the institution with the foresight, patience, common sense, and good humour which were his hallmarks. He was fond of saying, only half in jest, that it was sometimes difficult to devise, on short notice, programs to spend the money made available under new initiatives launched by one government or another. An engaging raconteur, one of his favourite stories involved the proposal which he and his management team developed in response to one such initiative. After giving serious consideration to a call for proposals from Treasury

Board, he concluded that the Archives could develop a project fitting the guidelines that would require about \$250,000 per year. Within a few days of submitting the proposal, he received a phone call from an official stating that they really had something much bigger in mind and asking if the Archives could not be more imaginative in devising ways to respond to the government's initiatives! It was in an atmosphere of that kind that Wilf spent most of his term as Dominion Archivist.

During that period, a systematic national acquisition program was developed, the "total archives" concept became a reality, computers were introduced to the Archives to respond to the new world of automation, archivists began to deal with the world of electronic records, a new importance was placed on promotion through archival publications and exhibitions, and archivists achieved a new level of professionalism. In all of these areas Wilf Smith played the role either of innovator or of supporter, always willing to listen to new ideas, always open to new ways to make the archival system work better. A man of seemingly infinite patience and courtesy, he was always willing to hear what others had to say and unflinchingly took the views of others into account. This attitude gave some of us who worked for him the scope to promote ideas that were sometimes impractical and occasionally bizarre, but I often felt that we did so knowing that, in the end, Wilf's common sense would prevail and that we would not be allowed to do anything really counterproductive. I have often reflected that his personality and his managerial style were exactly appropriate for the era of rapid growth and change that the archival world experienced in the 1970s and early 1980s.

During the period that he was Dominion Archivist, he devoted a great deal of his talent and energy to the subject of the international development of archives. He worked tirelessly for the International Council on Archives in the interest of promoting archives and records management, particularly in developing countries. His patience and forbearance were particularly well suited to the international forum where he enjoyed the reputation as a conciliator and a practical problem solver. Through his efforts many foreign archivists received training in Canada and took back home the benefits of the Canadian experience in archives and records management. He served for several years as the Deputy Secretary General of the International Council on Archives and he persuaded the Canadian government that it should invite the international archival community to meet in Canada for the first time, an invitation which resulted in the Montreal Congress of the ICA in 1992.

Wilf Smith received many honours in recognition of his professional work. To mention only a few, he was granted honorary degrees, he was named an Officer in the Order of Canada, he became a Fellow of the Society of American Archivists, and he was granted a Life Membership in the Association of Canadian Archivists. However, I have sometimes wondered if the greatest honour given to him was not the universal respect shown to him by his col-

leagues. He was an honourable man, a dedicated man, a thoughtful man, a kind man, a wise man, and for all these qualities he was greatly respected by those with whom he worked. I remember, when I first joined the Public Archives of Canada, how I was surprised that so many people referred to him simply as "Wilf." While other senior people were referred to as "Doctor," "Mister" or "Miss," he was referred to as "Wilf" even by some of the most junior staff. As time went on, I came to realize that this was by no means a sign of disrespect. On the contrary, it was an indication that his co-workers, no matter how junior, identified with him and considered him to be "one of them." Indeed, it was a tacit recognition of the marvellous qualities of leadership that he possessed. While he might appear unassuming and even at times very "low-profile," in fact, he was a very effective administrator. Because of those qualities, he influenced the lives of many people, including mine in no small measure, in a way that very few people do. It was the influence of his personality that led me to leave a teaching career, to take a cut in salary and to move to Ottawa in the 1960s to work for the Public Archives. Again in the 1970s, when I was quite happy with the orderly life as a provincial archivist, it was Wilf Smith who persuaded me that I should go back to Ottawa and to the Public Archives.

For many of us he was a boss, a co-worker, and a colleague; but he was also a friend, and his friends will miss his presence very much.

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