

# Articles

## What's History Got to Do With It?: Reconsidering the Place of Historical Knowledge in Archival Work\*

TOM NESMITH

**RÉSUMÉ** Cet article aborde l'évolution de la place du savoir historique dans la pratique archivistique, au Canada en particulier, depuis les années 1950. L'auteur commence en notant que la connaissance de l'histoire de son propre pays ou de sa propre communauté était au centre de l'identité professionnelle des archivistes canadiens entre la fin du 19<sup>e</sup> et le milieu du 20<sup>e</sup> siècles, alors que la plupart des archivistes se définissaient comme historiens. L'article commente ensuite les circonstances qui ont mené au questionnement et parfois au rejet du savoir historique comme composante-clé de l'expertise des archivistes et de leur identité professionnelle. Le rôle de la connaissance historique a donc été contesté et pose problème pour plusieurs archivistes au cours de l'histoire récente de la profession archivistique canadienne. Par une analyse des tendances récentes au niveau archivistique, intellectuel et sociétal, l'auteur suggère que le pendule effectue un retour vers l'arrière, non pas vers l'époque où les archivistes étaient indissociables des historiens, mais plutôt vers une valorisation de la place centrale du savoir historique au sein de l'ensemble particulier des connaissances, des recherches et des tâches quotidiennes de la nouvelle profession archivistique qui a émergé durant le dernier quart de siècle.

**ABSTRACT** This article discusses the changing place of historical knowledge in archival work, particularly in Canada since the mid-twentieth century. The author begins by noting that knowledge of the history of one's country or community was the centrepiece of the early professional identity of Canadian archivists between the late-nineteenth and mid-twentieth centuries, when most archivists saw themselves as historians. The article then discusses the circumstances which subsequently prompted serious questioning and sometimes rejection of historical knowledge as a key component of an archivist's expertise and professional identity. The role of historical knowledge has thus been contested and problematic for many archivists across the recent intellectual history of the Canadian archival profession. The author then points to recent archival, intellectual, and societal trends which suggest that the pendulum is swinging back, not in a simple return to the past, when archivists were largely indistinguishable from academic historians, but toward appreciation of the central place of historical knowledge

\* This article is the revised version of my keynote address to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Toronto, 12 June 2003. I want to thank colleagues at the University of Manitoba, Terry Cook (Department of History, Archival Studies) and David Williams (Department of English), for valuable comments on a draft of this article.

in the distinctive body of knowledge, research, and daily work of the new archival profession which has emerged over the last quarter century.

“What’s history got to do with it?” The Association of Canadian Archivists made this provocative question – about the relationship between historical knowledge and archival work – its 2003 conference theme, and thus played on the title of rock star Tina Turner’s 1980s hit, “What’s Love Got To Do With It?” This song helped launch Turner’s spectacular professional comeback from the effects of the physical and psychological abuse she suffered at the hands of her husband and early singing partner, Ike Turner. This abuse nearly took her life and almost ruined her musical career.

While the Turners’ band, the Ike and Tina Turner Revue, climbed the charts in the 1960s and 1970s with hits “Proud Mary,” “River Deep, Mountain High,” and “A Fool in Love,” Ike Turner became increasingly abusive, since Tina’s powerful vocals brought her acclaim that pushed him into the shadows. The abuse worsened when the band’s popularity waned in the early 1970s, as one after another of Ike’s songs failed to catch on. Tina finally ended the marriage in 1976. This left her career in tatters, because it seemed to many in the music business that she had destroyed the band and thus caused it to renege on several concert commitments.

To meet the challenges of her life, Tina Turner looked in part to history to find meaning and direction: she published an autobiography in 1986, which notes the distance she had come from her upbringing in a conflict ridden home in the rural isolation of segregated Tennessee; she found spiritual strength in the ancient teachings of Buddhism, and she gained insight into her own struggles with Ike Turner for equal leadership roles (and found a role model) in the ancient Egyptian woman Hat-shepsut, who ruled Egypt for her young stepson, Pharaoh Thutmose III, around 1500 BCE. Hat-shepsut was so effective that she was eventually treated as a pharaoh and did not readily relinquish her leadership when Thutmose came of age.<sup>1</sup>

In her most explicitly historical song about the “wreckage” of her turbulent life, entitled “I Might Have Been Queen,” Turner alludes to her close personal identification with (Queen) Hat-shepsut:

... I am searching through the wreckage  
For some great recollection  
That I might have been queen ...

I look up to my past  
A spirit running free

<sup>1</sup> Tina Turner and Kurt Loder, *I, Tina: My Life Story* (New York, 1986), pp. 156, 191; John A. Wilson, *The Culture of Ancient Egypt* (Chicago, 1956 edition), pp. 174–77.

I look down, I look down, and I'm there in history.  
[Oh,] I'm a soul survivor.<sup>2</sup>

Turner also drew inspiration for her work by sensing the value of the history of her profession, as an encounter with the Rolling Stones brought home to her. After performing as the opening act for the Rolling Stones in 1983, Turner joined the band's Keith Richards and a Capitol Records company producer to listen to music in Richards's hotel room. They hoped to come up with new material for her. Turner was amazed at what unfolded. Richards brought out a large tape recorder to play selections from his recordings of older popular music, which dated from as far back as the 1920s. Turner describes what happened in her autobiography:

We had some champagne, and Keith cranked up his machine and started playing all this old music, and suddenly it dawned on me: This is what these guys did. They would go back to all this old music that they loved – blues and R and B – and they would change it around and make something of their own out of it. Because the feeling that was in that old music was something they felt, too. But they made it new again, and that was what had always attracted me to the Rolling Stones' songs. I had never actually realized it before. That was a magical evening.<sup>3</sup>

Out of something old, even discarded, something new could be made in acts of personal musical imagination. Historical memory, whether of music, ancient Egypt, Buddhist spirituality, or the distance travelled from the rural black South, inspired strength, hope, and renewal. A troubled past of racial discrimination, sexism, violence, and professional setbacks, could be worked through by drawing on powerful historical experiences.

Historical memory thus helped make possible the remarkable resurgence of Tina Turner's career as a solo performer. "What's Love Got To Do With It?" rose to the top, winning her a 1984 Grammy for Record of the Year, when she was fifty-five years old and supposedly over the hill in the popular music world, especially as a female performer. Also against conventional expectation, the older she got, the more successful she became, until she retired from concert touring at the end of 2000, at age sixty-one, an international pop idol who led the entertainment business in concert earnings that year.

If Tina Turner herself could be asked "What's history got to do with it?" she would probably answer that it had quite a lot to do with her personal survival and professional renewal. Many others these days seem to be saying similar things about the importance of the past in their lives. Public interest in history

2 See Twin Music Lyrics at <[www.twin-music.com/lyrics\\_file/tina/private/i.html](http://www.twin-music.com/lyrics_file/tina/private/i.html)> (last accessed 12 February 2004); Turner and Loder, *I Tina*, pp. 191–92, 215–16.

3 Turner and Loder, *I, Tina*, pp. 210–11.

seems to be on the rise, prompting, in part, a renewed look at its place among archival concerns at the 2003 ACA conference. What does this renewed interest mean for archives?

Consider Tina Turner again for a moment to see some overarching themes. There are some parallels between her story and the experience of archivists over the last thirty years or so, perhaps especially in Canada. In archivists' own efforts to leave the margins and shadows of attics, basements, and the "handmaiden" role in their "failed" professional "marriage" with historians, there are echoes of her search for autonomy, respect for her remarkable abilities, and recognition of her pivotal contributions to partnerships with others. In the process, archivists have launched a new archival profession in Canada since the 1970s. In addition, archival work, too, is about finding ways of enduring (indeed thriving) and ensuring the survival of records, by renewing professional thinking and work, despite, like Turner, archiving's own advanced years as a human activity and the records' own great age. The experience of archivists as a profession seems not far from Turner's own recounting of a similar process of professional renewal.

This process of change or renewal in the archival profession is also the very "magic" of archives. Just as the Rolling Stones went back to "the archive" to renew their music, archivists help make old records (bad pun intended!) and their stories or "lyrics" new or relevant again, reshaping them for new audiences, helping people to make something new of them, something of their own, something that speaks or "sings" to a new generation, a new world different from that of previous users, or the original creators.

What archivists help others do, they can also do for themselves. Archivists can continue to renew and enhance their social relevance and professional knowledge by constantly exploring and critiquing their professional and societal pasts and opening this (their own "archive") to different ideas, experiences, and circumstances. Where, then, should the still developing archival profession go from here? It can develop further by more fully embracing the historical knowledge relevant to its work and by welcoming and encouraging the reviving historical interests in society at large. (The more society values historical information, the better will be the archivist's position as one of its key providers.) This more open and welcoming response is already being made in the archival profession as the 2003 theme conference confirms.

Before elaborating on these general points, a few explanatory comments are in order. Archivists are not being advised here to go back to a now lost past, when they were historians very much like those who teach and do research in the education system. Instead, archivists could draw more deeply on historical information and interests in order to perform better their distinctive archival work and to meet the challenges they face as a distinct profession. This is not hankering after an archivist *cum* historian, but for an archivist to be, like Tina Turner, inspired and renewed by history.

It is also necessary to recognize that there are both important contemporary aspects of archival work and valuable types of knowledge for archival work or theory other than historical knowledge. And academic history knowledge should not be privileged as the sole source of this historical knowledge, although it is an important source of it. Archival knowledge (which is still in its infancy) is a distinct new blend of many types of knowledge.

That said, archival work is driven by an overriding historical imperative. Archivists exist as a distinct profession to identify, protect, describe, make available, and preserve records that have long-term value, as carriers of information from the past that is relevant to the present and future. Thus information about the past will remain central to an archivist's knowledge base, regardless of its origin, whether in research by archivists, academics (historians among them), other professions, records creators, and various other users of archives – from the history buff to the genealogist. The historical knowledge or information referred to here means this broadly based and broadly derived understanding of the past, and particularly that part of it that pertains to the ability to do archival work.

The following five points summarize the main propositions of this article. They also question certain assumptions about the place of historical knowledge in archival work that have guided many since the 1970s.

1. Although support for the establishment of the ACA in 1975 came from many who questioned the central place of historical knowledge in archival work, ironically the new priorities set for the profession since then have led it toward a need for more historical knowledge to help archivists do their work well than was anticipated in the 1970s.
2. This internal professional need for historical information is complemented and reinforced by the significant resurgence of widespread public interest in history in recent years, backed by powerful influences in governments and other elites. Thus not only archivists need more historical knowledge to deliver historical information better, there is a rising need and expectation among others for what archivists have to offer – and there are signs that that need will continue to grow significantly.
3. These professional and societal needs are not only complemented and reinforced by the general resurgence of historical interest, but also by a remarkable transformation and diversification of society's historical information needs since the 1970s. This change in historical interests is as important as the rise in historical interest because it has moved the perception of historical information needs away from what was often thought (wrongly in my view) to be a narrow, esoteric, academic, or cultural concern to one which is directly related to the outcome of a wide variety of immediate practical problems.
4. These needs are being served and greatly stimulated by extraordinary

changes in the accessibility of historical information, due mainly to the recent expansion of television services and the advent of the Internet.

5. And since the 1970s powerful new intellectual currents, which emphasize the importance of understanding the production and characteristics of communications, have further strengthened the role archivists can play in providing information about the past. The postmodernists have brought this concern most prominently to the fore, but many who would not call themselves postmodernists share it, and one need not be a card-carrying postmodernist to do so.

A brief excursion into archival history enables us to approach a further discussion of these points. Archiving has always had a decidedly historical character. Since ancient times in the West through to the early nineteenth century, although records have been kept indefinitely, they rarely have been given the kind of archival service that would be recognized today as such. If records were kept, they were usually selected in an ad hoc manner and simply warehoused, often to languish ignored and decaying, sometimes for centuries.<sup>4</sup>

The now recognizable archival institution and archival profession developed mainly in the nineteenth century. The focus of their work was these very old, often neglected records. Archivists also gradually began to work with much younger records, but the younger records were still typically at least seventy-five to 100 years old before they became the direct responsibility of archives. It was not until the mid-twentieth century that much younger records began to enter the custody of archives. Given this pronounced historical orientation of their work, many archivists saw themselves as historical researchers. And as the historical profession took shape over the nineteenth century, many archivists saw themselves as members of it, indeed some were among its founders and leading figures.<sup>5</sup>

As archival work evolved over the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the classic publications of the emerging archival profession often conveyed resistance to this historical orientation. As experience was gained with the vast historical record that had piled up for centuries, debates among these historian-archivists over how best to work with the records began to divide them into at least two camps. In one camp were those who argued for a contextual approach to archival work, which meant that archivists should concentrate on setting records in the context of their provenance, rather than focus their work

4 Elizabeth Hallam, "Nine Centuries of Keeping the Public Records," in G.H. Martin and Peter Spufford, eds., *The Public Record Office, 1838–1988* (Woodbridge, Suffolk, UK, 1990).

5 Philippa Levine, "History in the Archives: The Public Record Office and Its Staff, 1838–1886," *The English Historical Review* 101, no. 398 (January 1986); Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," in Ken Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Washington, DC, 1967).

on the conventional historian's interest in the records' subject content. (Hilary Jenkinson is the most prominent English-speaking archivist to articulate this view at that time.) In the other camp, were many who valued the contextual approach, but also maintained that an archivist is also an historian of subject content in the conventional sense. Samuel Muller, although he co-authored the pathbreaking Dutch archival manual published in 1898 (which gave the contextualists a comprehensive intellectual basis for the maturing archival profession), remains a prominent representative of the historian's orientation. He disagreed sharply about this with Robert Fruin, also a co-author of the manual, who took the contextualist view of an archivist's professional priorities, although he, himself, was a highly accomplished legal historian.<sup>6</sup>

Across the twentieth century, the archivist as contextualist gained the most ground in the profession. Under the heavy administrative and technical pressure of vast volumes of mid-twentieth century institutional archives, the leadership of the archival profession in the West, for the most part, abandoned the position that on-the-job an archivist was supposed to be a historian like a professor of history. Knowledge of academic history remained valued in the workplace and was usually the major component of the archivist's pre-appointment university education. Doing academic historical research in one's personal time was respected and often rewarded. Many archivists pursued it, but it was not a vital professional requirement.

Canada probably retained the historian-as-archivist model longer than most Western countries. In the first half of the twentieth century, the leading archivists in Canada's leading archives saw themselves largely as professional historians who worked in archives. Arthur Doughty, Gustave Lanctôt, Norah Story, D.C. Harvey, and A.S. Morton, among others, saw their primary task as securing historical records so that academic history could be written, in order to obtain the cultural, educational, and political benefits of such historical knowledge. W. Kaye Lamb, Dominion Archivist and National Librarian in the mid-twentieth century, is a good example of a member of this group and the pressures it faced in adapting to the changing demands of mid-twentieth-century modern archives. In response to demands (mainly from academic historians) for better access to federal government records and for a much more ambitious private manuscript acquisition program, Lamb oversaw an immense and rapid expansion of the then Public Archives of Canada between 1948 and 1968. Much greater attention was thus given to records management, the newer audio-visual media, and a host of administrative, legal, and technical issues prompted by the exponential growth of the archives' bureaucracy, within an also greatly expanding federal state. The Public Archives was

<sup>6</sup> Eric Ketelaar, "Muller, Feith, and Fruin," *Archives et bibliothèques de Belgique* 1, no. 2 (1986), pp. 266–68. This essay is also available in Ketelaar's *The Archival Image: Collected Essays* (Hilversum, 1997).

increasingly becoming an arm of administration, in addition to being a cultural institution.

Lamb realized that these changes presented archivists with a major intellectual adjustment and challenge. In his 1958 presidential address to the Canadian Historical Association (and note that he was its president), he lamented that “For me personally the career of an archivist has entailed one sacrifice. I was trained as a historian, but acquiring manuscripts for other people to use is such a time-consuming occupation that I have only an occasional moment to spend on historical research myself.”<sup>7</sup> In the 1960s, Lamb further stressed this “changing role of the archivist” and the emergence, as a result, of a “virtually new profession.” He thought that the key change was due to the archivist’s greatly expanded role in appraising records for long-term value. “To exercise that judgment intelligently, reasonably, and with common sense,” he explained, “will tax anyone’s time, knowledge, and patience to the limit. But, the importance of doing one’s best is vital, for the quality of the archives collection of the future will depend on it.”<sup>8</sup>

Here one can see the beginnings of the intellectual transition in the knowledge base of the Canadian archival profession – in Lamb’s declining ability to be a conventional historian, due to the increasingly heavy demands of administering modern archives, and in his awareness that these emerging duties (such as appraisal) were themselves significant new intellectual challenges. Implicitly, at least, Lamb was also saying that these new archival challenges were as intellectually demanding as those a conventional historian faces in doing historical research. Furthermore, the archivist’s distinctive intellectual challenges justified a new professional identity and self-respect in relation to historians. In 1961, Lamb openly criticized historians who thought of an archivist as “essentially a hack: a hewer of wood and drawer of water” for historians, rather than someone who performs the difficult intellectual work of appraisal and other archival tasks.<sup>9</sup>

These tensions and emerging insights into the demands of archival work reveal some of the forces which contributed to the formal professional separation of archivists and historians in Canada with the creation of the ACA in 1975, whose predecessor had long been located within the Canadian Historical Association as its Archives Section. There was a problem, however. Although what Lamb said about the intellectual demands of archival work was

7 W. Kaye Lamb, “Presidential Address,” *Report of the Annual Meeting of the Canadian Historical Association* (1958), p. 12.

8 W. Kaye Lamb, “The Changing Role of the Archivist,” *The American Archivist* 29, no. 1 (January 1966), p. 4 and W. Kaye Lamb, “The Fine Art of Destruction,” in Albert E.J. Hollaender, ed., *Essays in Memory of Sir Hilary Jenkinson* (Chichester, UK, 1962), p. 56.

9 W. Kaye Lamb, “The Archivist and the Historian,” *The American Archivist*, 68, no. 2 (January 1963), p. 385.



and remains true, the formally articulated intellectual basis for appraisal and other archival functions was still quite rudimentary in the 1960s and 1970s. There was very little archival literature or thinking on these matters, especially in English. Those in Europe, for example, who shared the Jenkinsonian view, did not want to enter into appraisal much, never mind write about it. In North America, appraisal was mainly done to identify records of very broad academic historical research interest or “informational value.” And when in doubt about that, “keep it” was the rule which seemed to solve any intellectual dilemma that may have arisen. In description, establishing a fairly straightforward and limited notion of provenance as the office of origin of institutional records or as the brief biographical sketch for a private manuscript fonds also seemed largely unproblematic. In reference, which was done mainly for academic historians (who were already highly knowledgeable about their sources and needs), there seemed little need to go beyond using these basic descriptions and providing general guidance to the latest new acquisitions – in part because historians often discouraged archivists from doing much more than that, by complaining that more elaborate finding aids merely got in the way of their direct access to the records.

It is not hard to see why Canadian archivists began to see a separate professional future for themselves in the 1960s and 1970s. They faced enormous administrative and technical challenges in coping with rapidly expanding older archives and in establishing the many new archives that were created in these years. Many archivists saw less relevance for academic historical knowledge as an intellectual base for meeting these new challenges. The historical knowledge they needed most seemed to them quite limited, yet sufficient to do appraisal, description, and reference in the 1960s and 1970s. This weakening of the place of historical knowledge in the knowledge base of archivists was probably further facilitated by the decline during the second half of the twentieth century in the social status of historians within the Canadian intellectual and political elites and by the wider erosion of general interest in history. In 1998 this erosion caused prominent Canadian historian J.L. Granatstein to lament the state of Canadian history in his best-selling book, *Who Killed Canadian History?* There thus seemed every reason why the rising, ambitious new archival profession would unhitch itself from this apparently fading star.

The agenda that the new Canadian archival profession set for itself in the late 1970s and the 1980s reflects these pressing and distinctive administrative, technical, legal, and often seemingly contemporary, rather than historical, concerns. This agenda focussed on clarifying a distinctive archival theory and method (largely apart from historical investigation of archives or use of historical research methods), establishing descriptive standards, improved processes and techniques for management of all archival functions, computerization of archival work and services, electronic records, archival law and policy, relationships with records and information management, and university-based archival edu-

cation, largely apart from departments of history. This detachment became formalized as the ACA gradually removed itself from meeting with the annual congress of the humanities and social sciences – the old “Learned Societies,” which included the CHA – in favour of an isolationist approach of meeting alone or sometimes with other archival or records management associations.

This agenda was launched on the assumption that historical knowledge and research skills would not play a significant role in its achievement. However, as the agenda advanced in Canada and elsewhere (as it was shared by archivists in many countries), its great intellectual complexities and the significant depth of the historical and other knowledge about society, records creators, records, institutions, record-keeping systems, and archives required to pursue it became much clearer. In efforts to elaborate the archival theory of records, for example, discussion often occurred in the abstract without much reference to actual extended understanding over time of various types of records. Without such reference to the history of records, archival theory could not account sufficiently for the characteristics of the records archivists actually work with or help provide what they need to know about them to do this work. As a result, since the late 1970s some archivists and others have attempted to show the value of study of the history of specific types of records, media, and record-keeping systems. One recent important affirmation of this rising emphasis is the successful first International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA), which was held at the University of Toronto in October 2003.<sup>10</sup>

10 For the 2003 I-CHORA programme see

<http://www.fis.utoronto.ca/research/i-chora/programme.html>

The second International Conference on the History of Records and Archives will be held in Amsterdam in September 2005. For appeals for this type of work in archival scholarship see Hugh A. Taylor, “The Media of Record: Archives in the Wake of McLuhan,” *Georgia Archive* 6, no. 1 (Spring 1978), my “Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982), also reprinted in Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, N.J., 1993) and my launch as *Archivaria* editor of the “Studies in Documents” section of the journal (number 20, Summer 1985) in an effort to encourage development of a “modern diplomatics” for modern archival records. For recent extended treatment of diplomatics, see Luciana Duranti, *Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science* (Lanham, Md., 1998) and the special issue of *The American Archivist* devoted to diplomatics (59, no. 4, Fall 1996); for examples of replies to earlier work on diplomatics published by Duranti in a six-part series in *Archivaria* (nos. 28 to 33, 1989–92) see Joan Schwartz, “‘We make our tools and our tools make us’: Lessons from Photographs for the Practice, Politics, and Poetics of Diplomatics,” *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995) and Rick Brown, “Death of a Renaissance Record-Keeper: The Murder of Tomasso da Tortona in Ferrara, 1385,” *Archivaria* 44 (Fall 1997). For examples of studies of documents, record making, and recordkeeping, see Barbara L. Craig, “The Introduction of Copying Devices into the British Civil Service, 1877–1889,” in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), Carolyn Heald, “Documenting Disease: Ontario’s

The new agenda item of descriptive standards has entered a similar stage of reconsideration of the role of historical knowledge in description. The stress thus far on the application in the abstract of archival theory of provenance as the fonds, and on the technical form and rules of standard descriptions, is now encountering recent changes in concepts of provenance. These changes were initially centred on the Australian series approach, with its recognition of the

Bureaucracy Battles Tuberculosis," *Archivaria* 41 (Spring 1996), David Hume, "Life's Embarrassing Moments – Right Treaty, Wrong Adhesion: John Semmens and the Split Lake Indians," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983–84), Lilly Koltun, ed., *Private Realms of Light: Amateur Photography in Canada, 1839–1940* (Toronto, 1984), Terry Cook, "Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Records Administration, 1898–1958," in W. R. Morrison and Ken Coates, eds., "For Purposes of Dominion": *Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow* (Toronto, 1988) or in Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies*, Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85) or in Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies*, Tom Nesmith, "'Pen and Plough' at Ontario: Agricultural College, 1874–1910," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85), Jim Burant, "The Military Artist and the Documentary Art Record," *Archivaria* 26 (Summer 1988) or in Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies*, and Brian Masschaele, "Memos and Minutes: Arnold Heeneey, the Cabinet War Committee and the Establishment of the Canadian Cabinet Secretariat During the Second World War," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998). This archival scholarship was paralleled and inspired in part by work in other fields on similar topics. Archival scholarship of this kind has thus been part of a much broader intellectual movement in the late twentieth century toward greater interest in the history of communication. A small sample of this vast international literature includes M. T. Clanchy, *From Memory to Written Record: England 1066–1307* (Cambridge, Mass., 1979; 2nd ed., 1993), Susan Sontag, *On Photography* (New York, 1977), JoAnne Yates, *Control Through Communication: The Rise of System in American Management* (Baltimore, 1989), Elizabeth Eisenstein, *The Printing Press as an Agent of Change: Communications and Cultural Transformations in Early-Modern Europe* (New York, 1979), Armando Petrucci, *Writers and Readers in Medieval Italy: Studies in the History of Written Culture* (New Haven, 1995), George Emery, *Facts of Life: The Social Construction of Vital Statistics in Ontario 1869–1952* (Montreal, 1993), John Naylor, *A Man and an Institution: Sir Maurice Hankey, the Cabinet Secretariat, and the Custody of Cabinet Secrecy* (Cambridge, UK, 1984), and Richard Ruggles, *A Country So Interesting: The Hudson's Bay Company and Two Centuries of Mapping, 1670–1870* (Montreal, 1991). For a sampling of the varied Canadian literature on archival theory see, Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), Terry Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival Studies," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 232–52 and his "What is Archival Theory and Why is it Important?" *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), Terry Cook, "'Another Brick in the Wall': Terry Eastwood's Masonry and Archival Walls, History and Archival Appraisal," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), Luciana Duranti, "The Concept of Appraisal and Archival Theory," *The American Archivist* 57 (Spring 1994), Heather MacNeil, "Archival Studies in the Canadian Grain: The Search for a Canadian Archival Tradition," *Archivaria* 37 (Spring 1994), Tom Nesmith, "Nesmith and The Rediscovery of Provenance (Response to Heather MacNeil)," *Archivaria* 38 (Fall 1994), Trevor Livelton, *Archival Theory, Records, and the Public* (Metuchen, N.J., 1996), Tom Nesmith, "Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate: Some Thoughts on the 'Ghosts' of Archival Theory," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999), and Preben Mortenson, "The Place of Theory in Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 47 (Spring 1999).

multiple provenance of many institutional records, rather than on the traditional conception of provenance as a single formative originary moment when a first inscriber of records makes a record or fonds. This new concept of provenance may lead to an even wider view of it as an ongoing process of the records' creation, which would include more information about how particular events of pre-archival custodial history and later archival interventions shape the records. These changes arise from exploration of a much deeper understanding of provenance, based on greater knowledge of the actual history of records creating institutions and functions, and of custodial and archival history. Interest in this exploration was largely missing from the new professional agenda for descriptive standards in Canada in the 1970s and 1980s.<sup>11</sup>

In a recent joint article by Verne Harris (who is well known for employing deconstruction in textual analysis) and Wendy Duff (a pioneer of descriptive standards), these different strands may be coming into fruitful confluence. Harris and Duff do not as yet offer a detailed new approach to standards, but ask that future work in this area aspire to what they call "a liberatory standard" which "would posit the record as always in the process of being made. ... Such a standard would not seek to affirm the keeping of something already made. It would seek to affirm a process of open-ended making and remaking."<sup>12</sup> In so doing, archivists would come closer to conveying a fuller history of the records. Descriptive standards now stress only a part of that history. They focus on placing records within the right network of correctly labeled formal

11 Tom Nesmith, "'Through Various Vicissitudes': Custodial History and Archival Theory," paper presented to the annual conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Winnipeg, 8 June 2001; see also Laura Millar, "The Death of the Fonds and the Resurrection of Provenance: Archival Context in Space and Time," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002) and Peter Horsman, "The Last Dance of the Phoenix, or the De-Discovery of the Archival Fonds," *Archivaria* 54 (Fall 2002) for critiques of the fonds concept based on sensitivity to the complex custodial history of records. As these "vicissitudes" of custodial history are better understood for private manuscript materials, there may well arise reasons for replacing the still typical fonds-based description of them with an approach that parallels the multiple provenance approach of the series system for institutional records. For a good introduction to that complex custodial history for private manuscripts, see Ian Hamilton, *Keepers of the Flame: Literary Estates and the Rise of Biography* (London, 1992). For more on the Australian series system, see the pioneering work of Peter Scott, "The Record Group Concept: A Case for Abandonment," *The American Archivist* 29 (October 1966) and Chris Hurley, "The Australian (Series) System: An Exposition," in Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggots, eds., *The Records Continuum: Ian Maclean and Australian Archives First Fifty Years* (Melbourne, 1994); see also Chris Hurley, "Problems with Provenance," *Archives and Manuscripts* 23, no. 2 (November, 1995).

12 For discussion of descriptive standards see, Verne Harris and Wendy M. Duff, "Stories and Names: Archival Description as Narrating Records and Constructing Meanings," *Archival Science* 2 (2002), p. 284; see also, Wendy M. Duff, "Archival Description: The Never Ending Story," *Archives News/Argiefnuus* 43, no. 4 (June 2001), pp. 141–51.

relationships, as members of fonds or series connected to one or more creators. Standards do not go much beyond these formalities to make provision for in-depth explanation of the way people *actually* create, organize, use, disperse, destroy, and archive records.

Inspired by the Australian “Wizards of Oz” and their North American supporters, some Canadian archives are adapting and enhancing much richer contextual series- and fonds-based descriptions. The innovative work of the Archives of Ontario and the Archives of Manitoba represent this trend. These archives have learned well from the pioneers of descriptive standards in Canada that standards and technical precision are vital, but they have also responded to the evolving understanding of the history of the records by modifying how such standards should be structured and what information about records should be standardized.<sup>13</sup>

This new contextual series-based descriptive work has been greatly facilitated by the advent of computing in archives. Adoption of new computing technologies as an administrative tool was also, and quite rightly, a key feature of the agenda for the new archival profession in Canada. Archivists’ experience with computers as an administrative tool follows a pattern similar to the experience with descriptive standards, in that computing was launched with more stress on its technical features than on how deeper exploration of understanding of records might enhance the delivery of historical information from archives through computerization. Admittedly, the fairly simple capacities of computers in the early days of their use in archives in the 1970s and 1980s did not encourage much imaginative thinking about what computers could do. That said, the view of many archivists’ of the time, that their work involved only a limited amount of straightforward historical information, did not help prompt that imaginative rethinking.

As computing technologies evolved in the 1990s, it became much clearer that the principal challenge they present is not technical or administrative, but intellectual. The new hypertext and hypermedia computer technologies have made possible the practical application of that much richer body of contextual knowledge about archival records in description and reference. The principal question now is: how can this knowledge of the history of records be better conveyed by computers in future? Technical questions about how computers

13 See Bob Krawczyk, “Cross Reference Heaven: The Abandonment of the Fonds as the Primary Level of Arrangement for Ontario Government Records,” *Archivaria* 48 (Fall 1999). The Archives of Manitoba expects to make its new Web-based series system of description for Manitoba government records and the holdings of the Hudson’s Bay Company Archives publicly available in 2004. The system also includes fonds descriptions of private manuscript holdings. For earlier critiques of the conventional application of the fonds concept see Debra Barr’s path-breaking “The Fonds Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report,” *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–88) and Terry Cook, “The Concept of the Fonds in the Post-Custodial Era,” *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993).

work, and whether one knows a certain program, now seem very much subordinate to that. Most archivists readily adapt to these now familiar technical tools. How best to use them for historical information retrieval and presentation is now the overriding question. Thus computerization has neither simply led to a premium on technical knowledge and skills nor to a contemporary orientation for archival work in concern about the latest technological developments, but to renewed focus on identifying, obtaining, and making available contextual, historical knowledge about records and records creation.

There are two other key aspects of the new late-twentieth-century agenda for archival work which might appear to have tilted it toward less concern about its historical orientation, mainly because they quite properly reflect a strong contemporary dimension. They are electronic records and appraisal. Electronic records represented a seemingly new phenomenon when they came to archival attention in the 1960s and 1970s. Their very short history (they had only emerged as practical institutional tools in the 1950s) seemed to make traditional archival academic historical interests of little relevance to their management. They seemed only to require a much more contemporary, technical, and administrative orientation for archival work. Archivists struggled mightily with them, without much success. Why? One important reason is that in the early years of their response to electronic records many archivists did not understand sufficiently the history of records and archives. It was not until the pioneering work done mainly in the 1990s on electronic records by John McDonald at the then National Archives of Canada, and by the University of Pittsburgh, University of British Columbia, the Australians, Margaret Hedstrom, InterPARES, Terry Cook, Paul Marsden, and many others that it was possible to see that archivists should have focussed much more of their efforts on enhancing the record creation and record-keeping dimensions of the problem. This might have been more readily apparent had archivists understood more clearly that that had been a long-standing successful strategy behind much human effort to manage and archive recorded information.<sup>14</sup>

To bolster their status as records, electronic communications need to be contextualized with rich metadata far more than was thought at first, when they seemed to be mainly containers of decontextualized discrete data or subject information. Archivists and others have come to this view after nearly forty years of experience with electronic records. In other words, they have seen computerized communications evolve from rather simple databases into increasingly varied and sophisticated means of holding and disseminating massive amounts of multimedia information. These records now have a complex history to try to grasp, which will only become more complex as the

14 A book which did much to draw archivists' attention to record making as a long-standing means of constructing meaningful communication is historian Michael Clanchy's *From Memory to Written Record*.

future appears to hold ever more amazing and unexpected applications. In addition, archival work with them will require a careful documenting of what archivists do to reformat and restructure them or take other measures needed to keep them over time. Thus an important aspect of the history of these records will be that phase in which they were shaped and even changed by archival intervention.<sup>15</sup>

If archivists are to make available records which have as much integrity or meaningfulness as possible, they will have to account for these actions. If they are successful with electronic records, these records will obviously get older and older, spreading this work over longer time frames, or across history – archival custodial history. Thus, the records cannot be managed without an archivist who understands how to analyze these varied aspects of the intricate evolution of their contextual provenance or evolving metadata or history. Interestingly, this perspective is coming to the fore even within the information technology and corporate worlds. Contextual understanding, rooted in the history of records, is strongly stressed in recent books such as David Levy's *Scrolling Forward: Making Sense of Documents in the Digital Age* (New York, 2001) and John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid's *The Social Life of Information* (Boston, 2000). Both books were written by leading pioneers of computing technology at the renowned Xerox Park laboratory. Duguid, now a professor in the Copenhagen Business School, was the keynote speaker at the Society of American Archivists' annual conference in August 2003. In Canada, Donald Tapscott, the country's most prominent information technology guru, conveys the same contextual message.<sup>16</sup>

Led by Terry Cook, then of the National Archives, and colleagues there such as Brien Brothman, Rick Brown, Sheila Powell, Candace Loewen, Catherine Bailey, Nancy McMahon, Jean-Stephen Piché, and Dan Moore, appraisal has been oriented away from the conventional approach of seeking to protect records with valuable academic historical subject matter, usually identified long after the records were created. The new macro-appraisal approach, now adopted by archives in several countries, does refocus appraisal work upon recent or contemporary records. It rightly aims to bring records under archival appraisal control before they age very much. In these two key respects – its departure from the primacy of academic historical objectives and

15 See Jim Suderman, "Defining Electronic Series: A Study," *Archivaria* 53 (Spring 2002).

16 For further comment on *Scrolling Forward*, see my review of it in the electronic journal *Portal: Libraries and the Academy* (April 2003) <[http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/portal\\_libraries\\_and\\_the\\_academy/toc/pla3.2.html](http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/portal_libraries_and_the_academy/toc/pla3.2.html)>; John Seeley Brown and Paul Duguid, *The Social Life of Information* (Boston, 2000), pp. 2 and 202. For Tapscott's views see *The Globe and Mail* (27 May 2003), p. H5; he also shares his concern about preservation of electronic communications with a popular audience in Air Canada's in-flight publication *enRoute*; see his "Memory Loss," *enRoute* 06 (2003), pp. 31–33 and "Wayback to the Future," *enRoute* 09 (2003), pp. 35–36.

its focus on recent records – macro-appraisal reflects the agenda of the new Canadian archival profession. Indeed, it helps fulfill the hopes of those such as Kaye Lamb, who saw a new archival profession emerging around the intellectual challenges presented by appraisal.<sup>17</sup>

Macro-appraisal, however, also redeploys historical knowledge and interests in important, relevant new ways. A macro-appraisal analysis begins with study of the history of the functions, structures, records, and record-keeping systems and practices of the records' creators, as well as the organizational cultures of the creator being appraised, and then proceeds to an analysis of their more recent manifestations. These functions are what is appraised in the pivotal initial steps of the process. Macro-appraisal aims to identify those records which best document functions and activities which have long-term enduring value or which, in effect, convey what is deemed important to know about the history of a given institution, including its impact on society. Thus, although it most often appraises recent records, macro-appraisal is immersed in the historical perspectives, objectives, and research abilities that enable that to be done well. Private manuscript appraisal could use similar conceptual development. If it does receive that, it too will probably reflect these historical as well as contemporary emphases.<sup>18</sup>

The emergence of these new circumstances in the archival workplace since the 1970s enables archivists to see anew the central utility of historical knowledge in their work. And just as archivists have begun to see that their knowledge base must expand to incorporate the renewed importance of the historical dimensions of their work, many others seem to be coming to a similar conclusion about the value of historical knowledge to their work and lives. These tendencies, strongly reinforced by remarkable new developments in access to historical information in the 1990s (through the dramatic expansion of television services and the advent of the Internet) encourage archivists to seize the perhaps unprecedented strategic opportunities these developments provide to make information from archives more available.

17 See Terry Cook, "Mind Over Matter: Towards a New Theory of Archival Appraisal," in Barbara L. Craig, ed., *The Canadian Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor* (Ottawa, 1992), pp. 38–70; Catherine Bailey, "From the Top Down: The Practice of Macro-Appraisal," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997), pp. 89–128; Richard Brown, "Macro-Appraisal Theory and the Context of the Public Records Creator," *Archivaria* 40 (Fall 1995), pp. 121–72; Jean-Stephen Piché, "Macro-Appraisal and Duplication of Information: Federal Real Property Management Records," *Archivaria* 39 (Spring 1995); and Jean-Stephen Piché and Sheila Powell, "Counting Archives In: The Appraisal of the 1991 Census of Canada," *Archivaria* 45 (Spring 1998).

18 Significantly, Cook and his colleagues drew effectively on archival history to reflect on how appraisal needed to be reconceived in the 1990s. See his "What is Past is Prologue: A History of Archival Ideas Since 1898, and the Future Paradigm Shift," *Archivaria* 43 (Spring 1997).



In the last decade or so, a number of new Canadian organizations has appeared to counter the atrophy of knowledge of Canadian history. They have arisen from concern about the adverse impact of this problem on the quality of Canadian democratic citizenship and Canada's cultural and political survival, particularly in light of the rising tide of American culture and the dangers to national unity of Quebec separatism. Historica, the Dominion Institute, CRB Foundation, Pier 21 Society, the Hudson's Bay History Foundation, and Canada's National History Society very actively and visibly promote the study of Canadian history in the education system and interest in it among the general public. These organizations have the support of prominent business figures, academics, and journalists. They have sponsored new awards, such as the Governor General's Award for Excellence in teaching Canadian history and the Pierre Berton Award for efforts to popularize Canadian history. They conduct well publicized surveys of popular knowledge of Canadian history, fund historical publications, sponsor history fairs across the country for school children, and hold conferences on strategies for improving the teaching of history, as well as lobby governments and the media. These concerns about history have also helped intellectual figures, such as John Ralston Saul, gain wide recognition in the last decade. As perhaps Canada's leading public intellectual, Saul has identified renewed appreciation of the deep historical roots of Canada's distinctive democratic experiment as the primary means of sustaining it in the face of the kinds of economic, social, and political pressures mentioned above.<sup>19</sup>

A host of new television programmes and a new Canadian television channel entirely devoted to historical programming – History Television – complement these concerns. Perhaps the best example of the new programming is the CBC's ambitious seventeen-part, bilingual *Canada: A People's History*, which was watched by millions of Canadians in 2000 and 2001. Given the seeming lack of public interest in history, many thought that this was an extremely risky project when it was launched. It went on to win three Gemini Awards and confirm what other television projects, such as Ken Burns's historical documentaries in the United States, had already indicated. History could draw strong audiences if attractively presented and made accessible through a medium most people use to obtain information. Canadians are also avid viewers of historical programs on Canada's Documentary Channel and on Ameri-

19 See Saul's inaugural Lafontaine-Baldwin Lecture on 23 March 2000, Royal Ontario Museum, Toronto, Ontario, <[http://www.operation-dialogue.com/lafontaine-baldwin/e/2000\\_speech.html](http://www.operation-dialogue.com/lafontaine-baldwin/e/2000_speech.html)>. See also the section on "Memory" in Saul's *On Equilibrium* (Toronto, 2001), his *Reflections of a Siamese Twin: Canada at the End of the Twentieth Century* (Toronto, 1997), and his *The Unconscious Civilization* (Concord, Ontario, 1995). The remarkable sales for a Canadian book (about 10,000 copies) of the first edition of Granatstein's *Who Killed Canadian History?* are also indicative of the new life that interest in Canadian history now enjoys.

can television networks such as PBS, A&E, the History and Biography channels, and the Discovery Civilization channel. Television and the motion picture industry now also bring to millions of people an increasing number of popular dramatizations of historical events, biographies, and novels. Many of these are based heavily on archival materials.<sup>20</sup>

These programs made *archives* more accessible, as well as historical subject matter, since archival documents were often read or displayed on screen. Archives have been at the heart of the success of these programs, as the lengthy credit list of archives at the end of a typical historical documentary indicates. The Internet so far seems to confirm the television experience – that if archives can be made more accessible, they will be used in these ways. The extraordinary recent growth of interest in genealogy is another good example of this role for the Internet and of the broader trend of rising general interest in history. Aided by countless new Web sites for genealogical research, many offering access to digitized archival documents, genealogy has become more popular than ever. Entering the words genealogy archives into Google produced just over 1.4 million hits. The Mormon Church's genealogical Web site records 8 million hits a day. One of the new Canadian genealogical sites – Canadian Genealogy and History – reports about 1.1 million accesses since it was established in 1995. The Canadian Genealogy Centre at the Library and Archives of Canada, which opened in March 2003, is another noteworthy response to this growing interest.<sup>21</sup>

Pier 21 in Halifax, which opened in 1999 as a National Historic Site, is another significant example of the rising interest in genealogy. It also reflects a striking aspect of new trends in genealogical research – interest in the wider historical context in which family histories unfolded. Pier 21 was a major entry point to Canada for over a million immigrants, refugees, wartime evacuees, and war brides during the twentieth century. Visitors to Pier 21 can gain access online or through microfilm to records from archives which document the arrival of family members between 1925 and 1935. Like the Canadian Genealogy and History Web site, which contains links to sites providing greater historical context for family history information, Pier 21 offers exhibits which set the immigrant story in the wider context of national historical development. Some individuals pursue this wider context for their family his-

20 For further discussion of the role of archives in television programming, see Kathleen Epp, "Telling Stories Around the 'Electronic Campfire': The Use of Archives in Television Productions," *Archivaria* 49 (Spring 2000). Although television and the Internet offer promising new outlets for archival material, traditional means of making archival records more accessible still have much life. See the recent and widely noted publication of archival documents in Judith Hudson Beattie and Helen M. Buss, eds., *Undelivered Letters to Hudson's Bay Company Men on the Northwest Coast of America, 1836–57* (Vancouver, 2003) and Charlotte Gray, ed., *Canada: A Portrait in Letters, 1800–2000* (Toronto, 2003).

21 *National Post* (20 August 2001), p. A11.

tory in other ways. After researching how the Hudson's Bay Company transported fur down the Hayes River in northern Manitoba two hundred years ago, Bradley Bird canoed the river in 1995 to retrace the path of his ancestors who had been involved in this trade. And Canadian actor R.H. Thomson's play *The Lost Boys* (the subject of his keynote address at ACA 2003) is another example of this genealogical interest in the stories behind the ancestry lines and of the new literary forms this interest is taking.<sup>22</sup>

Governments at various levels are also responding to the growing concern about knowledge of Canada's past. At the federal level, there is the new Canadian War Museum, the new Portrait Gallery of Canada (which draws on the holdings of the new Library and Archives of Canada), Canada's Juno Beach Centre in Normandy, the opening of which was broadcast on national television in 2003 on the anniversary of D-Day, and the merger of the National Library and National Archives. These initiatives reflect sharply increased attention to cultural and historical institutions, and, in particular, to making the rich historical holdings of the Library and Archives of Canada far more accessible.<sup>23</sup>

At provincial levels similar forces are at work, sometimes with federal assistance. Several provincial governments contributed funds to the Juno Beach Centre. Newfoundland and Labrador has begun development of a new provincial cultural complex to be known as "The Rooms." It will bring together the provincial archives, gallery, and museum in a state-of-the-art facility dedicated to making the province's historical resources more readily available. In British Columbia, the provincial government has recently announced the merger of the provincial archives with the Royal British Columbia Museum to establish a "cultural precinct" in Victoria. In Manitoba in 1994, the Hudson's Bay Company made the extraordinary gift of its storied

22 *Winnipeg Free Press* (4 February 2001), pp. B1 and 2 and *The Globe and Mail* (7 February 2002), pp. R 1, 5; R.H. Thomson, *The Lost Boys: Letters From the Sons in Two Acts, 1914–1923* (Toronto, 2001).

23 This is not to suggest that funding is yet at acceptable levels. Auditor General of Canada Sheila Fraser highlights past neglect of Canada's federal heritage institutions, including the Library and Archives of Canada, in her November 2003 report. This is another welcome sign of renewed general concern – this time from one of Canada's most powerful public officials. For this report see <<http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/reports.nsf/html/20031106ce.html#ch6hd4c>>. Fraser repeated her call for much greater attention to federal heritage institutions in her appearance before the House of Commons Standing Committee on Heritage on 1 April 2004. She told the committee, "As you probably know, Canada's legacy and heritage is one [sic] of the key areas I will emphasize during my term." See <[http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/other.nsf/html/04hert01\\_e.html](http://www.oag-bvg.gc.ca/domino/other.nsf/html/04hert01_e.html)>. That Fraser was a keynote speaker at the 2004 ACA conference in Montreal is a further important indication of her commitment to this issue. For media support for the Auditor General's position on heritage institutions from one of Canada's foremost journalists, see Jeffrey Simpson, "Another Federal Scandal," *The Globe and Mail* (9 April 2004), p. 13. Simpson says, "The decline of heritage ... represents a classic case of misplaced priorities...."

archives to the Manitoba government and provincial archives, with funding support from a multi-million dollar federal tax credit that the company obtained for the gift. The Manitoba and Canadian governments in the late 1990s funded the construction of a new state-of-the-art archival facility for Franco-Manitoban archives known as the Centre du patrimoine (which was the venue for the ACA conference in 2001 in Winnipeg). And the Provincial Archives of Alberta, the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick, and the Montreal office of the Archives nationales du Québec have recently moved into new state-of-the-art facilities.

Accompanying these important signs of interest in the general state of historical knowledge in Canada are trends within more specific aspects of research into the past in archives. They are indicative of a new diversification of historical interests which has profound implications for archives. Within academic history as such, there seems hardly an area of human activity which does not have its historians. Other humanities and social sciences now also include many scholars who explore the historical aspects of their fields using archives, and provide context for the contemporary issues that animate them. Some of them have even begun to study archiving activities. Historian Carolyn Steedman refers to these developments as “the recent ‘turn to the archive’ in the human sciences.” A striking recent example of the diversity of this new academic interest in study of archives is a major new South African book on archives entitled *Refiguring the Archive* (Cape Town, 2002). It is edited by Verne Harris, among others, and contains articles by an archaeologist, an anthropologist, historians, a literary scholar, a novelist, a dramatist, a psychologist, a geneticists, a philosopher, and, of course, archivists.<sup>24</sup>

24 See Bernadine Dodge’s review of *Refiguring the Archive* in *Archivaria* 55 (Spring 2003), pp. 141–46; Carolyn Steedman, *Dust: The Archive and Cultural History* (Manchester, 2001), p. viii; two issues of the journal *History of the Human Sciences* were devoted to the archival turn; see volume 11, no. 4 (1998) and volume 12, no. 2 (1999); see also special issues of *Historical Geography* 29 (2001) and *Canadian Literature* 178 (Autumn 2003) which highlight archival themes; archivists at McMaster University will help host a major conference in May 2005 on the literary theme “Turning the Knobs on Writers: Archives and Canadian Literature;” see also, Jacques Derrida, *Archive Fever: A Freudian Impression* (Chicago, 1996), Suzanne Keen, *Romances of the Archive in Contemporary British Fiction* (Toronto, 2002), Michael Millgate, *Testamentary Acts: Browning, Tennyson, James, Hardy* (Oxford, 1992), Rebecca Comay, ed., *Lost in the Archives* (Toronto, 2002), Natalie Zemon Davis, *Fiction in the Archives: Pardon Tales and Their Tellers in Sixteenth-Century France* (Oxford, 1987), Patrick Geary, *Phantoms of Remembrance: Memory and Oblivion at the End of the First Millennium* (Princeton, N.J., 1994), Michael Hunter, ed., *Archives of the Scientific Revolution: The Formation and Exchange of Ideas in Seventeenth-Century Europe* (Suffolk, 1998), and James P. Sickenger, *Public Records and Archives in Classical Athens* (Chapel Hill, 1999), which was summarized in his “Literacy, Documents, and Archives in the Ancient Athenian Democracy,” *The American Archivist* 62, no. 2 (Fall 1999). This interest among archivists and others in the study of

Other academic and professional fields and social groups also have a growing number of researchers who are studying their histories and using archives to pursue historical information relevant to them. Architects, lawyers, journalists, teachers, nurses, librarians, business people, public servants, engineers, war veterans, gays and lesbians, climatologists, and medical researchers in genetics, Alzheimer's Disease, and cancer research, among others, are making their way to archives. A recent example of this extraordinary diversity is *Human Biologists in the Archives*, edited by D. Ann Herring and Alan C. Swedlund. The editors maintain that their book reflects a change in their field toward greater attention to archival issues and the use of archives, which promises much for their discipline. "It suggests," they add, "that research based on archival materials might signal a newly emerging area of biological anthropology, human biohistory: the historical reconstruction of the human biology of past populations."<sup>25</sup>

In addition, a wide variety of new historical uses of archives has appeared in recent years as archives are increasingly employed to hold institutions to account for injustices committed in the past. In Canada, Native land claims, the residential schools issue, Japanese-Canadian wartime compensation claims, the search for Nazi war criminals, and the claims of the Dionne Quin-

---

archiving and recording is part of a broader trend of rising interest in comparable phenomena: museums, libraries, and their holdings of artifacts and publications. For examples of the new museum scholarship see Hilde Hein, *The Museum in Transition: A Philosophical Perspective* (Washington, 2000), Peter Vergo, ed., *The New Museology* (London, 1989), Victoria Newhouse, *Towards a New Museum* (New York, 1998), Ivan Karp and Steven D. Lavine, eds., *Exhibiting Cultures: The Poetics and Politics of Museum Display* (Washington, 1991), and Tony Bennett, *The Birth of the Museum: History, Theory, Politics* (London, 1995). For a general introduction to similar international library scholarship, see "Libraries Today" at <<http://www.uoguelph.ca/~lbruce/index.html>>. For the history of Canadian libraries and publications see Peter F. McNally, ed., *Readings in Canadian Library History* (Ottawa, 1986), his *Readings in Canadian Library History 2* (Ottawa, 1996), and the *History of the Book Project*. This project received funding of \$2.3 million in 2000 as a Major Collaborative Research Initiative by the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada. For further information about the project see <[http://www.library.utoronto.ca/hbic/home\\_en.htm](http://www.library.utoronto.ca/hbic/home_en.htm)>.

- 25 D. Ann Herring and Alan C. Swedlund, eds., *Human Biologists in the Archives: Demography, Health, Nutrition and Genetics in Historical Populations* (Cambridge, 2003), pp. xi, xiii (emphasis original); Carol Daus, *Past Imperfect: How Tracing Your Family Medical History Can Save Your Life* (Santa Monica, 1999); see also for Alzheimer's research, *Time* (14 May 2001), pp. 43–45; for breast cancer research see *The Globe and Mail* (24 September 1994). (I thank Jean Dryden for the latter reference.) The outpouring of historical work is not limited to a specialized and academic audience. For Charlotte Gray's end-of-year review of Canadian history books published in 2003 which, she maintains, represent the resurgence of public interest in the past, see her "History is King," *National Post* (27 December 2003), p. RB8. "After years of neglect," she writes, "history is the non-fiction genre that publishers are now embracing."

tuplets are among the more prominent examples. There are many more instances of this growing need for historical information to assist the practical management of a contemporary problem. Richard Cox and David Wallace's recently published *Archives and the Public Good: Accountability and Records in Modern Society* (Westport, CT, 2002) is an especially valuable survey of these kinds of uses of archives. In addition to Terry Cook's article on the Canadian Nazi war criminals and Barbara Craig's on the Concordia University faculty murders, the book provides a number of international case studies, such as on Swiss banks and Nazi gold, the effort to protect the archives of apartheid South Africa from destruction in the closing days of that regime, and records manipulation and destruction in the Iran-Contra Affair, at the American IRS, and in the tobacco industry.

This book, however, is not only valuable because it points to a diverse new range of uses of historical information from and about archives, but also because it underlines the importance of an archivist's ability to do this type of research into the history of records, record-keeping, and archives in their societal, political, and institutional contexts. This is a crucial point. Here we see archivists doing historical research for important archival ends (public accountability through records) not as conventional historians *per se*. The contributors to *Archives and the Public Good* have shown that this research into the complexities of this history provides vital support to all archival functions. How can appraisal, description, and reference be done with such records without knowing in considerable depth how, why, when, where, and what records have been created and survive and how they were used – or hidden or destroyed?

This book also represents a key contribution to the public programming function of archives, as it attempts to educate the wider public about the importance of these record-keeping and archival issues and the role of the archivist as society's principal expert in the history of record-keeping. The public programming agenda of the new Canadian archival profession did not stress this purpose in the 1970s and 1980s, when emphasis was understandably placed on attracting new users of archives. More recent awareness of the complexities of record-keeping histories now means that archivists also need to provide that more sophisticated public education, reference service, and professional identity as key aspects of the new public programming. (The theme of the 2003 ACA Institute – "Archives and Society" – takes this approach to public outreach and was thus a valuable complement to the 2003 ACA conference.<sup>26</sup>)

The resurgence of popular interest in history and the remarkable expansion and diversification of society's historical information needs have transformed

26 For a review of the 2003 Association of Canadian Archivists' Institute see my "'Prepared to Lose Your Job?': ACA Institute 2003 and the Archivist in Society," *ACA Bulletin* (November 2003), pp. 5–10.

the status of these concerns since the 1970s. At that time, when the Canadian archival profession distanced itself from the historical profession, and even from an identity as a type of historical professional, society's historical information needs were much narrower and focussed on the needs of professional historians, who were a fairly small user group, and on genealogists, who, though much more numerous, were thought to have such straightforward needs that few archivists held them in high regard, or saw them as presenting important issues for the new archival profession's agenda. Given the heavy pressures in other areas of archival administration, it seemed reasonable to orient professional identity and priorities in new administrative, technical, standard setting, and contemporary directions, and toward cultivating new users who were not academic historians. But society's historical information needs have been radically transformed since the 1970s, in volume, variety, and complexity, and archivists need to respond to that with the new ways of employing historical information in their work that have been discussed above. Indeed, archivists cannot advance the administrative, technical, and contemporary aspects of the profession's agenda without doing so. Without the intellectual substance and direction this gives to the overriding historical purpose of archival work – of making information from the past available now and in the future for an expanding array of uses – efforts to administer archives will be seriously hobbled.

What of the future? It is reasonable to expect that these trends in society's historical information needs will grow in significance to archives. Key demographic patterns favour it, as the "baby boomers" get set to retire. They will soon form the largest, best educated, wealthiest, and healthiest (thus most active and longest living) group of retirees. And they will be looking for new challenges for this stage of life. A last frontier of social experience for a generation that has "pushed the envelope" in so many ways is the historical and archival frontier. The typical tendency of older people to reminisce, undertake genealogy or local history, attempt to make meaning of their lives and contributions, and want to be remembered will be powerfully reinforced by all the advantages of education, wealth, and better health and longevity the baby boomers can bring to it. In addition, they will likely be attracted to the novelty of it, after having largely ignored such interests during their adult lives, when their priorities shifted from youthful 1960s concern for social and cultural change to the business or other current agendas that dominated their adult working lives from the 1970s through 1990s.

R.H. Thomson's experience in writing *The Lost Boys* reflects these demographic trends. The play is about the tendency to ignore the past. When he was young, Thomson began to read some of the family archives of World War I letters that his aunt had preserved and which now form the basis of the play. He could not find the motivation to finish reading these "boring" letters when he was a teenager. He contrasts his youthful dismissal of the uncles who wrote most of the letters from the front with his more recent appreciation of them.

“Oh, Yeah, that’s old Uncle Art’,” he admits he would once say, “But now that I am older I go: I missed what?” At age 54, he explains, “You know there’s a point in your life when you are ready to do something. [At 16] I wasn’t ready. I didn’t get it, didn’t understand.” But by late middle age, he had become an archival researcher, a featured speaker at the ACA’s national conference, and a valuable friend of archives.<sup>27</sup> This kind of archival experience, so little known and even somewhat mysterious to many at any age, will be facilitated by the increased accessibility of archival materials that expanded television and Internet services provide, especially to older people, who will inevitably find such ease of access convenient as they inescapably slow down.

One other trend supports the views about the place of historical knowledge in archival work that are espoused here. It arises from what philosopher Rom Harre notes is a recent major intellectual development: “... the turn from a study of what is expressed to the investigation of the means of its expression.”<sup>28</sup> This turn has its roots in the two main closely related features of the information revolution of the last half of the twentieth century. The first is the explosion in the sheer volume of information and documentation in various new media, and the second, which has only recently gained greater attention, is the revolution in the management, interpretation, and communication of documentation that this enormous volume of it has helped prompt. Some of the key ways of managing this complex body of documentation (primarily through the contextual knowledge of the intricate provenance or history of the records) have been discussed above. The revolution in the interpretation of documentation, to which Harre points, has come about as people with various backgrounds, such as academics Marshall McLuhan, Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida, as well as journalists, media critics, theologians, architects, lawyers, and others, have drawn attention to the complexity of the interpretive process. They have shown that this process is aided by understanding that the means of inscription and subsequent communication play a powerful role in affecting how people come to know things. It is an axiom now that the means of inscription and communication, whether newspapers, television programs, films, books, or archival records in any medium can no longer be taken at face value. Many people are more attuned to what postmodernists suggest, which is that greater note be taken of something quite basic and even obvious about documents – that they are not the same as the things they purport to document.

As the philosophers of this view would say, the relationship between the signifier (the document) and the referent (the phenomenon documented) has

27 *Winnipeg Free Press* (7 November 2001), p. D6; *The Globe and Mail* (7 February 2002), p. R1. For further discussion of R.H. Thomson’s family history see his “Five Brothers from Brantford,” *The Beaver* (October/November 2002), pp. 6–7.

28 Rom Harre, *One Thousand Years of Philosophy: From Ramanuja to Wittgenstein* (Oxford, 2000), p. xi.



been disturbed or profoundly questioned. Notions of authorship and creatorship of documents have been radically altered. Thus to know anything about what a document says (or what is signified), a bridge between the signifier and referent needs to be constructed by using all the interpretative means available. In other words, an act of interpretation is always at the heart of the management and use of documents. Postmodernism, for all its seeming circuitous bafflegab, comes down to that very basic insight, and its implications, which are momentous for archivists and other researchers.<sup>29</sup>

These implications, however, should hearten archivists and, as Terry Cook says, help them to experience a “professional rebirth” rather than be dismissed as “fashionable nonsense.”<sup>30</sup> One of the principal implications is a new view of documents and archives. If they are powerful means of communication at the heart of the interpretive acts which shape knowledge over long periods of time, they are no longer to be viewed as static, material things. The conception of documents and archives needs to shift from this narrow materialist emphasis on defining them mainly as a simple physical thing, called a letter or photograph, or a storage facility, to one which emphasizes what they do to shape knowledge when involved in actions taken with them by their users and managers. Record making and archiving, therefore, are participants in long-term historical processes of meaning making or interpretation. Thus documents and archiving functions have key histories, or contexts, or multiple provenances in which to place them in attempts to understand them, and those histories have no final point where one can settle and say, “Aha! This is all the context I need. I now know surely what happened” – as if the signifier and the referent can come together in perfect harmony. This does not mean that anything goes, that any interpretation is as good as another. It does not mean that nothing can be known. It means that knowing is far more problematic and thus tentative than has usually been assumed. However, as Heather MacNeil notes of the postmodern shift, “It may not offer much in the way of metaphysical comfort, but there is something to be said for an approach to truth that acknowledges

29 Stuart Sim, ed., *The Routledge Critical Dictionary of Postmodern Thought* (New York, 1999), pp. 4–5. For further elaboration of this concept of communication see David Williams, *Imagined Nations: Reflections on Media in Canadian Fiction* (Montreal and Kingston, 2003), pp.36–41, 223–25, and 236–38.

30 Terry Cook, “Fashionable Nonsense or Professional Rebirth?: Postmodernism and the Practice of Archives,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001) and Terry Cook, “Archival Science and Postmodernism: New Formulations for Old Concepts,” *Archival Science* 1, no. 1 (2000); see also my “Still Fuzzy, But More Accurate” and “Seeing Archives: Postmodernism and the Changing Intellectual Place of Archives,” *The American Archivist* 65 (Spring/Summer, 2002); and two issues of *Archival Science* 2 (2002) devoted to postmodernism and archives, edited by Terry Cook and Joan Schwartz; these contributions follow the pioneering work of Brien Brothman (“Orders of Value”) and Rick Brown; see their “Archives and Postmodernism,” *The American Archivist* 59, no. 4 (Fall 1996).

alternative perspectives, embraces persistent debate, and tolerates imperfect solutions.”<sup>31</sup>

The intellectual challenge this presents goes to the core of the archivist’s role in society – the assessment and protection of the integrity of the record as evidence, and how that is to be done in order to maximize the benefits to society. It can be more clearly seen now that archivists do so not just by guarding the records from physical damage and tampering, although that is important, but by unraveling the often complex histories of the records so that their users may make more informed interpretations of the evidence the records convey. Records are “imperfect” evidence of a great many things. More of these things will be understood as archivists and others learn more about the history of the records. Thus the utility, reliability, and authenticity of archival records are directly related to the ability of the archivist to interpret or contextualize records as fully as possible, rather than based simply on observing and guarding those attributes of records. This work adds to the archivist’s responsibilities and accountability, and thus to the need for archival history of such activities.

Much has changed since the 1970s when the Canadian archival profession set a new course by leaving the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association to establish the ACA. It was felt then that historical knowledge would not be as important to the work of archivists as had traditionally been thought. But several key developments have prompted its renewed importance. The information revolution which has accelerated since the 1970s presents archivists with immense volumes of documentation in various media forms, capable of being communicated in promising new ways. There has also been an expansion of popular and academic interest in historical information from archives on an array of topics. These range across genealogy, popular entertainment, a new diversification of academic historical interests (from conventional histories of all kinds to human biology and climatology), and a myriad of practical matters of public policy. And just as the appetite for historical information grows, new and powerful means of mass communication for making archival materials accessible (expanded television service and the Internet) have arrived to help address the primary problem archives have long faced – difficulty gaining access to them. Recent intellectual trends have raised awareness of the complexity of interpreting documentation of all kinds and of the formative role of intermediaries in the knowledge formation process, such as archives, museums, galleries, and libraries. In addition, recent demographic trends involving the baby boomers make it very likely that for the foreseeable future demand for a wide range of historical information from archives will continue to increase, access to it through the Internet and televi-

31 Heather MacNeil, “Trusting Records in a Postmodern World,” *Archivaria* 51 (Spring 2001), p 47; Jonathan Culler, *Literary Theory: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford, 1997), pp. 66–68.

sion will be highly desired, and this generation, long schooled by postmodernity to ask critical questions about how to understand the complexities of information, will turn to archivists expecting help with that.

These developments create a considerable intellectual challenge. Archivists cannot read all the records the information revolution generates in order to appraise and describe them. Even if archivists could physically read them, they cannot grasp their well nigh infinite subject matter to appraise and describe them or match them to relevant researchers. Archivists cannot anticipate all the countless uses of the records or have in depth knowledge about the many and varied uses they do encounter. The best strategy in these circumstances is to base archival work on as much knowledge of the multiple provenances, many contexts of creation, or the overall history of the records as can be obtained – and then use the power of this provenance information to locate, appraise, describe, make available, interpret, preserve, and protect the integrity of the records.

This agenda involves a reorientation of the knowledge base of the archival profession toward this expanded degree of historical information about records creation, its surrounding personal and organizational cultures, types of records, record-keeping systems, and custodial and archival histories. This move is underway and is to be encouraged as the next key step in the ongoing development of the archival profession. This development does not diminish in any way the importance of the administrative, technical, legal, standard setting, and contemporary dimensions of archival work. It expands them to include more fully and without qualification or apology the breadth of historical information required to perform all of an archivist's distinctive functions. If this is done, archives – wait for it – may then even become hip, or as bold, dazzling, and increasingly successful as they age as, well, Tina Turner herself.

