

Book Reviews

Documenting a Province: The Archives of Ontario at 100 / Chronique d'une province : Le centaire des Archives publiques de l'Ontario. Toronto: Queen's Printer for Ontario, 2003. 344 p. ISBN 0-8020-8953-4.

Commemoration is the declared and obvious reason for this book. The archival authority of Canada's most populous province reached its centenary with modest fanfare in 2003. What more enduring milestone could mark this attainment than a publication – a work on good old-fashioned paper, weighing in at a few solid pounds, with high production qualities, and lots of glossy white space? A veritable coffee table adornment to be sure!

Documenting a Province is a handsome volume. It looks and feels of value. Reproduction of documents has been extraordinarily successful using as many natural tints, hues, and full colours as possible. There is nary a page that has a blurry text or fuzzy graphic. I have seen few paper publications that have consistently managed to bring archival images so quickly and completely to life – especially records that are in poor physical shape anyway. A fine example of this achievement is reproduction 4-8a (p. 107), a detail of the patent plan of Zorra Township showing three 200 acre lots granted by the Crown to Upper Canada worthy William Hamilton Merritt in 1820. The plan, even after some conservation treatment, remains appropriately creased, tattered, and stained yet eminently accessible and decipherable. Being able to present the three dimensional reality of the record in publication, according the document its artifactual quality, conveys a tangible, almost touchable presence. Another similar image (10-14 on p. 296) is of a letter sent to Tonbridge, County of Kent, England by a Mrs. Bridgman, thought to have been a governess to the children of governor Sir Francis Bond Head and Lady Julia Head, describing the events of 7 December 1837 during the Rebellion. This letter, in strong black ink with wax sealing and postmark, vividly shows the commonplace early-nineteenth-century practice of cross-writing (vertical, horizontal and diagonal) done to save paper and mailing costs.

A team of Archives of Ontario (AO) staff archivists put this book together over a period of more than eighteen months. You can imagine the meetings and discussions that went in to deciding, from the millions of records held by the AO, what would be selected, under what theme, and with what effect. The three themes chosen were ultimately very broad, with eleven sub-categories, each in chronological progression. Thus, the first theme, “Images of Ourselves” (120 pages), is considered under four categories – documentary art, maps, portraits, and documenting lives. The second theme has the label “The Importance of Context” (148 pages), and is split into amateur and commercial photographers, the Government of Ontario art collection, the architectural record, government publicity and promotional material, and photojournalism. The final section of fifty-one pages, “Important Events in Ontario History,” moves from the colony to the developing province.

My initial reaction to this structure was that it looked awkward and possibly inadequate. Despite the quality of its production, would *Documenting a Province* provide the reader with enough sense of how Ontario has been captured by the agency responsible for preserving a recorded memory? I believe it does. At the end of the book, fittingly with notice of transfer to archival custody in 2002 of the many electronic records of the Walkerton Commission investigating the drinking water contamination scandal of May 2000, there is a pretty fair sense of the whole. The images, however carefully selected, timed, and reproduced, do remain inevitably as images offering a taste rather than a meal. You must turn to the text accompanying each theme, category, and item for ingredients. Here the editorial work of the staff team shows its mettle.

Take for instance, a crisp description of a 1703 *Carte du Canada* (item 2-21 on page fifty-seven): “this cartouche is a typical example of its kind ... drawn at a time when boundaries were disputed by rival empires” and “clerics are shown baptizing and teaching Natives and there are additional depictions of the aboriginal people waiting for redemption. At the bottom, animals and vegetation illustrate the bounty of the New World, ripe for exploitation.” Or look at pages fifty and fifty-one in the maps sub-category of the “Images of Ourselves” theme. On the left is an 1882 colour map issued by the Provincial Board of Health from the *Weekly [sic] Health Bulletin* on patterns and trends of disease across Ontario. The captions for items 2-13 and 2-14 explain that this map is an example of one compiled by a Dr. Bryce, Secretary of the Board: “Bryce divided the province into ten districts based on differences in geographical formation and weather conditions ... text and tables included on the maps discussed the changes from week to week. Bryce’s maps not only show the incidence and varieties of disease over a two-year period in Ontario but also reveal the increasing role of government in public health initiatives.” Again, savour the three item spread (8-13, 8-14, and 8-15) on pages 230-231 from the Department of Mines and Northern Affairs (note the “and” relationship) in the early 1950s – a massive, cavernous entrance to a mine with tiny

figures and carts on rails, a camera flash photograph of miners at the mineral face, and a “Year of Achievement” report cover from 1954 showing a mining surveyor inspecting a lump of ore in the palm of his hand. The caption to 8–13 reads that the photograph “provides a glimpse into the harsh working environment of the miners. One is struck by the way the miners almost blend into their surroundings ...”

Such descriptive notes look effortless but they take skill, knowledge, and an eye for detail. As archivists, we are properly versed in attending to the context of records creation. The public view of archives has little or no sense of what this means and why context is the engine of our work. So, in *Documenting a Province*, it is good to find context briefly referred to (at page 126) and then exemplified in five chapters under its own thematic title. I would argue that it makes for an odd division in the book because context underlies *all* preserved records and not simply those selected for Part II. Nevertheless, the point is well made and it is one of a number of pertinent references to the particular discipline of the archivist and the creation of records. There is a thumbnail introduction (three pages) on the one hundred years of the Archives of Ontario and a nice observation that readers will appreciate: “There was no staying the tide of documents produced in Ontario ... letters, proclamations, legal papers, sketches, handbills, minutes, tax bills, account ledgers, and photographs. The people who jotted down notes about the weather in their diaries, kept scrap-books, or took family photographs likely had no idea that they were making history, but they were.”

Page after page reveals nuggets about all manner of Ontarians. It is difficult to find selections which do not pique interest. I found the biographical notes on that important record creator, the amateur and commercial photographer, especially germane. The obligatory coverage of governing and powerful Ontarians is there but not a dominating content. A section on the Government of Ontario Art Collection, administered by the Archives, verges on less archival concerns but it is an acceptable inclusion. The emphasis on architectural plans and designs is well deserved, whether of records from architectural firms such as the prolific Horwoods in the earlier years up to the more recent Moriyama & Teshima designs in recent years or the various government commissioned public structures such as courthouses, schools, teachers’ colleges, offices, theatres, and psychiatric hospitals. There is also some attempt to reflect the communication passages to sound and television records and, of course, those created electronically. The editorial team wisely notes the severe challenges to long-term archival preservation which born-digital records present and cautions that the difficulties of electronic records “goes far beyond the range of issues suggested by the selection of electronic storage media pictured here.”

Organizations the world over generate, to a greater or lesser degree, the kind of volume prepared as *Documenting a Province*, a self-acknowledged

showcase. Such publications tend to be sumptuous and serve as a profile message to funding sources public and private alike that what the organizations do is socially desirable. Archives are social assets by any measure and in these days of shifting priorities and threatened accountabilities it is vitally important that opportunities to reinforce the message are seized. The Archives of Ontario has done just that in *Documenting a Province* with admirable grace and aplomb.

Gordon Dodds
Archives of Manitoba