

# Obituaries

HUGH A. TAYLOR, 1920–2005



**Hugh A. Taylor, ca. 1994, taken by son-in-law James Spicer.**

The archival profession in Canada and around the world has lost one of its giants with the passing of Hugh Alexander Taylor on 11 September 2005. Born in England on 22 January 1920, Hugh was one of the most important thinkers in the English-speaking world of archives. His provocative essays have significantly pushed the borders of professional thinking. From his sensitive reading in diverse fields, Hugh became excited by new ideas and the prospect of teasing out their significance for archivists. He linked archives to a sense equally of local community and cosmic significance, to real life and philosophical ideas. Hugh was intent on constructing archives anew, imagin-

ing them as places where archivists connect their records with social issues, with new media and recording technologies, with the historical traditions of archives, with the earth's ecological systems, and with the broader search for spiritual meaning.

Hugh led a rich and varied life – loving family man, active environmentalist, peace advocate, spiritual seeker, and leading archivist. It seems altogether too narrow to focus on only one of these dimensions when reflecting back on his life. In a very real way, they were all woven together by Hugh into a brightly dazzling cloth. But for this journal's professional audience, it is his formal career as archivist that should be remembered, leaving to some future biographer those additional rich threads in the fuller tapestry of his life.

The first forty-five years of Hugh's life were spent in England, including his first fourteen as an archivist. There were three major formative experiences on his archival career. Like so many of his contemporaries, his education and career were interrupted by the Second World War. Hugh served in the Royal Air Force as a communications specialist, in wireless, later reflecting that this experience "introduced me to an electric language upon which our lives in the air at times depended, a medium utterly different from speech, printing, or writing, a prophetic experience which depended entirely on the interval, and the binary opening and closing of a circuit." Here were seeds sown for his later sensitivity to media, McLuhan, technology, and digital records. After the war, he studied History at Oxford, and attended the University of Liverpool for its Archives Diploma, and from both became well steeped in the character and use of documents in their many contexts. The third formative influence was his aunt, an accomplished Shakespearean actress, who lived in Bath. While his parents were in Africa building railways and bridges from 1926 onwards, Hugh went to live with this aunt for six years. He recalled that she tried to make him into an actor, and thus "taught me how to speak before an audience and I have always tried to recreate the record, whether printed or archival, by enveloping it with a kind of dramatic enthusiasm." Hugh then marvelled, too, at the architectural wonders of Bath itself, which he described as "an endless backdrop of elegance and famous lives, commemorated on plaques beside Georgian front doors, which worked upon me symbiotically. For me the record of the past was to be projected and recreated with excitement or not at all." These formative influences about the dramatic and public presentation of the past, about History, and about new media played out again and again in Hugh's career and writing.

In England, Hugh held the position of City Archivist, in the Leeds Public Libraries (1951–54); Archivist, Liverpool Public Libraries (1954–58); County Archivist, Northumberland (1958–65); and at the same time, Archivist at the University of Newcastle-upon-Tyne (1963–65). Working often with librarians in these postings, he saw the merits of cross-disciplinary convergences and inter-professional cooperation. As city, county, and university archivist in

Leeds, Liverpool, and Northumberland, he was exposed to a much different set of archival realities than those set forth in the classic theoretical manuals; he came to appreciate the value of the small scale and the local, even if operating outside the norms of the purists looking “down” from the Public Record Office. “We in local archives,” he later reflected, “were all fervent evangelists at a time when all England was becoming aware of an enormous documentary heritage” laying scattered about the nation outside London. In starting the last county archives to be established in England, in far off Northumberland, Hugh found “an archivist’s dream. Its history spanned the Roman Occupation, Anglo Saxons and Danes, mediaeval settlements, the coal trade, the wool trade, and the agricultural and industrial revolutions. The early years of a new repository are most exhilarating,” he recalled much later, “as fonds after fonds are acquired from the private sector over and above the early administrative and court records of the county. There was not much difficulty in following Jenkinson’s dictum that an archivist should not be a historian – there was no time! The rich complexity of the surviving record over hundreds of years provided all the stimulation we needed to stick to our post and not allow the discipline of history to dictate our agenda or warp our methodology.” Here, Hugh practised a “total archives” blending private and official records, and came to understand the keen intellectual stimulation of research by an archivist as an archivist into the complex contexts of records, rather than as a historian happening to be working as an archivist.

These attitudes and values he brought to Canada when emigrating in 1965 with his wife and three young daughters to become, first, the founding Archivist of the Provincial Archives of Alberta (1965–68) and, then, of the Provincial Archives of New Brunswick (1968–71). In Canada, as in Northumberland, Hugh was immediately struck by the contrast between the Jenkinsonian ideal of the passive keeper of government records and the Canadian model of the active, acquiring archivist-historian dealing with private and official records, with archives touching the lives of people and communities as much as those of bureaucracies and jurists. He was especially attracted to the wider range of recording media admitted within Canadian archives. “I suppose,” he thought shortly after his arrival, that “one of the great glories of Canadian archives lies in their splendid and massive photographic collections. Very few repositories in Britain have accumulations of this magnitude. ... It may be that these photographic collections will become the most prized and sought-after resources in the archives of Canada. The foundations laid by these great collections must be built upon,” including other audio-visual media, such as oral history recordings of Aboriginal peoples, and topographic and other documentary art. “I believe,” he explained, regarding the latter, “that the artist can make as valid a statement about the buildings or people he sees as anyone setting down the description in words and that this statement will in many cases enhance a purely photographic record.”

To his eye-opening exposure to the reality of Canadian multi-media total archives, Hugh added theoretical underpinnings borrowed from Marshall McLuhan, whose *Gutenberg Galaxy* he found “absolutely compelling” when he read it in the late 60s, and promptly “devoured a number of McLuhan’s other works in quick succession.” Hugh repeatedly counselled a greater visual literacy for archivists to complement their traditional analytical expertise with textual documents. Archivists should always be less concerned with “the surface” of their records, as historians were in searching for subject content, as with the “light of relatedness” of the various media themselves that illuminated a different kind of knowledge for viewers or readers. There should be a re-engagement of “all of our senses,” not only the logical, linear, logo-centric emphasis of Western thinking, and of its bureaucracies, and of its archives. Traditionally, archivists have seen records “simply as the neutral ‘carriers’ of messages or pieces of information, despite the fact that the nature of each medium does shape administrative systems. The interplay between the medium and the receiver,” Hugh asserted, closely following McLuhan, “creates a communication environment over and above the content of the message and thereby becomes a message itself.” Hugh thought that the character and impact of various recording media, and their patterns of communication and reception, were as much a part of the context of records as their more traditional provenance link to a creating person or office of origin. Archivists had an obligation to research and understand these deeper patterns, and convey this contextual knowledge to users of archives. Archivists needed to “work to ensure that those who draw sustenance and insight from archives feed on a balanced diet of media and are aware of the effects ... [and] ensure that our repositories have good media balance.”

Hugh brought this potent mix of ideas and experience to the Public Archives of Canada (PAC), which he joined in 1971 as Director of the Historical Branch, where he was responsible for all the archivists and all the archival programs. He soon, and pointedly, renamed it the Archives Branch. While previous leaders of the Public Archives from Arthur Doughty to Kaye Lamb, as well as Hugh’s then boss, Wilfred Smith, had identified the importance of non-textual media as part of a “total archives,” Hugh brought to total archives at the PAC the enthusiasm of a mid-career reawakening from his discovery of McLuhan and his own fascination with the visuality of Canadian archival holdings. True to his earlier conviction that “the foundations laid by these great [media] collections must be built upon,” Hugh took this growing media legacy inherited from his PAC predecessors and made media-based total archives a much more prominent structural reality within the Public Archives of Canada. Using the rapidly expanding staff and budgets of the time, Hugh created four new divisions, and enhanced four others, all by the mid-1970s, in order to realize his vision of media-centred archives. The Public Archives was forever after changed as a result.

In these mid-1970s, Hugh was also a strong advocate for the creation of an independent Association of Canadian Archivists, of which he may properly be considered the godfather; he had been a prominent leader, including serving as editor of the newsletter/journal, *The Canadian Archivist*, within its predecessor, the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association. Within the PAC, Hugh was a fervent supporter in the difficult early years of starting *Archivaria* as a new scholarly journal far larger and more ambitious than *The Canadian Archivist*, yet one edited by relatively junior PAC staff members – the “Young Turks” as he proudly called them – for twenty-eight of its first thirty issues. During the 1970s, Hugh was also a visionary in advocating full-time, two-year, graduate-level education for archivists in Canada, and co-authored the first set of guidelines of what such a program should address in its courses and research.

After leaving the Public Archives of Canada, Hugh became once again a provincial archivist, this time in Nova Scotia, where he oversaw the construction of an impressive new building, before “retiring” in 1982 to become an archival consultant. He thereafter taught part time for three years in the mid-1980s in the new Master of Archival Studies Program at the University of British Columbia and later was several times the Coordinator of the month-long Archives Course sponsored by the National Archives of Canada, until that was ended in 1993. And he wrote, and he wrote, and he wrote, a series of magisterial articles about archives. Yet while Hugh is rightly known through these articles as an imaginative thinker about archival issues, he had also worked very effectively, as seen above, at the “coalface” as he liked to put it: designing and opening new buildings, starting two provincial archives from scratch, reorganizing a major national archives from top to bottom, and adding a whole range of visual media (and electronic records) to the archival mainstream.

But these “practical” accomplishments are not at the heart of Hugh’s legacy, important and impressive as they are. He once remarked that archives administration left him cold. He cared more for the meaning of archives as social and cultural institutions and as documentary and media artifacts. What do archives signify? In the great memory systems of humankind, are archives a critical support or an academic indulgence? Is collective memory itself as fragile as our global ecosystem, and as holistically interconnected, and as needy of protection? Is not the very act of collective remembering itself filled with deep spiritual meaning, a kind of transcendent faith in humankind having a future and wanting its own past (that archivists create now) to care about? Indeed, following McLuhan, Hugh would ask whether archives are not as important as a collective medium of accountability, memory, and culture as they are for any message of historical content found in their holdings. By existing, archives signify. And Hugh’s own medium carried *his* message – a lively, literary prose, filled with pastiches, metaphors, and non-linear thinking,

so different from the turgid writing of the average archival manual or textbook, and sending thereby so evidently a signal to his readers that a different way of thinking about archives is both necessary *and* going on in his work. Given the serious challenges facing the archival profession with electronic records and information overload, with widespread illegal records destruction and a “dumbing-down” commodification of culture, with the explosion of multi-media sources and the challenge of postmodern thinking, Hugh’s stimulating ideas and the engaging style in his later-career essays provide a bright beacon of hope in times of professional change, technological anxiety, and occasional hubris. That is his legacy; his memorial will be that we seize his torch and carry on his probing and questioning.

Hugh was rightly recognized for his professional contributions. He was named in 1990 as an Officer of the Order of Canada, his adoptive country’s highest civilian award; and voted a Honourary Lifetime Membership in the Association of Canadian Archivists. He was one of the rare non-Americans to be elected to the Presidency of the Society of American Archivists. He won the Kaye Lamb Prize for best writing in *Archivaria*, and enjoyed a host of local and community honours. Hugh was celebrated for his long career with a *festschrift* published in his honour in 1992. Written mainly by members of the generation he inspired, and edited by Barbara Craig, the collection was entitled *The Archival Imagination: Essays in Honour of Hugh A. Taylor*. A decade later, his own book appeared: *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*, edited by Gordon Dodds and Terry Cook, and containing his best essays, as well as his own reflections back on the significance of his ideas and putting his writings in context.

Much harder to summarize than Hugh’s ideas, formal positions, and his many honours and awards, is his vast influence on his profession, especially through his provocative series of thoughtful essays. Hugh imagined what a new profession could be, should be, might be, in Canada, and then pushed us hard to get there. His essays written over three decades have established an extremely high standard for our professional discourse, inside Canada and internationally. Hugh made us move from pragmatic questions of “how to” and “how much” to deeper questions of “why” and “for what purposes.” Hugh addressed the relationship of archives to various recording media, information technologies, the history of record-keeping, post-graduate education, and the world’s broader philosophical and societal trends, all while linking the archival endeavour to the earth’s ecological systems and Aboriginal cultures, the threatening tyrannies of technology and bureaucracy alike, and, always, the quest for human spirituality. Before Hugh, no one addressed these issues in the depth he advocated and practised; now, after Hugh, a significant and growing international discourse in archival circles does just that, reflecting sometimes explicitly and consciously in footnoted references, sometimes implicitly and by osmosis, his vast influence in imagining archives anew.

Hugh has argued that archives, archivists, and archiving are fundamentally important because they meet society's abiding need for remembering and forgetting, for connection and continuity – quite aside from the value of the content found in archival records by legions of researchers. As a profession, we owe much to Hugh's celebration of our humanist role as remembrancers, stretching as he fondly remarked from medieval orality to archives without walls in a networked world. We owe much, too, that he looked well outside the insular archival cloisters, drawing inspiration for his writing from wide reading in many disciplines, and showing us – demanding of us – that archives and archivists must face outward to the worlds they serve, not inward to their professional and personal squabbles. He condemned the rule-bound archival fundamentalism he saw in some corners of the profession for failing to realize that “The letter killeth, but the spirit giveth life.” He envisioned instead the archivist as a deep researcher into the complex, ambiguous contexts surrounding records as the foundation of a new archival knowledge needed to thrive in the modern record-keeping world: the heart of the archivist's work should be “a new form of ‘social historiography’ to make clear how and why records were created; this should be *the* archival task ...” (Hugh's emphasis). Faced with incredible information overloads and digital records, archivists should not see their work “as essentially empirical, dealing with individual documents and series to be arranged, controlled, and retrieved as ends in themselves,” but rather be “concerned with the recognition of forms and patterns of knowledge which may be the only way by which we will transcend the morass of information and data into which we will otherwise fall.” His work, taken as a whole, is still the best effort ever, by anyone anywhere, to enunciate a philosophy of archives, of what archives mean and signify.

And yet it is not just Hugh's ideas that resonate, despite his many rich insights. Perhaps we owe most to Hugh's evident passion for archives, which he felt so long ago facing those “heaps on the floor” in an English county records office. There was a burning evangelical zeal as much as a fierce intelligence behind his probing the significance of remembering, and of connecting ourselves to our records, and our records to society.

There is an honorary bench for Hugh, erected by his family for his 80th birthday, in Playfair Park in Victoria, B.C. The park is a delightful space, with steeply sloping grasslands, rocky out-croppings, and a profusion of flowers in many colours and varieties. Hugh's bench has the best view of several such benches – a little off the beaten track that hugs the main flower beds, located instead on the higher ground, with the broadest and longest view of the park and its colours, on its quieter side removed from chatting walkers and playful children, and thus best suited for quiet contemplation. The location is not unlike the man's stance in the archival profession – off the beaten path, always on the high road, taking the longer, broader, more contemplative view, celebrating the most colourful perspectives, reflectively.

Personally, Hugh leaves behind his beloved wife, Daphne, who supported him all his professional life and turned impossible handwriting into his articles' neatly typed scripts for publication, two daughters (another sadly predeceased him), and eight grandchildren. For his dearly loved profession, he leaves a bold legacy of imaginative ideas and a passionate example of rethinking archives.

Hugh sowed well in the archival garden, and we all have reaped the bountiful results of his "information ecology." He would hope that we all would reseed from that harvest, and cultivate anew, growing yet higher plants of greater variety. And so many will, but we shall not see again such a gentle and wise gardener.

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## JOHN ALEXANDER BOVEY, 1934–2005



**John Alexander Bovey, ca. 1998. Photo courtesy of John Richthammer.**

In the early hours of 12 January 2005, John Bovey passed away in Winnipeg. He and his wife Pat had just returned from babysitting his only grandchild in London, England. It was a shock to us all.

For over three decades, John Alexander Bovey was a major presence at the national and provincial levels of Canadian heritage and archives. From the out-