

## *Book Reviews*

**From Memory to Written Record: England, 1066-1307.** M.T. CLANCHY.  
Cambridge, Mass: Harvard University Press, 1979. xiii, 330 p. ill. \$18.50.

Whenever we are tempted to take our media of communication for granted, it is helpful either to listen to anthropologists recounting the impact of the camera or tape recorder on non-literate societies or to follow the development of literacy in the profoundly oral world of the early Middle Ages. Michael Clanchy has a great deal to say about the uses of literacy as a vehicle for communication and as an administrative device, just at a time when archivists are grappling with a revival of oral and non-literate modes in an endeavour to achieve "media balance" within our repositories and to preserve a record of the past in its most appropriate form. It is the author's contention that, during the period under review, records proliferated on an unprecedented scale and that literacy became more widespread as a result. Indeed, by 1307, literacy had become all but universal in England within the administrative process (albeit in a somewhat functional and basic form), whereas at the Norman Conquest and for sometime thereafter written records had remained suspect and had taken second place to the sworn verbal testimony of men of good standing. With much the same nervousness we still jib at keeping land title records in the data bank of a computer. Though literacy, education, and learning have long been equated with a higher moral state, it is no secret that the written record can also be biased, inaccurate, unreliable and just plain wrong. We are, in consequence, slowly learning to value other forms of communication.

Clanchy does much to rehabilitate the chronicle based on oral tradition, often as valuable a record as the administrative roll—so long the darling of the medieval historians. He also distinguishes between dictation and reading on the one hand, and the art of writing on the other. The ability to read and write did not necessarily go together; then, as now, the administrator dictated. A secretary took notes on a wax tablet to be later engrossed on parchment in a fair hand. Today, the typewriter (originally a person, not the machine) has produced a set hand mechanically and thus secured on paper an increasingly flexible and oral form of communication. Archivists should be on guard against treating written records as necessarily superior to other forms. The Records Commissioners of the early 1800s who first published the Chancery Rolls of King John "would not have dreamed of burning Doomsday Book or the Chancery Rolls, yet the earliest records of the Exchequer were deliberately destroyed because they were in a medium wood, which was too uncouth for scholars to appreciate." These were the notched tallies which recorded financial transactions in the Exchequer and were split down the middle to provide a perfect duplicate receipt. In contrast to the present day, most of the records were intended to be preserved for the use of posterity, and the keeper of the records was a person of some authority who fulfilled the role of remembrancer in oral society. There are signs that to-

day's archivist is regaining something of this status as an erstwhile role of handmaiden to historians evolves into a more universal acceptance by other disciplines and the general public.

Clanchy also observes that "making documents for administrative use, keeping them as records and using them again for reference were three distinct stages of development which did not automatically and immediately follow from each other." Charters were issued long before charter and chancery rolls to record the fact were maintained by lay and ecclesiastic administrators. Even then a lack of indexes made retrieval from the rolls extremely difficult when the Crown sought, for example, to gather evidence on a subject's title to land. Rolls favoured the grantee who had a dated patent which he only had to compare with the entry on the roll to prove genuine. This has been the favourite nightmare of bureaucrats ever since, despite improved filing systems.

Again and again, the author treats us to insights arising from the nature of the record: seals became the last surviving symbolic objects of the non-literate which used to be exchanged in earnest of a deal (besides being difficult to forge) and which finally yielded to signatures; crosses did not necessarily denote illiteracy (and certainly not an ability to read) but were often used on account of their sacred symbolism which transcended both non-literate and literate societies. In the age of the manuscript, before the onset of moveable type "medieval reading (*lectio*) was primarily something heard rather than seen until the invention of printing, and writing (*scriptura*) often continued to be admired for its calligraphy rather than its textual accuracy. The laity was gradually coaxed towards literacy by ensuring that it changed the old ways of hearing and seeing as little as possible." We in our day are being coaxed into accepting the new media by similar steady pressure. Our present society is perhaps less literate than we like to believe since, for western man, literacy is less central to life than it was. Yet, as we involve *all* our senses our perceptions may be that much sharper.

This is a sensitive, finely researched work about media of record. It is, too, a memorable addition to archival literature for a generation of archivists who are becoming increasingly aware that the nature of the medium does indeed contain its own message. There is more to archives than the configuration of symbols on their surface.

Hugh A. Taylor  
Public Archives of Nova Scotia

**A Guide to the History and Records of Selected Montreal Businesses before 1947.** ROBERT SWEENEY, under the direction of RICHARD RICE and BRIAN YOUNG. Montreal: Centre de Recherche En Histoire Economique du Canada francais, (1979). x, 314 p. (Available from CRHECF, Chambre 440, 5255 avenue Decelles, Montreal, H3T 1V6)

**Guide to Canadian Photographic Archives.** Coordinated by ALAIN CLAVET. Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1979. xix, 222 p. ill. indexes ISBN 0 662 50346 5 (Ministry of Supply and Services cat. #SA2-108/1979) \$14.95 Canada, \$17.95 Overseas.

Both of these guides deal with much-neglected areas of Canadian historical research and archival responsibility. As trailblazers they are most welcome. Since, by and large, they are also well-thought-out, effectively organized and easy to use, their publication should be greeted with fervent applause. There are, however, some caveats—particularly those associated with the photographic guide—which force a reviewer, however reluctantly, to sit on his hands.