

Joseph Cuvelier, Belgian Archival Education, and the First International Congress of Archivists, Brussels, 1910

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Archivists quite naturally settled upon Brussels, a city of high European culture, a guardian of archival treasures, for their first International Congress in the year 1910. It was there that one of the most sacred axioms of the profession was first enunciated in the mid-nineteenth century. As the present Archivist of Belgium has written, "As for the principle of 'Respect des Fonds', it was already clearly defined by Gachard and taken up in an 'Arrêté Royal', (Order in Council), of 17/12/1851, holding regulations for the State Archives in the Provinces."¹ Therefore, when the First International Congress of Archivists met in Brussels, and ratified, as it did, the adoption of the corresponding "Principe de la Provenance," or source principle, as the basis for the arrangement and description of archives, it was in keeping with the archival traditions of Belgium which had been accepted throughout Europe, traditions which in 1898 were given credence in the publication by the Dutch archivists, S. Muller, J.A. Feith, and R. Fruin, of *Handleiding Voor Het Ordenen En Beschrijven Van Archieven*. This volume, first published in Groningen, quickly became the "bible for modern archivists," in Schellenberg's words. Two of the three famous Dutch archivists were present at the Brussels Congress. Dr. Robert Fruin, State Archivist of the Netherlands at Middleburg, was in attendance. Also was the redoubtable Dr. Samuel Muller, State Archivist of the Netherlands in the Province of Utrecht, whose well-known opinions were voiced many times at Brussels.

1 Dr. C. Wyfells, Archiviste Général, Archives Générales du Royaume, Bruxelles, 18 December 1980, to the author who is appreciative of having the original wording of the order: Article 9. Les Conservateurs prennent pour règle dans le classement des Dépôts:

De rassembler les différents documents par fonds, c'est à dire de former une collection particulière de tous les titres qui proviennent du même corps, du même établissement, de la même administration où de la même communauté [sans] mêler les actes d'un corps, d'un établissement etc., avec ceux d'un autre.

De classer, dans chaque fonds, les documents suivant leur nature, en coordonnant les matières selon les cas, d'après l'ordre chronologique, topographique ou simplement, alphabétique.

Belgium lists among its outstanding libraries the State Provincial Archives and the Archives Générales du Royaume of Brussels, as well as the incomparable riches of the University of Louvain, a major attraction to archivists and bookmen from foreign parts. There they could view, perhaps for the last time before its destruction in 1914, the 230,000 volume library, its 750 manuscripts dating from the Middle Ages, and over 1,000 incunabula, called by Brand Whitlock, the learned American Ambassador to Belgium, "the finest extant."² It was, therefore, a splendid place and time for the profession's first international meeting, and those whom many today might regard as the great archivists, in what has been termed "The Age of Archivists," were there.³

Among the luminaries present at that meeting was M.H. Stein, at that time Sous-Chef de Section aux Archives nationales at Paris, later to become its head. It was he, along with Joseph Cuvelier, who would bring out the first French edition of Muller, Feith, and Fruin's already classic *Handleiding* in the year of the Brussels Congress. France was also represented by Emile Chatlein, Conservateur de la Bibliothèque de la Sorbonne. The American Historical Association sent as its representative that pioneer of the American archival field, M. Waldo Leland, who on a grant from the Carnegie Foundation of Historical Research had already studied, beginning in 1903, European archival practice in French repositories, as had Arnold J.F. Van Laer, Archivist of the New York State Library. Among the other delegates from the United States were Gaillard Hunt, Chief of the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress, and Dunbar Rowland, the competent and ambitious State Archivist of Mississippi.⁴ Belgium was itself represented by D.D. Brouwers, Conservateur des Archives de l'Etat de Namur. The secretaries of the conference were L. Stanier, Librarian of the Royal Library at Brussels, and M. Joseph Cuvelier, an archival theorist, who was, at that time, Sous-Chef de Section aux Archives Générales du Royaume in Brussels.

Cuvelier was born at Bilzen on 6 May 1869 and was educated in his native town. He then proceeded to the University of Liège where he eventually earned the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in history in the Faculty of Philosophy and Letters in 1892. A slight hearing disability made a university teaching career impractical and, as a result, Cuvelier turned his attention to the administration of archives. In 1894, he was named to a post in the State Archives at Liège.⁵

A Belgian Royal Order in Council in 1893 established state examinations for archivists entering the state service. This rigorous test covering the fields of the political and institutional history of Belgium, paleography, and mediaeval languages was passed by Cuvelier with a first class standing and in 1896 he became Associate Keeper in the State Archives at Bruges.⁶ There he remained for four years until

2 Brand Whitlock, *Belgium: A Personal Narrative* (New York, 1919), two volumes, I, pp. 167-68.

3 C. Wyfells, "Le Problème de Formation Professionnelle des Archivistes Belges," *Per Archivar*, (1973): 207-14, hereafter cited as "Le Problème."

4 Donald R. McCoy, *The National Archives: America's Ministry of Documents, 1934-1968* (Chapel Hill, 1978), pp. 21-24.

5 C. Tichon, "Cuvelier," in *Biographie Nationale* (Bruxelles, 1961), p. 240.

6 The term "Keeper" was, and still is, usually reserved for European museum curators and rare books librarians. The term continues to be used by the Boston Public Library in its Print and Rare Books Department. Terminology for archival positions was originally discussed in an international setting at the First Congress of Archivists and Librarians in Brussels in 1910.

favourable circumstances took him to Brussels and to a section headship at the Central Archives of the Kingdom in the first year of the new century. His professional development was rapid in the years before the Brussels Congress. He published widely in professional journals and began with his colleague, L. Stanier of the National Library of Belgium, the publication of *The Archive and Library Review of Belgium*. In its pages and in front of the Belgian Association of Librarians and Archivists, of which he was a founder in 1907, he expounded many of the views and took many of the positions that he would later take at the Congress of 1910. Indeed, the subject matter of the Congress itself was to a large extent chosen by Cuvelier acting as secretary, and mirrored many of his interests. The classification of fonds, for example, and the publication of archival inventories were areas in which Cuvelier was to make some of his greatest contributions to Belgian archives. His *Inventaire des Archives de l'Abbaye du Val Benoit à Liège*, his *Inventaire de la 2^e Section des Archives Générales du Royaume*, and his most important *Inventaire des Archives de la Ville de Louvain*, of which four volumes were published between 1929 and 1938, were models of archival description.⁷ As Cuvelier wrote in his article, "Les Archives," in the *Revue des Bibliothèques et des Archives en Belgique* (1903): "Qu'il faut ... donner dans l'inventaire une image exacte de l'organisme ou de l'institution dont on veut faire connaître les Archives." His most persistent interest, however, and the area in which he would have the most far reaching international impact, focused on archival education. An examination of the records of the Congress at Brussels in 1910 shows him to be the acknowledged leader among his contemporaries in this field.

The Brussels discussions concerning archival education focused on developing programmes for countries where there were no specialized schools for archival training. Some of the specialized programs that did exist at that time were the Ecole des Chartes of France founded in Paris in 1821, the German archives school at Munich (1882), and the Institute for Archivwissenschaft begun at Marburg, Germany (1894), which was transferred to Berlin in 1906. This academically outstanding institution, the Berlin-Dahlem Institute, was formally known as the Institute for Archival Science and Historical Research at Berlin-Dahlem; its name embodied the theory that history as an academic discipline and archival studies were intimately connected. In fact, the Institute would only accept for advanced study those who had already completed the Ph.D. degree in history, usually at the University of Berlin. Another of the more specialized schools for archival training was the Rijksarchief school founded in the Low Countries in 1914. There were other schools as well.⁸

Cuvelier was of the opinion that, apart from the more dominant form of archival education found in the archival training schools, the education of archivists could be left to existing university programmes. These programmes, he believed, would be supplemented by state examinations for entry level positions, and by specialized on-the-job training of probationary archivists in what would become the celebrated

7 Tichon, "Cuvelier," p. 240.

8 Ernst Posner, "European Experiences in Training Archivists," in Ken Munden, ed., *Archives and the Public Interest: Selected Essays by Ernst Posner* (Washington, 1967), pp. 45-57. For a more modern survey of European archival training, see William J. Orr, "Archival Training in Europe," *American Archivist* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1981).

courses in *Archivéconomie* and “Le Stage” (Internship in Archives), at the Archives Générales du Royaume of Belgium. The theory of these courses had become well-formed in Cuvelier’s mind, but their implementation was postponed until the end of the First World War, as that monumental event interrupted the process that would have led to their earlier development.

When Cuvelier spoke to his assembled colleagues in 1910 at Brussels, he emphasized the Belgian archival experience and noted that the education of archivists would undoubtedly vary from country to country. It was also evident that he believed that the ideas he was formulating, based as they were upon the successful completion of the Doctor of Philosophy degree in history, might well serve as the model in countries where archival schools did not exist. As Cuvelier stated in 1910, “Ainsi complété, le doctorat en histoire des universités Belges, pourrait, je pense, servir de modèle aux pépinières d’archivistes du monde entier.”⁹

One may well consider the reason for Cuvelier’s assurance concerning Belgian training. The Belgian Higher Education Law of 1890 organized the degree of *Docteur en Philosophie et Lettres (Groupe Histoire)*, as well as the *Docteur en Droit*, at Belgian Universities. From the first, the examinations were both complete and demanding in the historical field and in the auxiliary sciences deemed necessary for completion of Belgium’s highest degree in history, the gateway to an academic post as well as a career in the state archival service.

It was necessary for the candidate for the degree in history to be able to translate a Latin and a Greek text, indispensable for European archivists, as well as to write an analysis of a Roman and Greek author. The candidate was expected to be familiar with the history of French or Flemish Literature, and would be examined in one of these fields. One would also have to pass examinations in moral philosophy and logic as well as the history of philosophy. In the field of general history, the candidate was expected to have a complete knowledge of the political history of the ancient world, specifically Greek and Roman history. He was also to demonstrate a mastery of the history of the Middle Ages, modern political history, and, more specifically, the political history of Belgium. The doctoral candidate was, in addition, to be familiar with the relationship of history to geography, and was to write an analysis of a particular period of history as part of his doctoral examinations. He would, as would be assumed of an European archivist, be familiar with Latin and Greek epigraphy, and would be examined in this area, or in the palaeography of the Middle Ages. Lastly, he was to present a doctor’s dissertation, “sur une question scientifique,” a subject based upon original research which would be publicly defended. It was a course rigorous by any standards, and it was assumed, but not required, that holders of higher posts in the Belgian State Archives would be those who had completed it. Above all, it was believed by Cuvelier that archivists, in order to be of service to society and to be able to administer the records of the past as well as the present, should understand the development of society itself. For this

9 Joseph Cuvelier, “La Préparation des Archivistes,” in J. Cuvelier and L. Stanier, eds., *Actes: Congrès de Bruxelles, 1910* (Brussels, 1912), pp. 305-306, hereafter cited as *Actes*.

purpose, he believed, the history degree would provide the basic theoretical background for archival work.¹⁰

In addition to this, Cuvelier explained to his assembled colleagues at Brussels that, under the terms of a Royal Order in Council of 14 June 1895, all aspirants for archival posts in the central archives or in the provinces had to sit for examinations that were divided into two parts. The first set of examinations, known generally as “Les Epreuves Théorétiques,” were composed of the political history of the Middle Ages, modern political history, political history of Belgium, and the institutions of the Middle Ages and modern times. All holders of the Doctor of Philosophy were exempted from this part of the state examination. However, all candidates for archival posts had to sit for part two of the examinations, “Les Epreuves Practiques,” which were composed of palaeography, Latin of the Middle Ages as opposed to Classical Latin or what is today called in England “Archivist’s Latin,” Old French, Old and Modern Flemish, and one of the languages chosen from the group composed of German, English, Spanish, or Italian.¹¹ Having thus passed the state examinations, “Le Candidat Archiviste,” for so he became known, was compelled to take part in the keystone of the system of Belgian archival education, the famous “Cours Pratique d’Archivéconomie.”

Very little is said or written today in archival literature about these exceptionally influential Belgian courses that were the creation of Cuvelier’s educational theory. Indeed, as Dr. C. Wyfells, the present Archivist of Belgium, has written on the occasion of the twenty-fifth anniversary of the founding of the Archives School at Marburg concerning “Archivéconomie,” it is a “terme inconnu à ce moment.”¹² Ernst Posner’s brief mention of it in his “European Experience in Training Archivists,” is the most complete description that this writer has seen. In that 1940 work, Posner also mentions Cuvelier’s role in the development of the courses:

The role assigned to the study of modern records in the training program is closely related to the problem of practical training or laboratory work. Among the courses of a narrower professional scope, in those given at Brussels, practice was considered as important as any other part of the curriculum. The Cours Pratique d’Archivéconomie devoted 30 lessons to archival theory, and the same to practical exercises. M.J. Cuvelier, the late Director of the Belgian Archives of the Kingdom, who created this school, insisted strongly on the importance of practical training because, arranging and describing form the veritable mission of the Archivist, and because a certain uniformity in this respect is badly needed if there are not to be as many systems as there are archival repositories or even Archivists. Dahlem has obviously moved in the same direction.¹³

10 It is interesting to note that Frank Burke has recently suggested the same course of action for American archivists in order that they develop a better sense of the broader principles of archival science and, indeed, to develop archival theory itself, in order to answer the question of “why,” rather than “how,” do archivists function. See Frank Burke, “The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States,” *American Archivist* 44, no. 1 (Winter 1981).

11 Cuvelier, *Actes*, pp. 302-303.

12 Wyfells, “Le Problème,” p. 1.

13 Posner, “European Experiences in Training Archivists,” p. 55.

The projected courses in "Archivéconomie," the new science of the arrangement and description of archives formalized by the 1898 publication of the manual by Muller, Feith, and Fruin, were discussed at length at the Brussels Congress by Cuvelier, who had just completed the French translation of the Dutch work in collaboration with Henri Stein of France. The thirty hours of lectures in archival theory were divided between general discussions of archival history, the history of the Belgian Archives, the rules of classification and description, and the administration of archival repositories. The practical section of the course, taken at the Archives Générales du Royaume at Brussels, involved the actual inventorying and classification of a fond. Practical studies were combined with the year long "Stage," or internship, in the central archives. Thus, having passed through the courses at the university leading to the doctorate in history (should the student elect to go that far), the state examinations, the course in "Archivéconomie," and the "Stage," the aspiring archivist would at last be accepted as a fully qualified member of the profession and assume the title of "Archiviste-Paléographe." It is hardly surprising that after this long and strenuous programme of study, an endurance test of one's intellectual fortitude and persistence, Cuvelier was as confident as he was of Belgian archival education and preparation.

There is little doubt concerning the Germanic influences of the Prussian Privy State Archives training programmes upon Cuvelier's educational theories concerning the courses in "Archivéconomie" and the "Stage," as they were to develop after World War I. At the Brussels Congress, Dr. Paul Bailleu of the Prussian Privy State Archives explained that the German "Stage" was of a two-year duration, and was undertaken at the central archives in Berlin, although it was possible to complete a part of it in other German repositories such as Marburg or Dusseldorf.¹⁴ The Belgian "Stage," on the other hand, was to be of one year's duration and completed wholly in Brussels.

In Germany, the Director of the Prussian Privy State Archives was the chief instructor and supervisor of the student archivists, "Les Stagières," as Cuvelier would become in Brussels. In Germany, the Director taught the history of archives in the Middle Ages, and dealt with the problems of administering modern archives in Germany, France, and Belgium, as well as concentrating upon diverse systems of classification and, most notably, the principle of provenance.¹⁵ At the same time, the German "Stagières" studied palaeography; economic, administrative, and modern Prussian history; and the history of the German language in its different dialects. In that these latter courses were taken at the University of Berlin as a part of the student archivist's Ph.D. programme in history, its character and content were not at all unlike those courses required for the Belgian Docteur en Philosophie et Lettres (Groupe Histoire) that Cuvelier did so much prize for his student archivists. Indeed, as Bailleu observed at Brussels in 1910 concerning German archival training and its similarities to the Belgian programmes then outlined by Cuvelier, "La manière dont nous avons résolu la question de la préparation des archivistes est analogue à celle que M. Cuvelier a proposée avec beaucoup de raison."¹⁶

14 Cuvelier, *Actes*, p. 666. See also Ernst Posner, "Max Lehmann and the Genesis of the Principle of Provenance," *Indian Archives*, (January-June 1950).

15 *Ibid.*

16 *Ibid.*

If one judges the validity of a man's educational theory by the productive scholarly results of his students, Joseph Cuvelier must be accorded the highest encomia. The *Travaux du Cours Pratique d'Archivéconomie Donné Pendant les Années, 1920-1925* (Brussels, 1926) and the five volumes of archival inventories produced by Cuvelier's students in the years 1926-37 testify to his judgement on matters of archival education outlined in 1910. As the Belgian *Biographie Nationale* (1961) commented concerning Cuvelier's work, "Il put former une pléiade de jeunes archivistes, et assurer au corps des archivistes Belges, une haute tenue scientifique."¹⁷

As the North American archival profession matures and explores differing ideas concerning the education of future archivists, the question arises whether European precedent can provide guidelines for future development? The answer is clearly that it has done so in the past in a great variety of ways, as Donald McCoy has pointed out, in the earliest years of the United States National Archives.¹⁸ It can safely be assumed, therefore, that such can be the case again. Archivists as historians should value precedent and tradition, without being tied to it, and have a clear recognition of the historical development of their own profession in the widest sense possible. This argument has been persuasively tendered by Richard J. Cox in his admirable article, "American Archival History: Its Development, Needs, and Opportunities."¹⁹ This is something that sadly escapes most other professions, although there are usually a few scholarly die-hards in most professions who, by the very esoteric nature of their research into professional roots, produce the only and, therefore, the classic studies of their fields.

The question of archival education in North America has been a continuing one since the late 1930s when the historian of American diplomacy, Samuel Flag Bemis, headed a Society of American Archivists' commission to examine the matter. Since that time, many plans of action have been reported in a variety of archival publications, the bibliography of which has been usefully set forth by Nancy Peace and Nancy Fisher Chudacoff, who have also offered their ideas for future education of archivists in American schools of library service.²⁰ While their bibliography is indeed a needed tool for archivists who are studying these matters, it is questionable if library schools, as suggested in their study, are at all equipped to provide the archivist with the training needed to blend historical methodology on the advanced level with technical archival experience which most have traditionally agreed makes the necessary training for a competent archivist. One cannot help, in reflecting upon this problem, paying close attention to the words of Theodore Schellenberg whose ideas mirror those of Joseph Cuvelier and other European archivists of his day:

The best preliminary training that an archivist can have, in my opinion, is advanced training in history. This provides him with a knowledge of the development of his country and its government which is basic to any evaluation of research values that are found in public records. It provides him with training in research methodology which is needed in

17 Tichon, "Cuvelier," p. 242.

18 See McCoy, *The National Archives*, *passim*.

19 See *American Archivist* 46, no. 1 (Winter 1983).

20 Nancy Peace and Nancy Fisher Chudacoff, "Archivists and Librarians: A Common Mission, A Common Education," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979).

all the work he does in rationalizing public records, in arranging them in proper relation with each other, and in describing them in terms of organization and function. Since the formulation of the basic archival Principle of Provenance in the middle of the last century, archival institutions in all countries have stressed the importance of historical training for archivists.²¹

It is here that the general experience of European archival education as outlined by Ernst Posner, William J. Orr, and, more specifically, the ideas formulated by Joseph Cuvelier in Belgium, may be of value in terms of developing a basic theory and establishing the intellectual underpinnings for advanced archival training today. Generally speaking, European archival education, despite its national differences, demonstrates the philosophy that such education should be a part of broad scientific training, and that that training has almost invariably been in the field of history. Discussing the classic Dutch archivists, Samuel Muller, Johan Feith, and Robert Fruin in a rare paper on archival history delivered to the annual general meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Cincinnati in 1980, Maynard Britchford stated that, "while rejecting the writing of history by archivists, Muller maintained that the archivist must be an historian. He wrote inventories and manuals for archivists and compiled, edited and collaborated in the production of historical works. By 1911, he maintained that writing history and publishing sources should come before inventories and 'service work'. Fruin placed description ahead of writing and held that guiding historical research and supervising the selection of sources made the archivist a true historian as much as writing history."²²

It is clear that the classic European archivists considered that the study of history was basic to the archivist's education. Where European archival institutes developed separately from university education, such as at the Ecole des Chartes or Berlin-Dahlem, the connection to major universities had always been close. Ernst Posner indicated that the presence of University of Berlin faculty at the archival institute at Berlin-Dahlem "prevents it from gliding down into purely technical instruction," a warning that should not be lost on those who advocate the education of archivists in schools of library service.²³ The recognized value of graduate historical studies to European archivists has been so universal in European thinking on the subject that students at both the Ecole des Chartes and the Institute at Berlin were expected to earn advanced degrees in history.

It has not been the purpose of this paper to offer another course of action for North American archival education to the many already suggested. There does not seem to be a need for that. It is clear, however, that the reasoned arguments set forth by Lawrence McCrank, formerly of the University of Maryland and presently at the University of Northern Illinois, seem to be built upon European precedent of the combination of historical studies and auxiliary archival sciences as adapted to

21 Theodore Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1965), p. 131.

22 Maynard Britchford, "Contemporaries of Samuel Muller, (1848-1922), Johan Adriaan Feith (1855-1913), and Robert Fruin, (1857-1935). Unpublished ms. and address delivered to the 44th Annual General Meeting of the Society of American Archivists at Cincinnati, October 1980. Quoted with the permission of the author.

23 See again Posner, "European Experiences in Training Archivists;" and Orr, "Archival Training in Europe."

North American needs. His warning about depending upon schools of library service alone must be heeded if an historical background on the advanced level continues to be of fundamental importance to archivists. As he notes in his discussion of the joint MA-MLS programme at the University of Maryland and the long-term possibilities of cooperative doctoral programmes in history and the information sciences, "Library schools cannot be expected to solve all the aforementioned problems in the near future. The best solution seems to be multidisciplinary cooperation, placing archival education firmly into higher education and simultaneously achieving some kind of balance between historical and informational studies."²⁴ There is little doubt that Joseph Cuvelier and other leading European archivists of the early twentieth century would have approved of this statement and of the models offered by Professor McCrank in his provocative essay. The goals that he outlines, and the European roots (although unstated) of his theory in blending historical and humanistic scholarship, and technical expertise in the archivist, help to ensure a healthy future for the archival profession.

24 Lawrence J. McCrank, "Prospects for Integrating Historical and Information Studies in Archival Education," *American Archivist* 42 (October 1979).