

*Masters in our Own House?**

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The question which sets the theme for this paper was hurriedly conceived, and I have since thought of at least half-a-dozen better titles. As I began to structure my argument, however, the question of mastery in our own house became increasingly salient. I must point out immediately that the question of whether we are masters in our own house is not a hard one to answer. For the archivist, the answer is, and should be, "NO!" The reasoning behind this simple, emphatic response is considerably more complex and grows from the very heart of the philosophical bases upon which we build our profession.

Why are we not masters in our house? There is a temptation to take the question literally, but I shall remain militantly within the metaphoric mode and suggest that what the archivist really needs is not a house, but a room of his own. To be a master in your own house suggests a certain splendid isolation which, while it might appease whatever ego needs you may have as far as power and the like are concerned, makes for lousy archival science. A room of one's own, however, accords a certain independence of action — how to arrange the furniture and the like — while retaining the occupants of other surrounding rooms for guidance and support. The degree to which one can exercise one's freedom of action, and the degree to which one will be held subservient to the goals of the house, depend a great deal on the formal and informal relationships which exist between the archivist and the other occupants. Every archivist should understand the nature of these relationships implicitly, for context is something absolutely fundamental to this profession. After all, what is provenance but context?

For Sir Hilary Jenkinson, in his now too-often overlooked or second-guessed *Manual of Archive Administration*, the matter of context was paramount. Archives, he wrote, are documents

...drawn up or used in the course of an administrative or executive transaction (whether public or private) of which they formed a part; and

* **Author's Note:**

This paper was presented at the 1982 ACA Annual Conference in Ottawa, Ontario and was written to be spoken rather than published. While I have attempted to remove or rewrite those parts which seemed too obviously "verbal" in their phrasing, what remains is still very clearly an attempt to establish a framework for discussion rather than a comprehensive examination of the issues upon which it touches.

subsequently preserved in their own custody for their own information by the person or persons responsible for that transaction and their legitimate successors.¹

The “Wilson Report” to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRCC) formally stated a principle that many archivists have been preaching for years: that every institution or organization which produces records should have its own in-house archives programme.² Again, the context is critical.

The parallels here are obvious. As archival records diminish in value the farther they are removed from their source, so does the archivist diminish in value and effectiveness the further he drifts from his primary context. The nature of any organization and the archivist’s position within that context carry equal weight in determining how successful the programme will become. Schellenberg, in his *Modern Archives*, talks at some length about the place which archives should occupy in their context. He states, in the preamble to the section “Nature of Authority,” that “An archivist’s authority is derived from the position and responsibilities assigned to him in the government he serves.”³

While Schellenberg is referring here to government archives, what he says is equally applicable to any archival institution which is lodged within a larger organization. My archival experience has been primarily with government records and my attitude toward my profession has been cooked in that particular pot. The conflicts I have lived through and the compromises I have made have been made within that context. They do not, however, differ greatly from those made by any archival administrator, be he in the public or private sector.

What are the contexts (and there is more than one) within which I ply my trade? One is the Corporation of the City of Calgary. It is as much a corporation as any private business in that it has a job to do and internal structures with which to accomplish that job. In the course of doing that job it produces records. Some of those records, like any business records, are required by law to be maintained for examination by one regulatory agency or another. Other records are required by law to be open to public scrutiny. All of this material is, by definition, archival and should be kept by an archivist if for no other reason than that archivists have the skills required to ensure that such documents will last permanently and will be easily accessible. Since most provincial regulations require municipal documents to be maintained by a City or Town Clerk’s Department, then the archives should be in that department too. That becomes a second, and narrower context. I am, then, a civic servant who is a Divisional Manager within a City Department who has been charged with the responsibility for ensuring that the Corporation can meet its statutory record keeping obligations. There is little conflict or compromise inherent in these activities and, were I simply to fulfil that protective function, I would be functioning as a professional archivist.

1 Sir Hilary Jenkinson, *A Manual for Archive Administration* (2nd edition, London, 1937), p. 11.

2 *Canadian Archives: Report to the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada* (Ottawa, 1980), pp. 6-7.

3 Theodore R. Schellenberg, *Modern Archives: Principles and Techniques* (Chicago, 1956, reprinted 1975), p. 119.

In the present scheme of things, archival science is not nearly as cut-and-dried as that. It is a mongrel dog of a profession in that it begs, borrows or steals bits and pieces of related professions and makes them its own. It is also a chameleon of a profession that tends, quite correctly, to take on the characteristics of the surroundings in which it finds itself. It is here that the conflicts and compromises appear since the modern archivist is more than the passive keeper of records as a statutory requirement. The modern archivist is also an information manager. Requirements concerning public access to the documents he protects bring the archivist into the broadest of the contexts in which he lives: that of public service in the most direct and simple sense of the phrase. By public service, I do not only mean service to the university-level professional who makes the most complex and demanding use of our records, for he forms only a small percentage of our clientele. I refer rather to a full spectrum of people — both corporate officials and members of the general public. Their demands for information that is credible and comprehensive pushes the archivist beyond the field of the purely statutory public record and into the area of supporting documentation. It is not enough to provide a copy of a document: one must also be able to explain where that document came from, what caused its creation, how it has been amended and what effect it has had or continues to have. In short, one must be able to provide its context.

In moving beyond the realm of statutory retention, the archivist is moving, if you like, from the standard model into the area of optional extras and, as we all know, the price then goes up. What price the host corporation is prepared to pay for the options is perhaps the greatest area for conflict and compromise. The municipal corporation, beyond its statutory requirements, is not obliged to provide research, reference or interpretative services to the public and, in fact, most do not do so. Schellenberg suggests that a government's concern for its historical records is a sign of its maturity as an organization and that, when this concern manifests itself, many of the records with which it is concerned have already disappeared.⁴ I would add that a government's concern for its historical records also grows from within as the need to be able to understand the origins and development of its policies and procedures becomes more numerous and their implications more complex. The question then arises as to the lengths to which the corporation is prepared to go to ensure that the information which it needs is available to it.

A corporation will make essentially selfish decisions regarding the type of programme which it will permit to grow. I say "selfish" not in the sense of the small and mean, but rather in the sense of self-serving. As I have suggested, with few exceptions, the drive to create in-house records or archives programmes comes from within the corporation as a result of the corporation's wish to know. How far the archivist can or should take his programme beyond serving those immediate needs falls into the realm of sponsor/archivist conflict.

The need to acquire, organize and make available records which support and explain statutory documents breeds new problems for the record keeper. While statutory records have, by definition, an internal logic, that logic is dictated by the manner in which a council, for example, keeps its minutes and is not generally capable of meeting sophisticated research demands. In stepping outside the realm of

4 *Ibid.*

statutory requirements, the archivist can meet resistance from those civic officials who are not prepared to relinquish control of the documents in their possession. This resistance is based on two concerns: the perceived loss of their ability to use those records (no matter how aged they may be) and a reluctance to open to public scrutiny the details of internal departmental operations. In dealing with this latter problem, the archivist must never lose sight of the fact that such scrutiny is not, in many cases, a public right. All "public" records are not open to the public.

If it is context which gives an archival programme its strength, it is also here that the limitations which can frustrate its development lie. These limitations, while they often manifest themselves in terms of budgetary or staff growth restrictions, can, in fact, be seen as philosophical conflicts between the goals of the archivist and the goals of the corporation as a whole. The archivist, armed with an ideal model (modified to suit the particular nature of the corporation of which he is a part), must attempt to develop his programme in competition with other equally or even more deserving programmes or projects. As a specific case in point, the growth of the archival programme at the City of Calgary will depend to a great degree on how effectively it can compete within the department of which it is a division. Competition will be against such other statutory programmes as the Council and Policy Committee Secretariat and the Elections Division. Following this first exercise, the programme's needs and wants, no matter how essential or philosophically sound I may hold them to be, are put through three more examinations where they compete with other programmes from other departments. A municipal archives programme must stand against transit, day care, pensioners' housing, sewers, roads and parks. I for one — the heritage of a nation notwithstanding — accept this as the way it should always be. Immunity from public scrutiny is not a viable goal for an archives' administrator. The public, through its elected officials, have the final say as to what they are prepared to pay for.

As archivists we usually speak of our responsibilities to the public in terms related to improved access to documents, comprehensive finding aids and exhibitions. However, fiscal responsibility is as much a requisite for keeping the public trust as the development of an ideal freedom of information policy. In fact, the question of municipal and other government tax rates has rarely been accorded the yawn which has traditionally greeted most freedom of information pronouncements.

The theme for this paper establishes a rather interesting series of opposites: sponsor *versus* archivist, archivist *versus* user and user *versus* sponsor. As I have attempted to point out, the matter of sponsor/archivist conflict can be minimized by a rational placing of the programme within its context and the support of that programme through the implementation of strong, defensible terms of reference and clearly defined authorities. Indeed, I cannot conceive of an instance where sound archival theory could be so in conflict with a sponsor's goals that serious difficulties would arise. That is not to say that corporations are not sometimes short-sighted, misinformed, irrational and downright anti-archival, or that archivists are never pompous, opinionated souls who feel that moral right is theirs alone. Even in this light, however, sound archival theory should dictate that the wish of the sponsor be paramount. The materials in question are, after all, the sponsor's property.

The field of researcher/archivist relationships is, for me, a far muddier one. There has been, of late, a good deal of examination of the researcher/archivist relationship

with most of it coming from archivists and most of it not particularly encouraging to researchers. In fact, it seems as though there is today a natural antagonism between the researcher and the archivist which did not exist ten or fifteen years ago. Many archivists have suggested that this is a result of the increasing professional identity which we cherish so dearly while others have suggested that we are finally secure enough to call a halt to what we see as flagrant abuses perpetrated on ourselves and our records by arrogant researchers. Again, I find each point equally difficult to swallow.

That there is a problem cannot be questioned. That there is both conflict and a need for compromise is also beyond question. I would suggest, though, that the root of the problem lies with the modern archivist and with the nature of modern records. To state categorically that public research service is a by-product of service to one's sponsor is not to infer that such research is unimportant or even secondary. It is simply to state that there is a hierarchical relationship between the two which cannot be tampered with. I believe that our service to a certain percentage of the researching public is beginning to suffer due to our inability to deal effectively (or as effectively as we used to) with the collections in our care. The tremendous volume of material produced by any organization which must undergo archival scrutiny requires that single document or even file-level description be abandoned if any progress is to be made at all. When this volume of records is tied to increasingly sophisticated demands by the research elite and to a steadily rising number of research requests from within the ranks of our sponsors, we rapidly lose our ability to respond as we once could and the level of service appears to decline. I state "appears" because I do not believe that service has in fact declined at all. It simply has not met the rising expectations of both sponsor and user — expectations which we ourselves promoted.

Where Alan Artibise and Gilbert Stelter, in the introduction to their recently published bibliography, *Canada's Urban Past*, speak of their hopes for "a significant reduction in the fragmentation and compartmentalization of knowledge,"⁵ the ability of archives to provide the materials necessary to support this synthesis is surely beginning to erode. Why is this the case? I believe that to a large degree we are becoming victims of our own success and are perhaps even guilty of believing our own press releases. Some time ago we solved the problem of acquisition and began to eliminate empire building and the irrational raiding of each others' territories. We began to respond to increases in demand by expanding both our public service programmes and our storage areas. What we have failed to do is bring our theories and practice of appraisal up to scratch. We are simply incapable of dealing effectively with the masses of multimedia materials to which we have fallen heir. The reasons for this growing inability to manage increasing volumes of material are many, but primary among them is a failure on the part of archivists to keep our sponsors fully informed as to the real implications of the expanded public service and "total" archival programmes which we sold them in the 1960s and 1970s.

We have experienced tremendous growth in certain areas, but today we are not able to fully develop the programmes necessary to deal with the results of that growth. We do not have the staff and we do not have the budgets and it is unlikely

5 Alan Artibise and Gilbert Stelter, *Canada's Urban Past* (Vancouver, 1981), p. xxviii.

that, over the next decade, we will even come close to getting them. It is unfortunate (but nevertheless true) that the researcher will be the one to suffer as his expectations are not met. Archivists, acting in something which is often perilously close to a vacuum, have advocated expanded research facilities, sophisticated computer-based finding aids, the development of common language for cataloguing and the publication of such guides as the *Union List of Manuscripts* and *Ontario's Heritage*. All this we have done in the name of improved public access to the documents in our care and all of these things are undeniably important from a philosophical point of view. We are, after all, committed to encouraging the use of our collections. There is some doubt in my mind, however, about prospects for the continued development of this evangelistic activity.

Research in archival collections is increasing as statistics for institutions right across the country will confirm. While the great majority of research continues to be local and rather straight forward in nature, the university-level researcher still makes the fullest and most complex use of our records. It has been for this group that our most sophisticated finding aids have been developed. It has been for this group that we publish. It is for this group that we maintain large quantities of materials that might otherwise have gone to their great reward. This relatively small group is, in fact, very expensive to service. I do not for one moment question the value of the work that they do nor do I question whether or not it is the business of archivists to provide the support services which we have repeatedly committed ourselves to providing. There is, however, the matter of money. It seems a shame to reduce most things to such mundane terms, but money is the basis upon which the present problems lie. Our most valued and worthy researchers (that is to say senior university professors or students), are now in a position where they are increasingly unable to pay the cost of the services which they require. We are all aware that such essentials as travel grants and research fellowships are rapidly declining, as are the acquisition budgets for the libraries and other repositories which used to assist with such things as the cost of copies, microfilming and the like.

Simultaneous with a decline in funding are the increasing needs of the researcher. Who, then, will pay the costs? There is a conflict between user and sponsor which is implicit in this problem, and the archivist is caught in the middle. We are committed to the acquisition, preservation and exposure of permanently valuable records. We have, on the one hand, sponsors who presumably feel that such activities are a vital part of their corporate activities and, on the other hand, researchers who are making increasingly complex and detailed demands on those records.

Our obligations as archivists are clear. While we are committed to provide to those researchers the finest service we can, we have an even stronger obligation to our sponsors for the costs which they have to bear. Each time we acquire a new collection, there is an impact on our operating budget which, in time, will far exceed the cost of the acquisition. Each time we agree to participate in some co-operative programme outside our own walls, there will be financial considerations which must be explored. We have been lax in ensuring that our sponsors are aware of the implications of what we are doing for them and for the public. A decade or so ago, with their blessing, we began major expansions of our collections and of our public service programmes. We began to grow and to assert ourselves as professionals with specific goals and to develop the philosophies and methodologies necessary to reach those goals. We have now reached a stage where we need to examine carefully the

implications of what we have wrought and what it will take to sustain it. The time has come for us to go back to our sponsors and ensure that they are aware of what their archives are going to ask of them in the next decade and to give them the opportunity to say “yea” or “nay.” We must also be prepared to justify to our sponsors the cost of maintaining their records and the cost of maintaining records for which they may not have much use. We must be prepared to try to convince our sponsors that the work which we do, beyond our statutory duties to them, is worthwhile and worth funding.

We have already begun to see that the 1980s will not hold nearly as many rose-tinted vistas as the 1970s. Already archival programmes of some consequence have been closed or cut back. Other programmes planned for the near future, especially in the corporate sector, have been relegated to the “back burner.” This trend will continue for some time. Those programmes which have lived on grants and goodwill — the theme collections and their cousins — and those which do not have sound, informed and active sponsor support are bound for hard times and all the research pressure in the world will not save them in the face of rising costs and declining revenues with which to fund them. Service to our sponsors is not the “con” or smokescreen that it is too often seen to be. It is not something which we do only so that they will let us do something else which is more glamorous or noble. It is the first and foremost reason for our existence. What some of us may perceive as excessive compromise, others will see as matters of practical fact.

I am not suggesting a wholesale retreat from the fields of public research service and outreach programming. We have come much too far for that. If we ignore accountability to our sponsors, however, we do so at our own peril. We must never abdicate responsibilities which are rightly our own, but neither should we take for ourselves those which others have abdicated. We must build our programmes on a solid foundation of sponsor support because ensuring that that support will be strong and consistent will ultimately benefit all those whom we serve. We are not, and will never be, masters in our own house. We are a part of a greater whole and the recognition of this fact must be an integral part of any developing professional identity.