

*Masters in our Own House: A Commentary**

by **BRIAN S. OSBORNE**

Apart from the double doors in the elevator approach to the "upper sanctum" of the seventh floor and staggered hours of lunch and coffee breaks, the three major obstacles I have had to overcome in my attempts to communicate with archivists at the Public Archives of Canada have been: I'm sorry, those records were destroyed in the fire on Parliament Hill; I'm sorry, those records are in storage in Hull but we can get them for you by tomorrow; and I'm sorry, but this collection has been recatalogued and the new finding aid is not ready yet. Mr. Rees now raises the spectre of a fourth problem: I'm sorry, but we convinced our sponsor that preserving these records was not cost-effective and they were destroyed in the interests of economic rationality. Obviously, this is an overstatement of Mr. Rees' argument but I must confess to a considerable uneasiness over the underscored assertions of the paper that:

1. The archivist must become an indispensable part of the administration.
2. Meeting users' needs and public service in general is only a by-product of service to the corporation.
3. The needs and concerns of the patron corporation are paramount.

I agree with Mr. Rees' portrayal of the archivist as "information manager." More specifically, he admits to the role of the archivist as a servant of a public which includes the specialized academic researcher and the enquiries of the general public. I also agree with Mr. Rees' identification of the immense problems being faced by corporate, municipal, institutional, provincial and federal archives, all of which have to accommodate the ever increasing numbers, diversity, demand for and sophistication of use of records. Finally, all would agree that such burgeoning pressures result in exponential increases in costs of operation, costs which have to compete with other charges upon budgets. Perhaps it is ultimately true that "Money is the basis upon which the present problems lie."

But it is here that we part ways. Mr. Rees asserts that his recognition of the paramountcy of the interests of the patron-cum-sponsor stems from the "philosophical base" of the profession. In contrast, I would rather argue that this

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reduction of the archivist to the role of servant of the sponsor appears to be motivated more by economic pragmatism and an implicit belief in the old adage, "Whoever pays the piper calls the tune." It is further argued that while public service continues to be important, archivists will have "a stronger obligation to our sponsors for the costs which they will have to bear." And again that "sound archival theory would dictate that the wish of the sponsor is paramount. The materials in question are, after all, the sponsor's property."

But surely it is more than a question of immediate proprietary rights? While it would be improper of me not to recognize these rights, I would argue that there is also a question of long term rights, of the protection of society's right to heritage. And it is also a matter of advocacy. I suppose that as a researcher I expect archivists, and the corporate archivist in particular, to be forcefully urging the case for the preservation of and access to records. This case should be based upon a professional evaluation of the value and significance of such records as best as they can be determined at the time. Certainly, I would not expect an archivist to feel it necessary to emphasize the costs of such actions or to attempt to advance a financial rationale for doing so. Others perform that role all too well.

Could it be that this is where the essential difference lies? That is, the difference between a keeper of corporate records on one hand and a professional archivist on the other, each having different perceptions of the role of the sponsor and the nature of the relationship of the sponsor with the user. A corporate record keeper must be responsible to the sponsor, maintaining records of use to the corporation in current decision making. In such situations, cost effectiveness is an important consideration. Public user access must be qualified, if not excluded, while such questions as historical significance, social responsibility and heritage become esoteric luxuries. Only when such records are no longer of any utility will the question of preservation as opposed to destruction be raised.

In contrast, archivists are concerned with meeting as best they can the need for preserving a great diversity of material and maximizing its use by the public. Without knowing the answers to as yet unformulated questions, little can be thrown away and yet we know that much must be. The only relief lies in the imminence of new forms of data processing, storage and management. Even so, the paper yield of the industrial and commercial revolution has still to be accommodated. Certainly, in the face of pressures on space and economic resources, hard decisions will have to be made, but always with the best interests of the broadly defined user in mind.

But perhaps I am misreading this paper or creating a "straw man" and Mr. Rees' message is simpler: archivists should focus more attention on convincing all sponsors of the importance of record keeping and, through economically responsible approaches to preservation, justifying the costs. If so, I agree. And I would add that the advocacy of the importance of records and archives requires that professional archivists not capitulate to the immediate economic interests of a narrowly defined sponsor, but rather strive to serve the broader interests of their true sponsor, the general public.