

Pot-pourri

David W. Parker: the "Father" of Archival Arrangement at the Public Archives of Canada

by CARMAN V. CARROLL

The case of the arrangement of the William Lyon Mackenzie King Papers notwithstanding, the Public Archives of Canada did have officials in its employ some seventy years ago who believed in and practiced archival arrangement following the principles of *respect des fonds* and *provenance*. Perhaps the first Canadian archivist to endorse these principles was David W. Parker, Chief of the Manuscript Division from his date of appointment to the Archives in 1912 to his rather fiery resignation in 1923. Except for the period 1917-1919 when he served overseas with the British Expeditionary Force, Parker's primary responsibility was the reorganization of the pre-Confederation government records in the Archives' custody.

David Parker is now remembered for his *Guide to the Documents in the Manuscript Room at the Public Archives* (Ottawa, 1914) and several other guides which he either wrote or coauthored under the auspices of the Carnegie Institution in Washington, D.C. The *Guide* was to be a two-volume work and the fact that volume two never appeared formed the basis of Parker's frustration with the PAC and, more particularly, with Arthur Doughty, the Dominion Archivist. If Doughty can be called the "father" of acquisitions for his vigorous and successful collecting activities (he was, after all, known as "the Great Thief"), then Parker might well be called the "father" of arrangement for his decade of devotion to the reestablishment of order in the arrangement of the public records and private papers in his custody. Unfortunately for Parker, he received much less support for his work than he felt he deserved.

His frustrations were put onto paper in an interesting and frank memorandum, a memorandum which also provides some interesting details on the operations of the PAC at the time. In his "Memorandum to Dr. Doughty on the classification of the records of government departments (1760-1867) in the Manuscript Room," dated 11 March 1920, Parker shoots from the hip.¹ The problems of the archivist sixty years ago sound remarkably familiar to this archivist today: acquisition *versus* arrangement, private papers *versus* public records, qualifications of staff for the key responsibilities of selection and arrangement of records, the historian *versus* the archivist, space problems, lack of staff, and media rivalries within the institution.

1 PAC, David W. Parker Papers, Manuscript Group 30, D44, file 1.

Parker resigned from the Archives in 1923, but not before he had delivered two more rather vocal salvos against the institution. In his address before the American Historical Association in 1922 entitled "Some problems in the Classification of Departmental Archives," Parker gave a detailed description of his experiences in the arrangement of the Manuscript Division's records. A sentence at the end of his remarks bears repeating. He stated that disregard for the "principe de la provenance" before his arrival "has resulted in several awkward series, in numerous amorphous collections, which now like income taxes and the poor, can not be disregarded, and are ever with us."²

Parker's resignation letter to the Secretary of State repeats many of his earlier charges and added one new one, a rebuke of the minister, A.B. Copp, and his predecessors: "For above a decade I have watched the procession of Secretaries of State march across the recent pages of our annals. Whatever may have been their interest in war trophies and patronage, so far as the Manuscript Division is concerned they have remained shadowy and distant personalities. I am not aware that history records a single instance of reform instituted or of adequate supervision exercised by absentee landlords."³

Memorandum to Dr. Doughty on the classification of records of government departments (1760-1867) in the Manuscript Room

The publication of the first volume of the *Guide to the Documents in the Manuscript Room at the Public Archives* marked a definite stage in the classification of important parts of our collections. Before a second volume could be compiled it became necessary to disentangle and reclassify practically all of the papers received from the Secretary of State, the Privy Council, the Department of Indian Affairs and the Department of Militia and Defence, covering roughly the period 1760-1867. In the introduction to the *Guide* I estimated that a minimum of two years would be necessary for this work. I still think three years would have seen the task completed if adequate assistance had been furnished. Apart from my absence on active service the chief factors of delay have been lack of aid, the multitude of daily interruptions to which I was subject, and the necessity that arose from time to time for diverting work from departmental to private collections. Of these the first was by far the most serious. Of course the technical analysis had to be done by myself alone. As each series was separated from the disgraceful mixture that formed the old classification, however, and was thus recovered as a distinct unit, it became possible to allow the chronological arrangement and certain minor operations to be carried out by others. In this way I could save myself a maximum of time and the fatigue of a large quantity of routine work.

As you know, the *Guide* was a single-handed work. To assist in that attack upon departmental records you finally allotted me the partial services of Miss Beith and Miss Phelps. Although these were inadequate to the size of the task, yet with the aid of about sixty per cent of their time the most important series were completed. At the time of my enlistment the situation was as follows: the bulk of the papers from the Secretary of State and the Privy Council had been reclassified as far as 1840; those from the Department of Indian Affairs (1760-1870) were about half completed; militia papers were untouched; and the continued aid of Miss Beith and Miss Phelps was promised until this work should be finished.

The same problems remained at my return, but all trained aid for resolving them had been taken away. Before a scientific classification can be applied it will be necessary (1) to complete

² American Historical Association *Report*, 1922, p. 172.

³ Parker Papers, Parker to A.B. Copp. August [1923].

the required work upon the papers from the Privy Council, the Secretary of State, and the Department of Indian Affairs for the years 1760-1840; (2) to classify everything from the Department of Militia and Defence; and (3) to revise thoroughly the rough arrangement of files for 1841-1867 of the Secretary of State, the Privy Council and the secretary of the governor general. Then and not until then will it be possible to compile the second volume of the *Guide*.

In addition a large number of private collections remain to be arranged. They lie outside the orbit of a regular scheme, it is true, and could be dealt with at any time. Since some are very important as historical material I consider that as many as possible should be included in the *Guide*.

If the above program were carried out two important objects would be realized. The *Guide* would give to historical students, officials and professional men valuable information on those parts of [the] collection that have never been described, and which mount to the earliest days of British rule. Secondly, it would then become possible to bind series that are now known as "Sundries" for Upper and Lower Canada, correspondence of the Indian Department, land and state minutes of the Executive Council, and thus afford them better protection against abuse and theft.

To carry out these objects I do not consider myself unreasonable in excepting [sic] some measure of assistance. At present my slender staff is utterly inadequate for such work, consisting of one temporary typist engaged for special copying, and a clerk who for some years was passed from one odd job to another, who has had no systematic training, and whom you finally sent into my room to get her out of your way.... The futility of expecting a person without previous knowledge of these records to separate masses of papers in which each of these series is likely to be found is quite evident....

On the other hand the counter-proposal to have large series of original documents carried over to Dr. Shortt's building, to be there arranged by someone under Miss Beith's nominal supervision is hardly worthy of serious consideration. Even disregarding the important factor of safety both the Manuscript Room and myself are on this side of the road not the other. In the next place such work demands concentrated attention, and even frequent interruptions are greatly to be deprecated. By present indications, under such an arrangement Miss Beith's share would not amount to one half hour a day, while on the other hand Dr. Shortt would benefit by the addition of her assistant. Last but not least, for me to depend on work done by persons under Dr. Shortt's control instead of mine, when the accomplishment of anything would be by his sufferance, would be to walk into a trap with open eyes. So far on every occasion when I have had anything to do with Dr. Shortt he has displayed a spirit towards the Manuscript Room that is exceedingly narrow and the reverse of altruistic. Such selfishness camouflaged under the name of generosity neither deceives nor appeals to me.

As you are well aware, to complete this reclassification is a large task, and the best results could hardly be obtained by a single-handed attack.... Being thus reduced to the level of a workman deprived of his tools, I must henceforth limit myself to routine work and tasks of lesser magnitude and importance.

A few months ago I had hopes that the Manuscript Room might be placed on a more satisfactory footing. As time brings once more nothing but promises and procrastination, however, I see that its interests are again likely to be sacrificed to certain influences or tendencies that have hampered in the past its usefulness and the progress of its work. The main ones, as I see them, are as follows:

1. Indifference to the value and the needs of manuscripts. Ever since by connection with this division it has ranked the lowest in the scale of any part of the building, and has had no chance in competition with pictures, private work, pamphlets, and the exigencies of political influences in which the service is still enmeshed.
2. Classification of manuscripts has never been recognized as a technical matter. Any person

no matter how ignorant, untrained or otherwise unqualified has been considered good enough to arrange and in some striking instances even to classify valuable records.

3. The selfishness of certain individuals, who have annexed as far as they could all the ability in the office in the interest of their private as well as official work, regardless of consequences to the public welfare.

Many times have I appealed to you to give the Manuscript Room if not the attention its importance deserves at least a fighting chance. After so many disappointments and unfulfilled promises it is not likely I shall strive much further for the benefit of the valuable collections in this room and of the historians who have the right to utilize them. Ever since you placed me in charge of the Manuscript Room two points have remained without explanation. First, the reason why though unrivalled as a collector your interest in manuscripts seems to cease as soon as they are received. Secondly, why all my attempts to act as a supplement to you in this respect — to put in proper shape and catalogue for historians the splendid collections you have gathered — have been hampered and frustrated by you at every turn.

Even if you close your eyes to the fact that the classification of large, complex, intermingled bodies of manuscripts is a technical matter it certainly is still fresh in your memory that the unskilled attempts made by my predecessor to arrange the documents I have since reclassified proved such a failure that his work had to be stopped by the aid of the Historical Manuscripts Commission. It is likewise clear that work done in departments upon their records, since transferred to us along with their untrained custodians, left their papers in anything but a satisfactory condition. I estimate that such work cost the Country at least \$100,000, and nearly all of it was not only useless but actually harmful. You are well aware of my qualifications when I came here in 1912, and of the work carried out from that time until my enlistment. you also know that I came as a scholar, not as a politician, and that I have remained largely on account of family reasons. Once the classification is completed and the *Guide* published, not only would the large series of valuable, indigenous material be in proper, convenient form for historians, and secure from further experiments upon them by untrained appointees, but also should family affairs allow me to change to a more attractive environment the lack of technical qualifications in a successor would not react so noticeably upon the problems to be faced.

The classification of the departmental records is already planned. It would be useless to put it on paper at this stage or allow it to be applied to another. No other person in Canada has studied the classification of manuscripts from a technical standpoint and the work is so different from that of historical research that to hand such a scheme to a student of the latter would be like entrusting astronomical arts to a plumber.

In conclusion allow me to point out that during the past few months I have outlined an important program of agenda in connection with the Manuscript Room, which if executed would involve me in much additional work. Such a situation I should welcome. I could easily attend to eight times the amount of work now in progress in this room, providing I might also have adequate assistance. So far as I am aware it is quite feasible to obtain this. Granted half a chance, which so far has been denied me, I can guarantee to produce results both creditable and important. The decision as to whether I shall be given this opportunity rests with yourself.

It does not appear that Parker's charges were replied to, for a search of the logical sources failed to reveal any response. However valid his accusations, Parker did play an important role in reversing the chaotic arrangement and classification of pre-Confederation government records imposed by his predecessors and government departments. Indeed, it was likely Parker who convinced Doughty of the worthiness of adapting archival principles in maintaining the records he collected so vigorously. Little documentation on Parker survives save for ten centimetres of personal papers

in the Manuscript Division. Doubtless an extensive search of the PAC's own records and pre-Confederation public records would shed additional light on David W. Parker, the "father" of archival arrangement in Canada.