

# IN MEMORIAM

William Kaye Lamb, OC, FRSC,  
1904–1999



Dr. William Kaye Lamb, Dominion Archivist and National Librarian, May 1957.  
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*On 22 September 1999 a memorial service was held at the National Archives of Canada for Dr. William Kaye Lamb, former Dominion Archivist and*

*National Librarian of Canada. The following is the text of the remarks presented in memory of Dr. Lamb by Ian E. Wilson, Dr. Jean-Pierre Wallot, and Jay Atherton.*

**Introductory Comments: Ian E. Wilson, National Archivist of Canada**

Colleagues and friends of Dr. Lamb and all those who, like me, knew him too briefly (if at all), but who hold Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, his contributions and accomplishments on behalf of Canada, in the deepest respect, welcome this morning. Thank you for coming here this morning and for taking the time to join with others to remember, to mourn the passing, and yet to celebrate the life of a fellow librarian, archivist, historian, public servant, administrator, visionary, and above all, Canadian. Most of you have read the basic biographical notes:

Lamb, William Kaye  
Born 11 May 1904 – Died 24 August 1999

Provincial Archivist and Librarian of British Columbia, 1934–40  
University Librarian of the University of British Columbia, 1940–48  
Dominion Archivist of Canada, 1948–68  
Founding National Librarian of Canada, 1953–67  
Officer of the Order of Canada, honorary graduate of many universities, Fellow of the Royal Society

I was going to continue this list with a reference to each of the national and international bodies in which Dr. Lamb held an executive position. As each of you well knows, it would be a long list indeed, and while each of our speakers this morning followed Dr. Lamb in various of his roles and official positions, to cover all would require a stage larger than this. The simple listing, though, would only serve to hint at his energy and influence in shaping institutions and organizations that play such an important continuing role in our lives. The bare list would do scant justice to reality. He did not accept positions in these various associations casually nor did he consider them simply as honours, but made a very active contribution to each. From my own limited experience, I can attest that while his name appeared on the letterhead of the Champlain Society as its Honorary President in recent years, he in fact took a lively interest in our publications and administrative pressures and provided useful perspective to me as president.

The list, though, would demonstrate to even the most casual listener that Dr. Lamb's was an extraordinary career.

He walked easily between our different, and often differing professions, at ease amongst historians, librarians, and archivists, earning respect and trust

from all. He managed with apparent ease the demands and pressures of scholarship with the daily crises of the university and government administrator, with many scholarly works complementing his numerous administrative achievements. He was committed to excellence and insisted upon meticulous research and accuracy. Il a préconisé et exigé des services fédéraux bilingues avant que ce ne soit une politique du gouvernement. Il a généreusement fait bénéficier de ses vastes connaissances et de sa passion tous ceux qui partageaient son enthousiasme et son engagement.

I am tempted to say that if you seek his monument, look around you, for in a very real sense, this building and the two institutions which have shared it since its grand opening in Centennial year reflect and still carry forward his influence, his vision, and direction. Yet his work also continues in the many associations and organizations he helped at critical points and which his energy helped maintain and grow. But I prefer to use Dr. Lamb's own reflections on history and the archival endeavour from his 1958 Canadian Historical Association Presidential Address:

I want to see historians, rather than journalists and novelists, write the history books that will be widely read in Canada. I want to see historians broaden their audience, and in that way carry their important discoveries and conclusions to a wider public, instead of merely to their colleagues and students, as they are apt to do today. A remark of Bertrand Russell's is relevant at this point: "We do not think that poetry should only be read by poets, or that music should be heard only by composers. And, in like manner, history should not be known only to historians."

Careful research and sound scholarship are of course the basic ingredients of good history; but it is all important that to these should be added clarity and style – the two qualities that constitute the last and most difficult mile, which, if left untravelling by the historian, can prevent any work from reaching its proper destination.

These remarks will perhaps have revealed my two basic convictions about Canadian history. One is that it is enormously interesting, even though it is made to appear so far too seldom; the other is that we do not know nearly enough about it. Huge segments of the story have been dealt with only in bare outline; there is hardly a corner of the canvas upon which important details do not remain to be filled in. It is for this reason that I find my work of gathering and safeguarding historical source materials so fascinating and so rewarding. We are building in the Archives a great collection, that, barring some catastrophe, will contribute to the greater understanding of this country and its history for many generations to come.

For me personally, the career of an archivist has entailed one sacrifice. I was trained as an historian, but acquiring manuscripts for other people to use is such a time-consum-

ing occupation that I have only an occasional moment to spend on historical research myself. My position is somewhat akin to that of the Editor of the *American Historical Review*, who ceased to be a professor of history and a producing scholar in order to serve his fellow historians through the *Review*. Like Dr. Shafer, "I have learned again ... how demanding scholarship, the pursuit of knowledge, really is." And like him, "I have learned, too, that to assist in the pursuit may be in itself a productive adventure."

**Jean-Pierre Wallot, O.C., F.R.S.C., National Archivist of Canada (1985–1997)**

It is with sadness and grief that the scholarly and archival communities have learned the disappearance of one of our most eminent colleagues, Dr. William Kaye Lamb, O.C., F.R.S.C., past Dominion Archivist, a brilliant scholar, administrator, and innovator who was also a loyal friend and a tireless researcher to the end. In a sense, given the breadth of his brilliant endeavours, his seemingly boundless intellectual energy and knowledge, it can be said that even at ninety-five years of age, Dr. Lamb was too young to die. He knew so much and did so much and still advised so many people – he still wrote to me on his old typewriter in the 1990s to encourage me. The present evolution in information science, including, of course, the library and archival fields was foreseen by him, and our efforts today derive in part from his injunctions and prescient moves both as Dominion Archivist and as National Librarian. As Dominion Archivist, the best tribute paid to him was expressed by the Honourable Jack Pickersgill, who said that "no other country of our day had a greater archivist [than Dr. Lamb]." Above all, Dr. Lamb was a scholar in his own right, who used to answer himself many of the questions addressed to the Public Archives or would check the answers prepared by the staff, given his encyclopaedic knowledge and prodigious memory.

Born in New Westminster, B.C. in 1904, Dr. Lamb went to school in New Westminster and Vancouver, before pursuing brilliant university studies first at the University of British Columbia where he obtained his BA with first class honours in History in 1927, then his MA in 1930. In 1929, he was awarded a Nichol Scholarship that allowed him to study further at la Sorbonne in Paris and in England, where he obtained his PhD in 1933 at the University of London. In the fall of 1934, Dr. Lamb commenced his dual career as librarian and archivist as Provincial Librarian and Archivist of British Columbia, while in 1936, he was appointed to the additional position of Superintendent and Secretary for the Provincial Public Library Commission. In 1940, Dr. Lamb was appointed Librarian of the University of British Columbia.

His experience and talent were quickly noticed, and in the fall of 1948 Dr. Lamb became the Dominion Archivist of Canada, a position he accepted on the condition that he could prepare the way for the establishment of a National Library. This was accomplished in 1952 and he became the first National

Librarian as of 1 January 1953. During his unprecedented double tenure (until 1968), the combined staff of both institutions jumped from 37 to 516 and the budgets from \$153,238 to \$3,852,000. But behind these figures emerges an extraordinary contribution to scholarship, knowledge, memory, and record-keeping in this country.

After World War II, the Public Archives of Canada (as it was known then until 1987, when the new law changed its name to the National Archives of Canada and the title, Dominion Archivist, to that of National Archivist of Canada) emerged from the relative slowdown that had characterized the preceding two decades of its history. The economic depression of the 1930s and the war had constrained the Archives' activities. But the postwar economic prosperity and the acceleration of government activities and programs launched the institution into a period of unprecedented development and progress. This growth was largely attributable to the fourth Dominion Archivist, Dr. Lamb, and to the excellent team he put in place. With his wealth of experience in archives, library science, history, and management, Dr. Lamb transformed the Public Archives into a thoroughly modern institution. At the same time, he literally created the National Library of Canada, preparing its law, lobbying for money, putting together the first Union Catalogue, and launching many other initiatives, not the least of which being the use of microforms – and in particular of microfilms – to copy and diffuse Canadiana, and records from Canada and abroad.

While the first three Dominion Archivists had made a major contribution to the development of the Public Archives' cultural role by nurturing the historical profession in Canada and gathering important records, in original form or as copies, their contribution to the management of government information had proven less significant. The reconciliation of the Archives' cultural function with the development of its role in the management of public records stands as one of the most significant accomplishments during Dr. Lamb's tenure as Dominion Archivist – the more so if one recalls how the Second World War had stimulated the growth of records produced by the federal government, a tendency that would increase after the war with the emergence of numerous social programs and new departments.

Today, with a firm scheduling program in place, it is hard to believe that only a few federal offices transferred their records to the Public Archives in the inter-war years. Under the pressure of historians and senior officials, the Privy Council Office at the end of World War II finally supported the need for a more formal system for the routine selection and disposal of records. This became the theme of the presentation made by Dr. Lamb to the Massey-Lévesque Commission on the Arts and Letters. Assisted by an increasingly professional staff, Dr. Lamb argued the case for effective records management as a normal part of modern public administration. The opening of the Records Centre in Ottawa in 1956, soon to be followed by the gradual opening of other records centres across the country, and the growing influence of the Archives,

its policies, and its active training program throughout the federal public service, provided eloquent testimony to Dr. Lamb's success in finally integrating the two roles so long envisioned for the Archives. The essential federal records, thereby accumulated in the Public Archives, were rapidly becoming available for research. With the Archives now serving both researchers and government, it was enabled, under Dr. Lamb's leadership, to balance the demands of scholarship and administration.

Many other major achievements would also merit more than mentions: for instance, the great increase in the acquisition of post-Confederation records, including prime ministerial and other political papers (as well as business and corporate records); the introduction of microphotography for acquiring complete copies of important public and private records from Canada and abroad, which was also linked to microfilm interlibrary loan programs to enhance the impact on research; the publication of preliminary inventories to textual records; the introduction of training courses for professional archivists in cooperation with the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association; the expansion of the national collection of maps and photographs; the construction of a new National Archives and National Library building at 395 Wellington Street in Ottawa, inaugurated in 1967.

Dr. Lamb's career, with its exceptional range and success, should not overshadow his role as a renowned scholar, whose work on the Pacific Northwest and notably the publication of the papers of many explorers (in particular, Simon Fraser, Gabriel Franchère, Sir Alexander Mackenzie, and George Vancouver) was simply remarkable. It was thus no surprise that he was elected Fellow of the Royal Society of Canada (our national academy of humanities and sciences) and, eventually, its president. In his presidential address, delivered in June 1966, he asserted that Canada was suffering from a "third solitude" (an allusion to the Commission on Bilingualism and Biculturalism then pondering the "two solitudes" in the country): that of the discipline and of the narrow focus of too many scholars. He called for a greater interdisciplinary focus to address society's main problems and hoped the Royal Society would play its role in favouring such an evolution. He also invited scholars to communicate the results of their labour to a larger public: "Being readable is not a sin!" In his Presidential Address to the Canadian Historical Society in 1958, he enticed historians to make their profession more visible and our history better known.

Beside the Royal Society and the Canadian Historical Association, Dr. Lamb was a member of a large number of professional associations, in nearly all of which he attained the presidency: President of the British Columbia Library Association, President of the Pacific Northwest Library Association, President of the Canadian Library Association, President of the Society of American Archivists, President of the Society of Archivists, Vice-President of the British Records Association, member of the Executive Committee of the

International Council on Archives, President of the British Columbia Historical Association, President of the Champlain Society for twelve years (he became honorary president afterwards), and the only Canadian member at the time, of four rather exclusive American organizations (the Massachusetts Historical Society, the Colonial Society of Massachusetts, the American Antiquarian Society, and the Institute of Early American History and Culture). It is no surprise that he garnered so many awards, ranging from his nomination as Officer of the Order of Canada to the Tyrell Medal of the Royal Society, and to honorary degrees from eleven Canadian universities, including the University of British Columbia, University of Toronto, York University, and University of New Brunswick. *Archivaria* dedicated its issue of the Winter 1982-83 as a *festschrift* in his honour.

There is the man also: warm, energetic, alive, always willing to share and to discuss. Even in the late 1980s and early 1990s, when I met him in Vancouver, he would listen and bestow his pearls of wisdom, never condescending, never overbearing, just being truthful with himself and with his visitors.

In the end, what remains most vividly from his long tenure as Dominion Archivist is his role in changing an interesting, but quaint and museum-like institution, into a modern Public Records Office, maintaining, however, its tradition of gathering and making available private and public records of national significance in all media. He made sure that archivists would be the ones to decide which records should be kept as a memory for the future, not administrators nor clerical staff. He did that and much more (including influencing Prime Ministers and Ministers) through his unshakable faith and the power of his mind. This is his legacy: a living memory institution continuing in this capacity to maintain a rich memory of recorded information in all media, whether public or private, so that future generations of Canadians may know what led to their diverse presents and can dream of different futures with understandings rooted in solid documentation about the past and the present.

Dr. Lamb was one of our most distinguished scholars, a unique Dominion Archivist and National Librarian at the same time, an innovator and yet a conservator in the sense that he cautiously protected and aimed at quality. But, just as a good multifaceted musician would do, he played on different chords at the same time, whether they were scholarly, linked to his administrative functions as Dominion Archivist and National Librarian, or to his role as officer in numerous professional associations. Dr. Robert Bahmer, former Archivist of the United States, has summed this up in the comment: "There have been few true scholars who have been successful in our hemisphere as top archivists. Kaye Lamb was one of the best and I suspect that it was his integrity as a scholar that won him the support for his program as Dominion Archivist." This is why, among many other good reasons, he is and will be fondly remembered.

**Jay Atherton, National Archives of Canada (1961–1993)**

When I traveled from British Columbia to join the staff of the Public Archives of Canada in September 1961, I had no idea of the pleasures that lay before me. I knew that the Dominion Archivist was from British Columbia, and was somewhat aware of his prestigious professional background on the west coast. I gradually became aware of the strength of his personality and influence. Dr. Lamb's leadership and direction were strongly felt within the Archives.

There is no doubt that the Sussex Drive years (we moved into the Wellington Street building in 1967), in the memory of most of who worked there, were a special period. There were probably a number of factors to account for this feeling. Perhaps it was the small size of the staff and the coziness of the "old building" at 330 Sussex Drive (the original portion dating from 1906, and the "new wing" from as recently as 1926). It could have been the daily appearance of Dr. Lamb's sleek Jaguar parked under the protective gaze of Sir Arthur Doughty in the courtyard outside the front door. Or was it the impact of the display of Canadian documentary art gracing the walls of his office overlooking the "grand river of the Algonquins"? Maybe.

An important element in Dr. Lamb's personality undoubtedly was his prodigious memory and attention to detail, setting a high standard for all of us to follow. In those days, all outgoing correspondence was signed by the Dominion Archivist himself (or, in his absence, the Assistant Dominion Archivist, Pierre Brunet). This meant that all of us working periodically on responses to written inquiries had to be mindful of the fact that the boss would be checking every last detail.

The word was out: be very careful with shipping inquiries. The slightest error in describing a sailing vessel (length, breadth, and depth) would be caught and returned for checking and correction.

I remember Dr. Wilfred Smith, Kaye Lamb's successor, expressing his amazement at the depth and quality of Dr. Lamb's memory, when he was interviewing him (at a distance of three thousand miles) to assemble some oral history of the Lamb years.

In retrospect, it is clear that Dr. Lamb's leadership of the Public Archives of Canada between 1949 and 1968 set the stage, provided the core support, for the developments and growth that occurred during the seventies and eighties. I would like to tell you briefly about one of the areas where Dr. Lamb had a significant impact (of which I became aware only at a later stage in my career): the creation and early development of a comprehensive federal government records management system.

Dr. Lamb's appointment as Dominion Archivist roughly coincided with the release of the report of the Royal Commission on the National Development of the Arts, Letters, and Sciences (the Massey Commission). Dr. Lamb's ten-



ure began early in 1949; the Massey Report appeared in 1951. One of its concerns was preservation of the large accumulation of records created by the federal government during the Second World War. A “Public Records Committee,” a creature of the Treasury Board, was in existence, but not very effective. Dr. Lamb quite quickly came to the conclusion (probably aided by the advice of staff) that a good part of the answer lay in the establishment of more systematic ways of managing the backlog and the new records coming on stage daily, weekly, monthly.

His solution was the construction of a large (for its day) records storage building – what he termed a “half-way house” into which dormant and inactive records could be transferred, under the control of the Public Archives. The idea was that staff of the archives trained in history would be able to screen the records to select out the portion for permanent preservation, with the rest being destroyed. The project received Cabinet approval in June 1950 (prior to the release of the Massey Commission report) and proceeded with the strong support of two key people: the minister responsible for the archives, J.W. Pickersgill, and the Secretary of the Treasury Board, Robert Bryce. After a couple of administrative hiccups, the result was turned over to the archives in January 1956: the Public Archives records centre at Tunney’s Pasture.

Events progressed rapidly thereafter. The opening of the records centre at Tunney’s Pasture marked a watershed in federal records management. From the template developed in Ottawa came a series of records centres across the country, from Vancouver to Halifax – erected over the next twenty years. Later in 1956 the central microfilm unit was transferred from the department of public printing and stationery to the Public Archives and installed on the ground floor of the new records centre building.

During the winter of 1959–60 a Records Management Survey Committee conducted a thorough survey of records management in the federal government. As a result of its recommendations, in 1961 the Cabinet enlarged the mandate and increased the autonomy of the “Public Records Committee.” The first month-long records management course occurred in 1961, jointly sponsored by the Civil Service Commission and the Public Archives.

The Royal Commission on Government Organization (the Glassco Commission) studied the records problem in depth during 1961. In response to a specific recommendation in its report, the Cabinet in 1966 passed the “Public Records Order,” abolishing the Public Records Committee, while giving the Dominion Archivist sole authority over the disposal of federal government records, as well as responsibility for coordinating the entire government records management program. With this step the government of Canada had entered the age of modern records management.

The Canadian federal government records management system that developed during the seventies and eighties under the able direction of Dr. Lamb’s successor, Wilfred Smith, became internationally recognized as, in its day, the

best in the world. The developments that created this model system grew out of the tenacity, persuasiveness, and leadership of Dr. W. Kaye Lamb during his two decades as Dominion Archivist.

I feel it was an honour and privilege to have worked for Dr. Lamb during that period, and an even greater honour and privilege to have been asked to speak about it today.

**Concluding Comments: Ian E. Wilson**

I mentioned at the beginning of these remarks that I have learned from Dr. Lamb. I continue to do so and in fact one of the things I did during my first week here as National Archivist was to send for the unpublished memoirs written by both Dr. Lamb and his close colleague and successor, Dr. Wilfred I. Smith. Dr. Lamb's memoirs include some 650 pages, each an extraordinary record of his varied work and a testament to his memory years later. I will conclude the ceremony this morning with Dr. Lamb's own concluding reflections on his career:

I have had my ups and downs, and hopes and disappointments galore, but on the whole it has been a career that I have enjoyed greatly, largely because I have felt that in each of the three institutions in which I have served I was building up in each something of lasting value.

I have had the satisfaction of building and protecting something that I feel is of permanent value and vast importance. To quote Charles Stacey ...: "the central pillar of Canadian historiography has been the Public Archives of Canada; and if that institution weakens and withers then Canadian historical studies will weaken and wither with it."

He went on to express his passionate concern about what he deemed might be in peril: "Our history is the prop of our National spirit; it is what makes us what we are; it is all that makes us different from other parts of the human race. In fact, it gives us our 'identity.'"

My hope is that over the years, I have done something to increase and safeguard the heritage he had in mind.