

The Archivist as Planner and Poet: Thoughts on the Larger Issues of Appraisal for Acquisition^{*}

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RÉSUMÉ Cet article traite de questions reliées aux stratégies d'acquisition dans le domaine des documents privés. Il analyse les relations entre le processus d'acquisition et les mandats des institutions d'archives de même que les notions d'importance. L'évaluation y est liée aux concepts plus larges du temps, de la mémoire et de la conservation à long terme des documents. Quatre grands secteurs de la recherche archivistique sont mis en évidence : le rôle de l'évaluation dans la conservation, la nature des documents personnels, les liens entre les archives et les autres objets de la mémoire sociale et, enfin, l'étude des utilisateurs des archives. L'auteure fait valoir que la recherche en histoire des archives doit se poursuivre car elle offre la possibilité de contribuer à l'évaluation archivistique et de l'humaniser.

ABSTRACT This article comments on issues related to private sector acquisition strategies. It discusses the relationship of acquisition to institutional mandates and ideas of significance. Appraisal is linked to larger concepts of time, memory, and the continuing preservation of records. Four large areas for archives research are highlighted: the role of appraisal in preservation; the nature of records for private persons; connections between archives and other social memorials; and the study of archives users. The pursuit of archives history is advocated for its potential utilitarian and humane contributions to appraisal.

Appraisal transforms the objects of its activities: some ordinary stuff of everyday transactions and communication are selected for special protection in an archives. Those not taken have an uncertain future: those selected will have a prolonged life. They will carry forward accruing burdens of meaning arising from their status as objects of continuing importance, to those who make the selection and to communities of users, some already established, others not yet known.

Archivists who do appraisal recognize that it is an extraordinary function with wide ranging implications for society, but more particularly to their insti-

^{*} This paper was prepared from a commentary delivered in the session "Private Sector Acquisition Strategies" at the annual general meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Winnipeg (2001). I am grateful to two anonymous reviewers for their helpful suggestions.

tution. Choice must serve declared larger purposes, meet clear goals, and continue to satisfy users. Who or what should guide acquisitions from organizations and from ordinary people who lead private lives? Many answers have been offered. In the aftermath of the First World War archives administrators rethought the customary ways they selected records to be preserved for retrospective uses. This was a practical necessity. No archives is able to assimilate all modern documentary production; moreover, few would now claim that such preservation was desirable. As a result of selection being recognized early as a key, practical function, archivists are especially well served by a literature on appraisal for acquisition. But in its profusion the literature can be overwhelming in quantity and confusing by the diversity of its perspectives, arguments, and levels of specificity. Some writers address the theoretical base needed to fashion the “vision(s)” that appraisal will serve, while others burrow deep into the detail of applications, either to expose the unusual aspects in a case or to support a particular method of integrating appraisal with other archive or record functions. Some argue the special value of ideas; others, less interested in ideas and ideals, discuss the merits of methods for doing appraisal consistently and systematically; still another group promotes the construction of tools to do the job and lay bare details of operations. The acquisition of personal fonds is not an area well served by the literature.¹

This silence is particularly curious for Canada. Most Canadian archives acquire private sector records and consider these acquisitions to be important. The national, provincial, and territorial archives include personal fonds in their legislated mandate and, following suit, personal fonds are actively sought by archives in colleges and universities, in church organizations, and in municipalities. Moreover, diaries, accounts, correspondence, and photographs kept by people in their daily lives are highly prized sources by users, and not only by historians or literary scholars. Almost any programme on the history channel is daily witness to the imaginative deployment of personal materials for entertainment. Given the cultural importance of the personal and the considerable interest in these materials by archives users for family research and wider historical endeavours, the time is coming when archives will want to concentrate on the personal and the private. Already there are signs of renewed interest in personal materials. For example, sessions related to per-

1 Although a full review of the published literature on appraisal is beyond the scope of this paper, a search for publications on the topic of appraisal between 1991 and 2001 using Library and Information Science Abstracts (LISA), Wilson Business Abstract, and the British Humanities Index yielded 151 citations. Only a small fraction of these citations deal with the appraisal of private sector records. The majority of our professional literature on appraisal concentrates on one of four issues: macro-appraisal; strategic approaches to documentation; the relationship of archival theory to appraisal; and specific issues in appraisal such as electronic records and special media.

sonal fonds were held at the ACA meetings in Winnipeg in June 2001.² The following reflections on some of the issues shaping our approach to appraisal for acquisitions were prompted by these sessions.

Archivists claim a calling and a profession, but our work is carried out largely within institutions where individual ways of thinking and personal values are indelibly modified. Acquisitions, for example, which shape the growth of holdings, are guided by the focus and scope of the archives mandate. In its current likeness this mandate lies always in the background, like some watchful beast whose presence casts a large shadow over acquisitions. Individual mandates seek to carve out a unique place for the archives. Most if not all of these have been developed largely in isolation with, at best, only informal consultation with other similar institutions. Recently, independence and the competition for acquisitions it fosters have come to be seen as weaknesses rather than strengths.

Mandates and missions look to ideals and may not always work in reality. The fullness of their vision will be affected, for example, by the resources devoted to their achievement. What seemed an ideal goal yesterday may seem less so today in the light of new opportunities or requirements. No mandated mission is ever really fixed despite the eternal quest its rhetoric suggests. But adjusting a mandate is difficult: not only are we unable to grasp fully the effects of changes on our future work, but also we know that change will have unsettling, even unpredictable implications for those responsibilities we have already assumed. Reappraisal emerged as a method to address some of these unforeseen implications by providing for a retrospective review of decisions made in the past.

While reappraisal is largely a self-referencing exercise in an archives, other practical strategies for dealing with unforeseen circumstances are based on the concept of co-operation – a group or network of institutions who work together to achieve mutually agreed goals. We are currently building the Canadian Archive Information Network (CAIN) to provide coordinated access to descriptions.³ CAIN initiatives not only are co-ordinating description in many institutions across Canada but also are inserting standards into archives operations, most especially by promoting the general use of the *Rules for Archival Description* or *RAD*. But the idea of a network, once it is accepted in one area, carries with it important implications for work in all the other areas, too. Acquisition and preservation will not be long behind description. Canadian archivists should not forget that one of the main reasons for setting up the

2 Especially pertinent sessions were the following: “Following the River’s Path: Documenting Agricultural and Rural Life along the Red River”; “Private Sector Acquisition Strategies”; “Is There a Post-Modern Approach to Archives?”; “Towards a Definition of Canadian Visual Artists Archives”; and, “Evidence and Anecdote: a Panel on Personal Papers.”

3 Access to CAIN is through the Web site of the Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) at <<http://www.cdncouncilarchives.ca>>.

Canadian Council of Archives (CCA) in the mid-1980s was not to tackle backlogs nor to harmonize description, but to begin a process of co-operation among archives in Canada, and most especially, in the view of its supporters and founders, in acquisitions based on agreed guidelines and criteria for appraisal.⁴

The Council of Nova Scotia Archives (CNSA) co-operative acquisitions strategy, agreed in late May 2001, is a new and joint endeavour in Nova Scotia based on agreed principles to guide members' activities in seeking new acquisitions and in deaccessioning holdings already acquired.⁵ The strategy does not prescribe the work of any one institution, but rather provides a clear guide for the ways they should conduct their affairs into the future bearing in mind the interests of others in the network. The agreement underscores the Canadian tradition of maintaining a working distance between acquisition and appraisal. There is a different role for each activity – acquisition is a matter for each institution, guided by its mandate and within its competence to administer. By contrast, specific criteria for appraisal, perhaps most easily grasped as a check list of qualities an archives seeks in its acquisitions, was in the view of the council not only difficult to agree, but also a less desirable end for co-operation. Appraisal is an act of professional discretion. Appraising values is the unique contribution of the archivist honed in experience and nurtured by special knowledge. We can all agree, for example, on the administrative routine for submitting bills for reimbursement – but there may not be a common ground for achieving agreement on the importance of the expense. The CNSA decided wisely to negotiate general principles of administering their acquisition activities. Recognizing that they have common needs in a time of rationalization and retrenchment, the council agreed to use scope of mandate as a foundation for dealing with acquisitions within a provincial framework. Nova Scotia's significant achievement has been to establish common principles for treating donors of records in the future and the materials acquired in the past.

A different approach to shaping a private acquisition strategy is analysed in Myron Momryk's article, "'National Significance': The Evolution and Development of Acquisition Strategies in the Manuscript Division of the National Archives of Canada," printed in this issue of *Archivaria*. This evolutionary history of the concept of "national significance," as it developed to guide private acquisitions and to measure value, discusses the National Archives of Canada's (NA) efforts over the past forty years or so in the context of Canadian political priorities and the environment of a federal civil service. The discussion demonstrates the rich history which surrounds archival concepts, as these have been interpreted and applied over time, reconfirming that archives history and experiences are truly worthy subjects for investigation. It should

4 Canadian Council of Archives, "National Acquisition Strategy" (Ottawa, 1995).

5 The document is available from the Council at: 6016 University Ave, Halifax, NS B3H 1W4, or <www.councilofnsarchives.ca>.

be a matter for regret that we are not better served by a strong literature exploring this past in depth. I was particularly struck by the continual reshaping of the concept as the institution endeavoured to keep the realities of politics and resources in line with emerging conditions in Canada and needs of the NA's key users. Archivists certainly need to plan for their future, if they are to participate in bringing it about, but equally they need to understand the history of their past efforts so that new plans may profit from accumulated group experience.

I cannot help but observe that despite its many years of effort seeking a workable approach to private sector acquisitions, the NA is hardly any further along than the CNSA in establishing agreed guidelines. The reasons for this situation are undoubtedly complex. One important factor seems to have been the concentration at the NA on defining significance, rather than on building working partners for co-operative effort. This solo approach is perhaps totally understandable: in earlier times there were few with whom to co-operate. While more recently the landscape has seen the addition of many more institutions as legitimate players, the putative "team" has had to play a game without the steadying influence of either a tradition of co-operation among archives or mutually agreed guidelines. The transition from the attitudes embodied in the idea of "top dog" to one of leader of a team, is not easy and should never be assumed to be so.

Co-operation raises a host of practical and theoretical issues. But we need to recognize that perhaps not all are amenable to agreement by negotiation in a group. The relationship of appraisal to acquisition, for example, runs the risk of being locked in a circular argument about priorities and precedents – which comes first, the chicken of acquisition mandate or the egg of appraisal values. The CNSA archives elected to avoid the difficult area of values in favour of agreeing on scope as the basis for co-operation. Indeed, looking beyond the practical impetus for the council's choice, we also could ask legitimately whether we should seek agreement on appraisal.

It is moot whether worth or worthiness should be defined in the same way by archives in a pluralistic society. Moreover, even if agreement on values were to be achieved now, what is worthwhile today may not accord with what was valued by our predecessors, and may seem less agreeable to our successors in the future. How does time season us and the archives we preserve and shape by our activities? Perhaps time is not a problem to be remedied. Is it not more a strength we should celebrate because it creates what is special and then offers us its differences to contemplate? If time brings a change to our outlooks, plans, and acquisitions, these variations should be enjoyed for the special depth and richness they work in our holdings. No definition of significance can be crafted to suit everyone but, more importantly, no such definition can embrace differences which arise legitimately over time and in time. A vision of what we are about in archival work, and what we seek to do

and achieve, by its very nature, is a poetic statement, not a bureaucratic marching order for the day. If we believe that archives express a form of truth, then their growth over time reveals that truth is a work in progress.

This core belief should prompt us to consider some of the broader issues embedded deeply in our practical functions of acquisition, appraisal, and preservation. Archivists are practical people, perhaps incurably practical, as Terry Eastwood famously observed. But if the philosophical dimensions of archives, for example, the cultural embeddedness of our goals and methods or our role in memory making, receive less attention than some would want, the reason for this is nonetheless valid. Archivists are faced with pressing tasks every day – tasks made all the more urgent by the real requirements of budgets and resources, and tasks always shaped by the demands of users who expect both valuable services and personal sympathy. It is natural for archivists to order their working lives to achieve concrete goals. There is precious little time to bring these to fruition and even less time, let alone opportunity it seems, for deep discussions of philosophical ideas or their theoretical and practical implications. But it seems to me that such activities should not be seen as digressions from the real tasks at hand. They may be in fact fruitful sources for insights that have, paradoxically, practical implications for appraisal, helping us to better comprehend the ends that it should serve. I see these elements as falling into one or more of four broad areas.

First, it seems to me that the connection between acquisition and preservation can no longer be taken to be self-evident. The idea of archive acquisition carries with it a presumption of preservation intertwined with notions of place and lastingness. The assumed relationship between these two ideas, where acquisition provides a modicum of assurance that material is high up on a list for preservation, is visibly fractured in a digital world. It is up to the archivist to lay bare the essence of this connection, conceptually and practically, so that institutional plans as well as strategies of co-operation are aiming in the same direction. What are the implications of securing a trusted home for records whose nature is highly dependent on software that changes frequently and supports that are fragile? The penetration of computers into personal and corporate records making underscores an expanded role for appraisal in guiding continuing preservation of records far beyond the brief life of the media and its specific market. The work of the International Research on Permanent Authentic Records in Electronic Systems (InterPARES), especially that of its Task Forces on Preservation and Appraisal, explores aspects of this symbiosis in their conceptual models of each function and related activities.⁶ This connection is especially evident in the Appraisal Task Force activity of the monitoring of appraisal, which effectively ensures a continuing review and a

⁶ The reports and other public documents of the InterPARES project are accessible through the project's Web site at <www.InterPARES.org>.

refreshing of decisions and actions based on changed circumstances.⁷ The conceptual clarity of the InterPARES models, however useful, does not address the fundamental bases upon which appraisal or valuing is done. These need to be constructed from other forms of experience and knowledge.

Second, we urgently require detailed studies of the uses of documents and documentary forms of communication by private persons in their personal lives. Functional analysis married to macro-appraisal bulks large in tackling the nature of corporate records making and keeping. But we need concepts for understanding activities producing records that are not tied to organized groups who engage in distinct functional activities. InterPARES 2, a continuation and expansion of InterPARES, among other goals, will endeavour to fill at least part of this void by exploring the nature of the record for persons in artistic activities. Their aim is to create unique content in unique forms; the corporate person, by contrast, inserts unique content into consistent and routine forms.⁸

Third, there is ample room for archivists, from their special perspective, to explore the connections between archives and the many other forms of social memorial and personal testament. Historians, philosophers, and politicians are keenly interested in these connections and it seems to me that we should have an equal if not a greater interest in exploring these too.⁹ Records, as memorial acts and as personal memorials, are legion in our archives – this is the stuff we deal with every day. These materials are tangible evidence of what people in the past considered important to remember and how they went about doing this. Their modes of communication, their reasons for communicating in the ways they did, and the beliefs these choices expressed should be the subject of our research. Exploring the archives as a site of the past is as pressing for us to undertake as is the crusade to promote their uses as evidence for accountability in a democratic society. No one else will explore the connections between person and record. Without a sure hold on this knowledge, what will be our role when history is not only marketed as entertainment, but also is consumed by viewers as the authentic story of the truth about the past?

Fourth, the archives as a special kind of place and space are ideas which need careful study. In the past, our users moved, while archives remained fixed – archive materials had a place or home in which the terms and conditions of use were controlled. In the future, this state of affairs looks to be radically changed. No longer can we take for granted those aspects of use that are conferred by the conditions of a special physical place. A large question which

7 Draft report of the Appraisal Task Force, accessed 30 October 2002 at <www.InterPARES.org>. See especially section A3.

8 InterPARES 2 project of research begins in 2002.

9 The expanding literature on social memory includes few sustained contributions on the role of archives in its formation. Unusual are the theme issues of the *History of the Historical Sciences* 11 (1998) and 12 (1999), which were devoted to archives.

presents itself now is what aspects of this in-place experience need to be carried into a future when materials most likely will be delivered over long distances to remote readers. What will we gain and what will we lose by this change in delivery and experience? And more particularly, are those qualities that are tied to using records physically in an archives reading room really important aspects of an authentic experience of the past or merely accidents of technology with no discernable contribution to meaning? Before we can move confidently into a future we cannot know, it seems clear to me that we need to understand better the essential nature of the experience of using archives that we provide currently. We are overdue to begin the serious study of users – their preferences, needs, behaviour, and habits. User studies are fundamental to designing public programmes to achieve definite goals.

These questions, and many more as well, are best addressed through research. The techniques of social science offer us a choice of method, each developed to explore areas of a human action. Ethnographic methods, for example, have the potential for providing us with a fuller understanding of how we actually work. Deeper insight into appraisal – what it is, what ends it serves, how it should be done, and who needs to participate – will also come from research into concrete experiences. But a richer understanding will need to be nurtured as well by sustained reflection on ideas, the elaboration of theories of value, and perceptive critiques of our declared and latent ontologies. Not all of these modes of knowledge are accepted by everyone as being applicable to the problems of appraisal. System and method are valued especially. We reside in a time subject to the reign of science: special privilege is accorded to research undertaken by the methods of science and we particularly value knowledge derived from its proofs. Moreover, the need for control in large organizations directs attention to methods of working and measures of evaluation that are methodical, replicable, and utilitarian. By contrast, historical analyses which show the play of a larger palette of values in making and keeping memorials for personal and social uses, may seem to be digressions. However, philosophical critiques of our goals and methods and historical contextualizations of time, place, and presumptions may be more useful gauges to use in appraisal than are the normalizing procedures of a standardized method alone.

Far from the luxury we can only occasionally afford, and even at those times perhaps reluctantly tolerate, archives history seems to me to have real potential for significant returns on the time we invest in its pursuit. These returns begin with a much richer knowledge of ourselves and a far clearer understanding of the essence of records we seek to convey to our users now and in the electronic future, which is fast becoming a reality. History, with its ancient credentials and source-based methods, harkens to the knowledge paradigms of the nineteenth century. However, perhaps it is a leading future integrative discipline, marrying philosophy with research and logic with the

power of narrative. Archivists may straddle the diverse worlds of the technician and the philosopher. But their discipline, as it develops as a work in progress, should be all the richer for this hybridization.

The archivist as poet and planner emerges in the archivist as appraiser. The question we need to address constantly is how best to marry the poetic with the planned. What should take precedence for us: life as it is written by a group or individual lives lived? The archives is, after all, a transformer. The following passage from Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*, with just a little leap of imagination, seems to be an observation equally about archives as it is about Caesar.

O! He sits high in all the peoples hearts;
and that which would appear offence in us,
His countenance, like richest alchemy,
will change to virtue and worthiness.
[*JC* I, iii, 157]

By what alchemy are the commonplace and ordinary transformed by archives into things of value? How do archivists, in the course their work, and especially in appraisal and acquisition, contribute to and participate in this transformation? These are real questions for which each generation needs to seek answers – philosophical, historical, and practical.