

Review Articles

The “English Report” and Archives: A Critical Appreciation

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The Role of the National Archives of Canada and the National Library of Canada. Report Submitted to the Honourable Sheila Copps. JOHN ENGLISH. Ottawa: Department of Canadian Heritage, 1999. 46 pp., plus appendices. Also in French. Available, as visited on 12 August 2002 at: <<http://www.pch.gc.ca/pc-ch/pubs/johnenglish/english.html>>.

Archives and archival activity, at least at the national level in Canada, have frequently been studied by official bodies. There were early investigative commissions into the state of records and archives in 1897, and 1912–14, discussion around draft parliamentary bills in the 1920s and 1930s, and substantial passages on archives in the very influential report of the (Massey) Royal Commission on National Development in the Arts, Letters, and Sciences in 1951.

In the brief quarter century of the ACA's existence, there has been the “Symons Report” on Canadian Studies (1976) that devoted a chapter to archives as the very foundation of all Canadian studies; the “Wilson Report” on Canadian archives for the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (1980) that investigated the state of archives in the nation and articulated the need for a networked, co-operative system for Canadian archives; and the “Applebaum-Hébert Report” on Canadian cultural policy (1983) that reinforced the conclusions of the Wilson Report for the federal and provincial ministers of culture, resulting eventually in the creation of the Canadian Council of Archives and funding for the Canadian Archival System. And this recounting does not include various regional and provincial studies in the same period, discussions around the *National Archives of Canada Act*, or subsequent investigation of Canadian studies by David Cameron.¹

The latest such report was written by John English in 1999 on the future

¹ T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies* (Ottawa, 1976); *Canadian Archives: Report of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada by the Consultative Group on Canadian Archives* (Ottawa, 1980); *Report of the Federal Cultural Policy Review Committee* (Ottawa, 1982); and David Cameron, *Taking Stock: Canadian Studies in the Nineties* (Montreal, 1996).

roles of the National Archives of Canada and the National Library of Canada, both as heritage institutions and as professional leaders of their respective communities. As the Symons, Wilson, and Applebaum-Hébert reports were all reviewed in *Archivaria*, the “English Report” deserves no less.² Furthermore, many archivists, individually and through their associations, engaged with Professor English as he carried out his investigations, and his conclusions should concern archivists across Canada, and indeed elsewhere in terms of some of the implications of his study.

Commissioned in March 1998 by Sheila Copps, Minister of Canadian Heritage, Professor John English, a prominent Canadian historian, former Liberal Member of Parliament, and now Chair of the Canadian Museum of Civilization Corporation, was asked “to report on whether the institutions are properly positioned to preserve, promote, and provide access to Canada’s heritage and confront the challenges of the information age in the next century while continuing to manage collections and records in traditional forms.” Copps specified that English should “see if new means can be found to strengthen the capacity of the National Archives and the National Library to respond to citizens’ needs and to play a leading role in information management partnerships, both at the national and international levels.” She asserted that the review was not intended to be a “cost-reduction exercise,” but that it was also not “intended to generate additional costs for the Government.” Consultation was to be wide-ranging: with the staff of the two institutions, the archival and library communities across Canada, former employees, the academic sector, other government departments, national and international associations and institutions, and Canadians at large. The minister asked English to focus especially on seven specific areas: mandate, collections and acquisitions, access, preservation, information management, organizational structure, and leadership. To these seven themes English adhered closely in the organization and substance of his report that was released in the summer of 1999.

John English did his job conscientiously by consulting widely in the relevant communities – perhaps too much so. He reported an “extraordinary” response from the two communities that “far exceeded our expectations.” This was not to be some quiet bureaucratic exercise, for English was lifting the lid too long sealed on a cauldron of staff frustration and users’ anger. In fact, English seems a little overwhelmed by the avalanche of formal briefs, submitted documents, interviews, staff meetings, and personal communications. The report has a curiously undigested feel, with no executive summary, no table of contents, no numbered recommendations – all standard features in such investigative works. And while the report does contain many useful insights given

2 Marcel Caya, “The Commission on Canadian Studies,” *Archivaria* 2 (Summer 1976), pp. 60–64; “The Consultative Group Report on Canadian Archives,” *Archivaria* 11 (Winter 1980–81), pp. 3–35; “The Applebaum-Hébert Report,” *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 95–119.

under the seven headings provided by Minister Copps, contradictory input is often left unreconciled, contentious accommodation issues are not comprehensively addressed, and no overarching or guiding vision is advanced for the two institutions. Despite these criticisms, there is much here of value to archivists and librarians, and to historians and other users of the National Archives and National Library.

While the list of English's forty-two recommendations alone well exceeds the space available for this review, the general tone of the report and its highlights may be indicated. The rumour mill in Ottawa buzzed that English's job was really to justify merging the National Archives and National Library into one grand Canadian heritage research institution, perhaps as another "legacy project" for (so it was then thought) a soon-to-be-departing prime minister. Certainly English raised the issue in many forums, only to find the idea of merging the two institutions universally condemned in both the archival and library communities. In his report, English places aside the merger notion, although perhaps with some regret that a grand stroke was thereby rendered impossible. He notes that the two institutions already share headquarters facilities in Ottawa, and for decades have had integrated activities in general administration, finance, facilities management, and conservation and preservation. He recommends that this informal co-operation be regularized through a common board, and then be extended to include internal records management and information technology, as well as some aspects of cultural programming, publishing, and exhibitions. Although (now Senator) Laurier Lapierre was appointed soon afterwards to chair this common board bridging the two institutions, this body seems to have been stillborn, and no other mergers occurred, save combining the information technology branches of the two agencies.

The merger issue aside, the extended archives and library communities reacted rather differently to the questions posed to them by John English. The library community complained about the lack of effective leadership by the National Library in championing the federal government libraries system, and in failing to lead dynamically the Canadian library community, especially the need for a national digital library strategy. The archival community conversely praised the National Archives for its effective leadership nationally, primarily through its arms-length sponsorship and funding of the Canadian Council of Archives. Complaints about the archives (and here, for this journal's audience, I will largely put the library issues aside) were threefold, and focussed internally on the National Archives rather than on its relationship with the archival community. First, the Archives was criticized for failing to take a strong leadership position in addressing forcefully such information policy issues as initiating effective preservation of government electronic records, advocating more liberal access to government information, lobbying against excessive privacy protection of government records (especially the census), and con-

demning openly illegal destruction of records by government departments. Secondly, English heard of severe morale problems among the Archives' professional staff, primarily over the undermining or "dumbing-down" of professional integrity that is based on research by archivists into records creators, recording media, and record-keeping systems. A major aspect of this was a series of decisions in the 1990s that separated the specialist media archivists from their collections, often their finding aids, and more often than not from interaction with their specialized researcher communities. The result was a sapping of the intellectual capital that must ever be at the core of the institution if it is to retain its ability to achieve national and international excellence. And finally, there were numerous complaints about dysfunctional reference services at the Archives, including long delays and indifferent responses, the latter caused primarily by internal staff squabbles and turf wars *de facto* limiting the access of researchers to required specialist subject and media archivists.

There are two broad themes among English's recommendations, as well as many sensible "stand-alone" suggestions. These themes are, first, identifying and managing the archival record in a digital age and, second, making Canada's valuable heritage assets (digital and traditional) much more available to Canadians. For the first, the National Library needs to lead an independent Canadian initiative on digital libraries of Canadian published resources, rather than leave the field to American or private consortia; the National Archives needs to reinforce "total archives" by sponsoring with the Canadian Council of Archives, a systematic national acquisition strategy for private-sector records', and it must with Treasury Board and other government partners, develop processes for identifying, then capturing, managing, and preserving, authentic electronic records of the Government of Canada. Where once the National Archives shared the international spotlight in electronic records, it has now slipped behind Australia, the United States, and several European countries.

For the second major theme, English recommends more extensive and imaginative use of the Internet to share with all Canadians – "whatever their entry point or gateway on the information highway" – descriptive information about all the holdings of the National Archives, perhaps with integrated links to a selection of images and texts from the actual holdings themselves.

On this second recommendation, the Government was listening, for the National Archives and National Library were both mentioned for the first time in living memory in the Throne Speech (Spring 2000), and granted therein significant new funding for digitizing their holdings. The Archives' role in supporting the Canadian Archival Information Network (CAIN) obviously is part of this agenda as well. On the first recommendation concerning information management, there is now some developmental work occurring to reposition the National Archives to deal with electronic records inside the government

and inside the Archives, and to revitalize concomitantly the appraisal and disposal programme; so far this is only at a planning stage, and success will obviously be in the concrete results, not in internal planning documents. Meanwhile, computer-generated records of certain archival value, and thus Canada's documentary heritage, continue to disappear daily through inertia.

English also heard from many special interest groups, and recommends as a result: a new national data management strategy and a new national data archive (for private-sector data as well as government databases); a new (or resurrected) national map collection; a revitalized national postal museum (and archives); a new (or resurrected) National Film, Television, and Sound Archives; and a new Family History Centre as a focus for genealogical clients. Certainly these media and researcher communities – and some of their archivist allies within the National Archives – have felt isolated, and even alienated, because of the integrated, cross-media approach of the National Archives in recent years. Equally certainly, in some areas, such as a national data strategy, the ball has been dropped by the Archives for years, despite repeated warnings from its own staff and expectations from the research community. Yet the report's recommended solution of such media autonomy is expensive, with no funds in sight for such new structures or expansion of old ones, other than some possible savings achieved through partnerships. Moreover, such autonomous media specialization can work against the "total archives" approach recommended elsewhere in the report, and ignores the increasing integration of all recording media in digital formats, often as multimedia documents and series. Similarly, English heard input from some archivists about the history-based research substance of their work into the history and character of creators, records, and record-keeping systems, and he heard from others an anti-history perspective stressing the importance of standards, process, and technology. These two poles (both important to complete archival work) are never reconciled in his report, with no vision emerging, for example, who the ideal archivist – or librarian – will be in the twenty-first century in terms of her university education, his personal characteristics, the nature of her on-the-job scholarly research, and his research-community focus.

In 1999, when the English Report appeared, Roch Carrier was appointed as the National Librarian of Canada and Ian Wilson as the National Archivist of Canada. I hope that they will take many of the good ideas advanced by John English and weave them into coherent policies and programmes to allow both institutions to flourish in the digital age. I hope as well, for the National Archives in particular, that archivists and historians will remain actively engaged in these processes that they highlighted in their submissions to John English. At a minimum, they should regularly request an accounting of progress against many of the report's recommendations, **and** they should lobby vigorously for expanded funding to allow the National Archives to implement the best of these recommendations. I also hope that many of the

silences in the English Report will be filled with articulated visions, plans, and concrete action for the future role of the National Archives and for the kind of archivist needed to work there to achieve that vision.

I believe that a renaissance for the National Archives will come not just by its becoming a more efficient manager and purveyor of digital information across all media, as English advocates, but rather from its again becoming a centre of research excellence by and through its professional staff. This requires sustained research by archivists themselves, and a supporting commitment by senior management, into the record-creating, record-keeping, and recording-media contexts of records, series, and fonds, to generate the contextual knowledge that allows archivists to do their jobs properly, and researchers in all disciplines and of all interests to interpret the institution's rich holdings creatively, and wisely. Archivists reported to English that, by 1998, such knowledge was being undervalued at the Archives. As a result, the significant intellectual capital built up in the past from such research-based knowledge, and used repeatedly for Web sites and exhibitions, contextualized electronic records management, macro-appraisal and records disposal, and standardized description, was being depleted, and not regularly replenished.

This is a major challenge for Ian Wilson and his managers: how does the Archives, refill that reservoir of intellectual capital when most of the dynamic programmes are identified with those who draw on that capital rather than those who create it? That gives a distinct message to professional staff that the sustained research that must underpin the long-term excellence of any cultural institution is not valued at the National Archives. Of course, it need not be an either/or situation. Intellectual capital must be built and used to achieve excellence.

Finally, although John English backed away from the merger idea, rumours of much closer integration of the National Archives and National Library continue to flit around Ottawa. I wonder if this is so unreasonable? While maintaining separate appraisal, acquisition, and description units to respect different legislative, donor, and media and creator characteristics, might not the reference, outreach, public programming, communication, exhibition, publication, and Web site programmes of the two institutions be profitably integrated – in short, their entire public face as seen by Canadians? From researchers' perspective, the issue is clear: they want the stuff, and care not whether it comes from the Library reference room on the second floor or the Archives reference room on the third floor in the Wellington Street building, or from one or two Web sites. Clearly integrating and harmonizing this public face would help the many shared users of both institutions find more and better sources. And certainly the Archives and Library have squabbled in the past over mandate issues. Some of the media collected by either institution blurs archives (unique, unpublished) and library (published by a publisher) lines as well. Most maps, most documentary art posters and prints, and most films col-

lected by the Archives are "published" media. Literary and musical manuscripts and many photographs collected by the Library are clearly archives. Original newspapers were for decades collected and maintained by the Archives, and then transferred to the Library. So, too, were rare books and government pamphlets found in the Archives' collections, often with tipped-in photographs and other media, now lost from their former contextuality when removed to the Library and its generalized bibliographies. And what of near-published/semi-published "grey literature," sometimes found in the Library's "government documents" holdings and sometimes in the Archives' government records files? And what of Web sites? Are they not really electronic versions of "grey literature": combining multimedia promotional "publication" materials along with capabilities for conducting "archival" business transactions? Perhaps a bold stroke would be to recognize that Web-savvy Canadians do not want to navigate through two cultural institutions' organizational structures and media overlap, let alone two sets of baffling professional jargon, but rather want to find, or be led to, good, contextualized information about Canada, period. Is that so wrong? And if not, then maybe the "role" for the National Archives and National Library in the new century, for which Minister Copps and Professor English were searching, is to decide how better to serve Canadians with heritage information about Canada, rather than defend institutional or professional boundaries.

Should such a merger occur between the Archives and Library, it must not be used, however, as an opportunity to forget John English's central lessons for the National Archives: significant numbers of the research community are deeply unhappy with the institution's apparent dumbing-down of reference services; many of its professional staff are demoralized by a perceived (and not unrelated) devaluation of their research skills and poor access to collections and researchers; and the electronic records revolution needs urgent and sustained attention. In order to address all three of these significant issues, a re-commitment is needed to research excellence by archivists to re-build the knowledge capital upon which credible solutions in all three areas must rest. John English heard these issues expressed as serious concerns at the end of the last century; they form an important challenge for the National Archives to resolve in the new one.