

# Book Reviews

**The Potlatch Papers: A Colonial Case History.** CHRISTOPHER BRACKEN. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997. xii, 276 p. ISBN 0-226-06987-7.

For the few archival commentators that have mentioned them in the same breath, postmodern theory and traditional archival science have been cast, with few exceptions, as antitheses. Their incompatibility is so profound for some observers that they believe that in order for the archival realm to be imbued with postmodern sensibilities, the old ways must be abandoned – replaced or heavily augmented by more enlightened thinking. Perhaps it is because archival material is viewed, in this connection, as one of the enabling tools of the modernist mindset: as fundamental to the belief that a direct link to an unmediated reality is indeed possible; as a roadblock to wider perspectives on the past; as a crippling atavism that must be supported or even replaced by other means of remembering so that truths, rather than the Truth, will out.

Christopher Bracken's book, *The Potlatch Papers*, departs somewhat from this pattern, providing a well-focussed example of how the postmodern paradigm can exist in close approximation to archival material kept, as always, via the old ways – to those routine government records that tell the "official" story. This is a study that does not bemoan the limited window on the past that such archives provide. It does not need to implore anyone to "improve" holdings by using new or different historical techniques, or by employing documentation strategies that may liberate the marginal voices suffocated by the metanarrative (a monolith aided and abetted, some would argue, by more traditional archival methods). Granted, the author approaches the material as a user, not as its keeper, and he is likely occupied by other questions. But Bracken's interrogation of these sources is nevertheless of consequence to archivists, insofar as it pertains to their plans for incorporating postmodern theory into the archival domain. Some may argue, for instance, that the addi-

tion of constructivist hermeneutics to the appraisal process can “justify” the preservation of records that essentialist diplomacies can only “identify” and that the relativist project of gathering “alternative” sources may fill out the invariably partial stories told by “mainstream” archives. Yet it is what lurks beyond how best to represent the past to the future that forms the crux of Bracken’s work: the vexing conundrum of language itself.

Bracken’s arguments revolve around an accumulation of “texts” – records and documents from the period spanning the 1860s to the 1930s, their common theme being the potlatch practiced by aboriginal communities in British Columbia and prohibited by federal law. Authored by late nineteenth and early twentieth century Department of Indian Affairs officials such as Gilbert Malcolm Sproat, George Blenkinsop, Israel Wood Powell, Lawrence Vankoughnet, and William May Halliday, these texts are scrutinized by Bracken under the glare of Martin Heidegger and Jacques Derrida. The musings of these philosophers on language-as-gift – on rhetorical invention – figure prominently in Bracken’s deconstruction of colonial discourse. Understood in these terms, it becomes quickly apparent that the government’s commentary on the potlatch went beyond competing claims of the truth. The colonizers’ view of the potlatch could never have been “a correct representation, an authentic image, of a thing existing independently of the words that describe it,” Bracken argues, for “the potlatch that the law had banned did not belong to a metaphysics that takes truth to be a correspondence shuttling ... between knowledge and its object” (p. 227). In other words, to ban what they had banned, the bureaucrats had to invent it; they had to make it “real” through their texts.

What does all of this mean? At the risk of oversimplifying Bracken’s carefully executed explanation, three effects of writing – otherwise termed “intertwining zones of textual contradiction” (p. 5) – constitute what is in essence Europe’s search for itself by reference to what it thinks it is not. The “limit” is the first zone, a boundary drawn between the “inside” and “outside,” between Europe and its other. Next is the “fold,” the point at which the limit becomes a “crease,” and where the former opposites of inside and outside now overlap. And last is the “gift,” the word that makes the condition of being both inside and outside true, and therefore real. Bracken adds to this Georges Bataille’s distinction between the non-reciprocal gift (loss) and the reciprocal exchange (investment), setting up the contradiction within colonial texts that insists on locating the “potlatch” on both sides of this European-imposed limit. To describe it as an act of giving, of waste, is to deem it barbaric and place it outside; on the other hand, to consider it as a method of exchange is to characterize it as following the principle of classical utility, as civilized, as “white,” thus allowing it to be placed inside. Two contradictory claims were allowed to be true at once; it was “given” – made “real” – by government officials via the word “potlatch.”

But just as a bank, Bracken notes, cannot be at once a financial institution

and the side of a river, a potlatch cannot simultaneously function as both an act of giving and an act of exchange. This “potlatch” can therefore exist only in the contradiction, a contradiction enabled by a limit that, as it is drawn, folds over and absorbs the barbarity of giving into civilization and the civility of exchange into barbarity, making those that practiced it “totally other and yet the same” (p. 8). And since the potlatch had transgressed the limit, crossing from the “outside” to the “inside,” it had to be stopped; it had to die. For the colonizer in the search of a national identity – of a “Europe-in-Canada” – the “uncivilized” aboriginal had to be kept, always, beyond the pale, lest the limit cease operating as a reference point for “whiteness” and as an excuse for the project of assimilation.

Archives – both the material and the institution – were, and one could argue still are, integral parts of this colonial mission. Duncan Campbell Scott, who served as Deputy Superintendent General of Indian Affairs between 1913 and 1932, had set as a task the building of the “perfect social state,” one that had “no place for non-European cultures” (p. 224). According to Bracken, in order for aboriginal cultures to “have a place in Scott’s nation ... they [had to] consent to die and leave their remains – such as their names [and the oral traditions associated with them] or confiscated potlatch regalia – in national archives and museums to be remembered by future generations of homogeneously white citizens” (p. 225). Perceived as a prosthesis (the means by which the government organism devoured its already-dead, assimilated aboriginal “other” in order to gain a sense of its own cultural self), the role of archives here and in Canadian society is thus exposed by Bracken to a fascinating and much-needed application of so-called postcolonial thought.

Although Bracken’s arguments may appear at first to support the termination of archives, his work does much, in fact, to champion their ongoing relevance. He demonstrates that the tool of the postmodernist is not necessarily different from that of the modernist: both approaches can and do use “official” archives to further intellectual goals, even though their respective ends may be very different. In fact, this study does not pit the content of “reliable” records of government against the details of marginal and arguably more “unreliable” sources. Because this study is not intended to provide a distillation of versions, the reader will search in vain among Bracken’s words for a more accurate rendering of the potlatch than the one that appears in bureaucrats’ records. Being an extended consideration of their “invented” phenomenon, his analysis has no need to seek out what was “real,” what, at any rate – to the postmodernist – could never be more than an illusion. This is, in effect, a literary critique, and as such, for those archivists interested in new ways of looking at the material in their care, this book will not disappoint. It is a captivating read, the author comfortably navigating the intersection of anthropology, history, and law with prose and argumentation that are left unmuddled by postmodern jargon. Yet, at times, Bracken’s journey into language can also be an uncomfortable experi-

ence, requiring, as it does, an earnest attempt to suspend pre-conceived ideas. It is, no doubt, a challenge, but he certainly rewards the effort.

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**On the Case: Explorations in Social History.** FRANCA IACOVETTA and WENDY MITCHINSON, eds. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1998. 369 p. ISBN 0-8020-8129-0.

They say one can't judge a book by its cover, but this book is worth a look simply because it is probably the only non-archives publication ever to sport a photograph of an archivist at work – the venerable Roy Reynolds, former government records archivist at the Archives of Ontario, taken in 1961. The photo shows Reynolds, ensconced in the stacks, reading through case file dockets. He is, one might assume, “on the case,” arranging and describing a valuable series of records. The explorations made in this collection of essays are all based on case file research, the fruits, one could say, of Reynolds', and many other archivists', labours.

In 1995, a number of social historians were invited to attend a three-day workshop in Toronto convened for the purposes of discussing experiences and offering feedback on the use of case files as historical documents. This volume is the tangible result. The types of case files used by the researchers run the gamut from the expected legal files, court records, medical files, and social welfare files, to more unusual materials: shipping crew agreements, immigrant settlement records, Native soldier settler files, and church registers. Most of the files date from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries—not surprisingly, given that the case file as a documentary form evolved around the turn of the century. On the other hand, two of the essays are based on earlier nineteenth century church records, a reminder that the church was the social safety net and regulator of social values before the state stepped in.

Every one of the papers published in this collection gives a fascinating description not only of the people captured in the files, but also of the records themselves. Eric Sager describes a shipping crew agreement as a “documentary panopticon” (p. 54); Carolyn Strange notes that “the capital case file can be approached as a textual artefact of *competing* truths” (p. 27); hospital case files are “a distilling of a life” according to Wendy Mitchinson (p. 267); for Margaret Little and other authors, a case file is “a site of contestation and resistance” (p. 231).

A methodological dichotomy forms an undercurrent running through this book. Says Steven Maynard, “Case files have emerged as one particularly fractious site in the debates over evidence” (p. 66). He is referring to the dif-