

Obituaries



Hartwell (Hart) Bowsfield, 1922–2008



Dr. Hartwell (Hart) Bowsfield, York University's first university archivist, passed away in Toronto on 10 August 2008. Born in Toronto in 1922, Dr. Bowsfield received his BA from the University of Manitoba in 1948, and served as Provincial Archivist of Manitoba from 1952–1967. Returning to Toronto to pursue his doctorate, he was recruited by Dean John Saywell in 1970 to establish York University's archives and also serve as a part-time lecturer with the Department of History. During these

years, Professor Bowsfield chaired the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA) and was an active member of the Toronto Area Archivists Group (TAAG). He retired from York University in 1988 but remained a supporter of the Clara Thomas Archives until his death. To see the full notice released by York University, see: <http://www.yorku.ca/yfile/archive/index.asp?Article=10985>.¹

Life is full of good-byes. Bidding farewell to friends and colleagues as we or they move on to new career challenges or new stages in life, is sometimes overlaid with happiness on their behalf or ours, sometimes tinged with sorrow at whatever has befallen them or us, but it always carries with it a wealth of memories and a sense of time passing. In the case of the death of a formerly

¹ Thanks to Suzanne Dubeau and Michael Moir of York University's Clara Thomas Archives for this biographical information, and to Victor Russell for the photograph.

close colleague, one pauses and reflects on them, and on the long-past time and place they occupied in our shared sphere.

Hart Bowsfield was remarkable for many reasons, not least of which was that he straddled the worlds of Canadian academics, historical research, and archives at a moment in time when all three were changing dramatically. It is almost impossible to convey how different the mid-1970s were from what we who are professionals and practitioners in any of these areas know them to be today.

In the field of archives, those of us who trained at the former Public Archives of Canada training course (offered jointly with Carleton University and the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association) when Hart first was conscripted to be York University's first archivist, know very well how much our profession has changed.

I suggest that it was the combination of distinguished scholars and researchers, which Hart undoubtedly was, and passionate and determined archivists, which Hart also was, that drove the discipline of archival science and the profession itself forward. I also suggest that it is possible to pinpoint almost to the day and hour when the sea change happened, and the archival profession in Canada moved out of the realm of possibility and into the practical world it inhabits now.

That moment in time was the earliest days of the Toronto Area Archivists Group (TAAG). The excitement and energy of TAAG's beginnings cannot be overstated. The significance of the Group's earliest actions, planned and developed during long formal meetings that often continued as long, informal social hours (read: drinking sessions) at whatever downtown Toronto restaurant was closest to the host archives, cannot be over-estimated.

Hart was prominent, persuasive, purposeful, and brought more than a few ideas to the table in those heady days. He was a delightful companion and comrade-in-arms as we few (thirty plus members in the early days) forged alliances with archivists and historians across North America, that would result in TAAG having a superb reputation as a professional association and TAAG members having ease of access to leading archival thinkers.

In the lead-up to the creation of the Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA), Hart joined eagerly in the wide-ranging discussions. He was willing to share his ideas and opinions as we debated the hows and whys of our new venture, and I will always picture him, leaning on his cane, giving his best advice. Hart famously argued that he could train anyone to be an archivist; not exactly a belief held by those of us who were working with several universities to develop what would become the Masters of Archival Studies degree program, but a belief passionately put forward by him nonetheless. In a testament to his nature and to the closeness and respect of the bond established by TAAG and perpetuated by ACA, all sides of all issues seemed valid, and differences of opinion never seemed to get in the way of collegial feelings.

Image courtesy of the Cable Public
Affairs Channel (CP AC). From
"National Archives of Canada,
Gatineau Preservation Centre Tour,"
broadcast 12 September 1997.

Hart belonged to a different generation than most of the early members of the TAAG and ACA leadership, but was nonetheless an active participant in the origins of modern archival practice in Canada. He was a lifelong devotee of the archival profession and deserves to be remembered by us as a voice that mattered.

Adieu, Hart.

Jane E. Nokes
Scotiabank Group
Director, Corporate Archives & Fine Art