

Obituaries



Debra Elaine Barr, 1954–2008



Image courtesy of Ian Barclay, July 2008.

Debra Barr was born in Tofino on the West Coast of Vancouver Island. She first attended the University of Victoria and then went on to complete her BA in English at Simon Fraser University in 1977. From a young age Deb had an inquiring mind and was fiercely passionate about many things. A school-mate remembers how Deb would fearlessly discuss “the meaning of life, what is right, what is wrong, the place of religion, and what is happiness.”

One of Deb’s major passions was archives. With nine other students she enrolled in the first Master of Archival Studies (MAS) program in North America at the University of British Columbia in 1981. She studied under Terry Eastwood and Hugh Taylor. She subsequently was among the first students to graduate, having obtained her MAS degree in 1985 with her thesis entitled “Analysing Photographs in Archival Terms.”

Deb’s first position was as the Archivist of the Anglican Diocese of British Columbia in Victoria, BC. After a short time working at the BC government’s Records Management Branch with Kent Haworth and Reuben Ware, she moved to Toronto. There she worked as a Project Archivist, producing the 338-page *Guide to the Canadian Manuscript Collections in Victoria University Library* in 1988, the *Guide to the Papers of Earle Birney in Canadian Repositories* for the Thomas Fisher Library, University of Toronto in 1987, and an inventory of the papers of Vincent Massey while employed at the University of Toronto Archives. In late 1990 she moved back

to her beloved coast to look for permanent employment. During the 1990s in Victoria however, there were few opportunities in archives, but lots of opportunities in records management. So Deb became the Ministry Records Officer for the BC Ministry of Housing, Recreation and Consumer Services, ending her work with the government as Acting Manager, Information and Privacy, for the Ministry of Attorney General. In 2001 she became the Manager, FOI/POP and Records Management for Royal Roads University (RRU). Most recently, Deb was instrumental in the creation and development of the Robert Bateman Art and Environmental Education Centre, also at RRU, to which she was seconded to curate the archives and art collections as Cultural Property Manager.

Outside of work, Deb was deeply involved in the archival profession. She was a member of the RAD Textual Records Working Group in 1990–1991. Perhaps because of her educational beginnings as one of the first graduates with an MAS, Deb was dedicated to promoting the education of archivists. She was Chairperson of the Toronto Sub-committee of the Ontario Association of Archivists' Education Committee. As a member of the Association of Canadian Archivists' (ACA) Education Committee from 1987 to 1989, Deb helped prepare the *Guidelines for the Development of a Two-Year Curriculum for a Master of Archival Studies*. Deb was Guest Editor of the Summer 1990 issue of *Archivaria* devoted to religious archives. Once back in Victoria, Deb became involved with the Archival Association of British Columbia (AABC), working on a submission regarding amendments to the *Freedom of Information and Protection of Privacy Act* and the new *Personal Information Protection Act*. She kept her hand in education, lecturing on archival accessibility and institutional sustainability as a guest speaker for the Managing Archival Collections course as part of the University of Victoria's Continuing Education Department.

She wrote a number of seminal articles that helped shape the concept of the fonds including "The *Fonds* Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report" (*Archivaria* 25, Winter 1987–88) and "Protecting Provenance: Response to the Report of the Working Group on Description at the Fonds Level" (*Archivaria* 28, Summer 1989). More recently she was focused on the privacy rights of the deceased. She was program chair of the highly successful ACA conference in Banff in 1991 and organized the joint AABC–ARMA Vancouver Island conference in Victoria in 2008. She served on the Board of the Anglican Diocesan Archives in Victoria for many years.

Delighting in drinking tea, Deb had an unusual opportunity to contribute to the promotion of Royal Roads University and the revival of a good beverage. She knew that tea merchants used to keep client cards on file listing the ingredients for the blends produced for individual customers. Deb approached Murchie's Tea and Coffee Company to reproduce the historic blend of China

black and green teas created for James and Laura Dunsmuir, the owners of Hatley Castle (now the administrative home of Royal Roads). Today Hatley Castle tea is available for purchase. Deb also assisted in the research of Isaburo Kishida, a Yokohama landscaper who arrived in Victoria to develop gardens for the estates of James Dunsmuir and Jennie Butchart among others.

Deb never let her passion for work interfere with her other interests, however. With her partner Ian Barclay she hiked, ran and went orienteering, volunteering with the Victoria Orienteering Club. With her good friend Walter Meyer zu Erpen and others Deb was one of the founding directors of the Survival Research Institute of Canada. She and Walter were working on a history of Canadian attitudes toward life after death and spirit communication, and together had written an article on Albert Durrant Watson for the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*. She had an enduring interest in the environment, and was a founding member of The Land Conservancy of BC. Along with this interest came a passion for birding and gardening. She loved to read, volunteering for the Victoria Literary Festival. She loved to write and she loved to travel. Above all, Deb valued family and friends, and kept in touch with a vast network of people.

Days before Deb became ill we shared an extended email correspondence. We covered many things, both work and personal. I told her that she now had the ideal job to go with her wonderful life, looking after the Robert Bateman archives, and she agreed. She asked me to look after a mutual friend she was concerned about. And she told me that she was very excited to be going to Cougar Annie's Garden, a heritage pioneer homestead in Clayoquot Sound. In an isolated and wild location, the gardens are, according to its website, of a "strange and compelling beauty." Unfortunately, upon arriving at Cougar Annie's, Deb was already ill and within a day had to be airlifted back to Victoria. After a six-week battle, Deb's generous heart gave out and she died on 13 October 2008. A friend leaving her packed memorial service said he saw an eagle circling the Gorge and felt it was a sign that she would continue to watch over her friends and family. I thought that if there is a circle of life, then Deb's life had come full circle. She left the way she came, having accomplished everything set out for her to do, and leaving a strong legacy of inspiration and friendship.

The Royal Roads Foundation has established the *Debra Barr Memorial Fund* to support archival management and preservation projects and eventually to name the *Debra Barr Archives Room* at Royal Roads University. Those wishing to make a contribution may contact the Royal Roads Foundation through its website: <http://campaign.royalroads.ca/campaign/making-a-gift/debra-barr-memorial-fund>.

Shelley Sweeney
University of Manitoba Archives & Special Collections