

Jean-Pierre Wallot, 1935–2010



Image courtesy of The Estate of Yousef Karsh

Jean-Pierre Wallot was born in Salaberry-de-Valleyfield, Québec on 22 May 1935. His father was of Belgian descent and his mother, French-Canadian. He grew up in a family that placed a high value on education and intellectual debate. As a teenager he worked for the family newspaper to earn money while he attended school and university, and he apparently was a very good newspaper man as he won prizes in journalism in the Eastern Townships region in the late 1950s. Among the lessons he learned in the newspaper business were a strong work ethic, the ability to spend late hours over a keyboard, and how to meet the rigid demands of a publishing deadline. The benefits of that training were apparent in his later years as a researcher, professor, author, and administrator both in academia and in the public service.

Dr. Wallot had a long association with the Université de Montréal (UM) where he received a BA in 1954, an MA in 1957, and a PhD in 1965. He became a tenured professor at the university in 1973, and served as an administrator in several capacities including vice-rector of studies, and vice-dean of research in the faculty of arts and sciences. In the 1980s he served as vice-rector of academic affairs. Prior to his work at UM, he worked as a historian at the National Museum in Ottawa for three years, as an associate professor at the University of Toronto from 1969 to 1971, and as a visiting professor at the University of British Columbia in 1972. Later, during his years in Ottawa he lectured in Canadian history at both the University of Ottawa and Carleton University.

During his academic career Dr. Wallot was a prodigious researcher and author, producing literally hundreds of scholarly articles, reviews, and monographs. In the course of the research for his PhD dissertation on the administration of Sir James Craig as Governor-General, he became intrigued with the entrepreneurial spirit that he discovered among the French-Canadian population of Quebec. For the remainder of his life, he carried on research and published extensively on the subject, dispelling the conventional view of nineteenth-century Quebec as a backward society dominated by the church. As an academic administrator, he raised hundreds of thousands of dollars to support research on this topic, much of it done in collaboration with Gilles Paquet of the University of Ottawa.

In 1985, Dr. Wallot accepted an offer to leave university life and assume the position of “Dominion Archivist” (at that time, the title of the head of the Public Archives of Canada). It was a period of learning and transition for both the new Dominion Archivist and for long-time staff. He would later acknowledge that the transition from academic life to the culture of the federal public service was very difficult for him. For the Archives staff there was also an element of shock and a need to accommodate change. Since the retirement of Dr. Wilfred Smith, the Archives staff had expressed in various forums the need for strong leadership, and that is exactly what they got from Jean-Pierre Wallot. As might be expected, it was not always the type of leadership and direction that staff anticipated; he had accepted the job offer from Cabinet with a clear mandate, and he took on the challenge knowing that change is not always readily accepted.

Early in his tenure, Dr. Wallot, in consultation with the Minister, department officials, and senior Archives staff, formulated three well-defined objectives to be achieved during his term of office. The first priority was to convince the government to scrap the old 1912 *Archives Act* and replace it with modern legislation, which would more truly reflect the roles and responsibilities of a national archival institution at the end of the twentieth century. After much work, consultation, and the conduct of an “education campaign” to inform senior government officials about their responsibility relating to the preservation of records, the new *National Archives Act* became law in March of 1987. The Act clarified the role and responsibilities of the National Archives in preserving the records of the Government of Canada, and gave the now-named “National Archivist” control over the destruction of all federal records. Another important innovation in the legislation was the definition of a role for the National Archives in the development and support of the broad archival community in Canada. He recognized the monumental problems faced by smaller archival institutions, often working in isolation. They faced the same problems, perhaps on a different scale, as those faced by the National Archives. Under the terms of the new Act, Dr. Wallot set out to obtain funding from the federal government and helped to organize the Canadian Council of Archives, serving as its first president.

His second objective was the construction of a proper archival repository. At the time, the Archives and the National Library were operating out of fourteen different buildings throughout the national capital region. None of the buildings, including the Wellington Street headquarters, was adequate, either in terms of size, or the quality and security of storage space. Dr. Wallot adopted a deliberate publicity campaign, one designed to inform the press of every security breach or water leak in the many storage buildings under his control. The purpose of the campaign was obvious: to inform the public about the crisis facing the preservation of Canada’s archival and library heritage, and to pressure government officials to put the needs of the Archives closer to the

top of their list of priorities. The campaign was long and difficult, but finally paid off in 1988 when the government gave formal approval to the construction of a new building. This formal approval constituted a major victory, but the dream was still a long way from reality. It was not until the spring of 1997 that the Gatineau Preservation Centre was officially opened. The result of all the work, waiting, and effort was universally deemed to be a crowning achievement – a building recognized to be the finest example of its kind in the world at that time.

Dr. Wallot's third objective was to make the institution a leader in dealing with the problems associated with preserving the so-called "new archival media." The most urgent need was, of course, to deal adequately with identifying and preserving the electronic records that government departments and agencies were beginning to create. In order to equip itself to deal with archiving records in electronic format, the National Archives itself had to undergo significant restructuring to ensure that government institutions were made aware of their responsibilities in dealing with these new record formats; that electronic records were covered by disposal schedules; and that the Archives had the ability to deal with acquisition and preservation of these records, as well as developing systems for making them available for public use in the same manner as hard-copy records. Needless to say, the revamping of the institution to deal with this monumental shift in priorities was not an easy one, especially at a time when all government departments and agencies were faced with downsizing and budget cuts. Over Dr. Wallot's twelve-year term as National Archivist, the National Archives of Canada made great strides in dealing with the preservation of electronic records and came to be recognized as a world leader in the field. The other area where he saw a need for initiative and leadership was in the preservation of Canada's audio-visual heritage. Dr. Wallot saw Canadian film and television production as a precious yet neglected part of the country's patrimony; he realized, however, that his institution would never have adequate resources to deal with the problem. He set out, with Sam Kula and other equally committed people, to find a solution and succeeded in getting funds to set up a national task force to study the problem. The report of the task force eventually led to the establishment of the Alliance for the Preservation of Canadian Audio-Visual Heritage, which operated in the form of a trust until 2010.

The National Archives received international recognition as a direct result of the accomplishments achieved during the 1980s and early 1990s. Archivists from around the world were anxious to visit the National Archives; Canadians were in constant demand to lead international study groups and to deliver papers at international meetings. Recognition of Canada's accomplishments came in several ways, including an invitation to host the meeting of the International Congress on Archives in Montreal in 1992. Following the meeting, Dr. Wallot was elected President of the world body where, for four years,

he worked tirelessly to promote archives on the world stage.

Along with all his duties both as a university administrator and as National Archivist, Dr. Wallot was in constant demand to serve on, and chair, committees in related fields of activity. Over the years he served in one capacity or another on the following associations and boards: long-time member of the Canadian Historical Association and served a term as its president; member of the Royal Society of Canada and a one-time president; member of the Historic Sites and Monuments Board of Canada; member and president of the Institut d'histoire de l'Amérique française; member of the National Archival Appraisal Board; member of the Board of Governors of the University of Ottawa; member of various committees of the Canada Council and the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council; member and president of the Association canadienne-française pour l'avancement des sciences; and board member of Cinémathèque Canada. He was named a member of the Order of Canada and its advisory committee. Following his retirement from the National Archives of Canada, Dr. Wallot continued his service activities, including a term as Director, Centre de recherche en civilisation canadienne-française at the University of Ottawa, and as president of UNESCO's International Consultative Committee on the Memory of the World. Dr. Wallot died of cancer in Ottawa on 30 August 2010.

If there was one single quality that characterized the life and work of Dr. Wallot, it was the passion with which he did everything – activities as diverse as writing an academic paper, playing music, building one of the finest archives buildings in the world, or serving as umpire at the annual ACA conference softball game. Whatever the challenge at hand, whatever the demand of the moment, he brought an energy and a passion to the task that his colleagues and staff had to admire and were inspired to emulate. Indeed, it was that passion and his sense of dedication that inspired others to follow him. That was his leadership style. It was based on hard work and single-minded determination, and it was inspirational. Dr. Wallot never lectured people on how to work. Rather, he led by example.

His legacy was a healthy, national archival program that achieved a high degree of visibility, not only in Canada but throughout the world. He recognized the essential truth in the often-quoted words of his predecessor, Sir Arthur Doughty: archives are indeed the most precious of national assets, and they are the gift of one generation to another. Jean-Pierre Wallot left the gift of a vibrant archives program to the next generation.

Michael Swift
Assistant National Archivist, 1986–1996