

A System of Their Own: Records Creation and Record- keeping in Canada's Department of External Affairs in the 1920s¹



ANNA SHUMILAK

RÉSUMÉ Cet article explore les aspects du contexte politique, légal et constitutionnel du ministère des Affaires étrangères du Canada. Spécifiquement, il trace des changements qui ont été apportés aux systèmes de création et de gestion de documents du ministère pendant les années 1920, mis en place suite à un accroissement des responsabilités dans la conduite et l'administration des activités des affaires étrangères du Canada. Sous-tendant cette analyse est la reconnaissance qu'en essayant de comprendre le contexte historique et organisationnel des Affaires étrangères, les utilisateurs de documents et les archivistes sont aussi mieux en mesure d'atteindre une compréhension plus complète des documents qui ont été créés à cette époque. Ainsi, cet article contribue à un discours archivistique beaucoup plus large, qui est centré sur l'incitation à étudier l'histoire et le contexte des documents d'archives.

ABSTRACT This article explores aspects of the political-legal-constitutional context of Canada's Department of External Affairs. Specifically, it traces some of the changes made to the department's records creation and recordkeeping systems in the 1920s, initiated by an increased responsibility for the conduct and administration of Canada's foreign affairs activities. Underlying this analysis is a recognition that by striving to understand the historical and organizational context of External Affairs, users and archivists are also able to achieve a more complete understanding of the records that were created at that time. In this way, the article contributes to a much broader archival discourse, which centres on encouraging the study of the history and context of archival records.

1 I would like to express my sincere appreciation to Paulette Dozois of Library and Archives Canada for encouraging me to write this paper and for offering valuable insight arising from her extensive knowledge of External Affairs history and recordkeeping. Many thanks also to my thesis adviser, Dr. Tom Nesmith, for his willingness to provide input and feedback, and for his continuing guidance in my work. This paper arises from my thesis research as a student in the Master's of Archival Studies program at the University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg. An earlier version was presented at the June 2011 Conference of the Association of Canadian Archivists in Toronto.

Introduction

In 1928, then–federal Conservative party leader and future Prime Minister R.B. Bennett observed that “recourse is had to despatches, to written communications, as the ultimate authority upon which nations rely to govern and guide their policies.”² The statement acknowledged the vital role of records within government, recognizing that they are the very lifeline of a political system. It is perhaps not entirely fortuitous that Bennett’s observation came at a decisive moment in Canadian political recordkeeping history.

Only two years had passed since Canada had attained full freedom to conduct its diplomatic affairs apart from Great Britain. What followed was a complete reconfiguration of Canada’s Department of External Affairs as the office worked to accommodate a new, expanded diplomatic mandate. But as External Affairs adapted to this role, it became necessary to change key ways in which departmental information was managed, created, transmitted, and stored.

This paper highlights aspects of the new information management processes that emerged. The study is a historical analysis of a department’s growth and evolution. At the same time, and from an archival perspective, it is intended to provide knowledge of an important records creator in Canadian history. This knowledge enables archivists to become “historians of the record,” with a goal to uncover more fully the layers of a record’s context and then to convey this knowledge to users of archival material.³ One part of this history involves examining the role of organizations as distinct records creators. David Bearman and Richard Lytle have identified the importance of this knowledge to archival work; they characterize organizations as “living cultures or organisms” and as entities with constantly evolving activities, functions, arrangements, and key players.⁴ They recognize that by gaining a greater understanding of an organization, it is possible to gain a more accurate grasp of the records it creates, since records are the “evidence” of organizational activities and development and because they form distinct historical strata within each organization.

The Department of External Affairs in the 1920s presents a distinct administrative and recordkeeping context. From this context, the following discussion specifically centres on changes to the department’s political–legal–constitutional dimension. This aspect influenced changes to its records creation and recordkeeping processes, and ultimately influenced its transition to a major records-

2 Library and Archives Canada [hereafter LAC], Records of the Department of External Affairs [hereafter RDEA], RG 25, vol. 749, file 183, “Extracts from Debates, House of Commons, Canada session,” 28 May 1928.

3 Tom Nesmith, “Archives From the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship,” *Archivaria* 14 (Summer 1982): 6.

4 David A. Bearman and Richard H. Lytle, “The Power of the Principle of Provenance,” *Archivaria* 21 (1985–86): 14.

creating branch within the federal government. The history of this transition in External Affairs has largely remained unexplored, although this paper draws inspiration from recent histories of records creation and recordkeeping in other Canadian government departments. Among these are Terry Cook's examination of the custodial history of the Department of the Interior's records; Brian Hubner's, Sean Darcy's, and Bill Russell's studies of recordkeeping in the Department of Indian Affairs; and Brian Masschaele's analysis of recordkeeping during the Second World War, to name only a few.⁵ The goal here is to provide an overview of the department and its evolving information management system. The study is not intended to be an analysis of External Affairs records, but what is implied here is that an understanding of the growth of the department during this era, and the information management system that evolved, provides crucial context for a researcher or archivist seeking to utilize the records it created.

Providing histories of organizations and other records creators is one way to make contextual knowledge more readily accessible to users of archival material. Online finding aids and catalogue descriptions can also relay context; however, these tools are generally created to provide only the most basic overview of administrative or biographical histories. They are not intended to provide detailed examinations of records nor of the contexts from which they were created and preserved. This has been perceived as a serious limitation of current descriptive systems. As archivist Lori Podolsky Nordland observes, descriptions and finding aids do serve an important role in forming "researchers' initial impression of most records"; however, she also points out that information presented in them is basic and often lacks other information necessary for more effective and thorough research. The solution, Nordland proposes, is to develop other descriptive tools to allow metadata "to be more prominently displayed" to archival researchers.⁶ Like Nordland, archival educator Barbara Craig supports

- 5 For a sample of these studies, see the articles by various authors in "Supplement: The Archival Legacy of the Department of the Interior," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987–88): 73–112. See also Terry Cook, "Paper Trails: A Study in Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898–1958," in Kenneth S. Coates et al., *For Purposes of Dominion: Essays in Honour of Morris Zaslow* (North York, Ont., 1989); Brian Hubner, "'An Administered People': A Contextual Approach to the Study of Bureaucracy, Records-Keeping, and Records in the Canadian Department of Indian Affairs, 1755–1950" (MA thesis, Department of History, Archival Studies, University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg, 2000); Sean Darcy, "The Evolution of the Department of Indian Affairs' Central Registry Record-Keeping Systems: 1872–1984," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 161–71; Brian Masschaele, "Memos and Minutes: Arnold Heeney, the Cabinet War Committee, and the Establishment of a Canadian Cabinet Secretariat During the Second World War," *Archivaria* 46 (Fall 1998): 147–74; Bill Russell, "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860–1914," *Archivaria* 19 (Winter 1984–85): 50–72; Brian Hubner, "'This Is the Whiteman's Law': Aboriginal Resistance, Bureaucratic Change and the Census of Canada, 1830–2006," *Archival Science* 7, no. 3 (September 2007): 195–206.
- 6 Lori Podolsky Nordland, "The Concept of 'Secondary Provenance': Reinterpreting Ac ko mok ki's Map as Evolving Text," *Archivaria* 58 (Fall 2004): 150, 159.

efforts to develop professional standards for description, but notes that many of these efforts focus principally on record content at the expense of record context. The latter is crucial, she contends, and should be “an integral part of any full archival description.”⁷

Terry Cook has suggested that archivists can provide greater context by “opening up” descriptions in order to showcase some of the “deeper contextual elements enveloping the complex creation, uses, and relationships of records” throughout their existences.⁸ One way of achieving this, as Tom Nesmith suggests, is by making available “a series of essays” to help illuminate diverse archival themes. According to this approach, existing descriptive systems could be augmented by various essays or histories that explore the context of records in archival collections. These essays would be optional for researchers to use but readily available to them as an additional source of information. The essays could offer an overview of the contextual nature of records and highlight and expand on different aspects of this context. This could include a deeper look at organizational structures, creators, systems, and information technologies. The ultimate achievement of such tools would be to help users “read an archives” by directing them to look beyond the information contained in records and see the wider context.⁹

External Affairs – The Early Years

The analysis of External Affairs presented here is an example of the contextual knowledge that can be relayed to archival users, in addition to what is already provided through other descriptive tools. However, before examining the new processes put in place in the 1920s, it is first necessary to trace key moments in the department’s early history leading up to its independence in foreign affairs. Canadian diplomatic autonomy had not always been perceived as inevitable. At its beginning in 1909, the Department of External Affairs had served a very different role and function, and its transition to independent foreign office was only to come about incrementally, over a duration of almost two decades. Its original architect, Joseph Pope, had advocated the establishment of the department foremost as a solution to a perpetual records problem within the government. This problem came to light most acutely during the Alaska Boundary

7 Barbara L. Craig, Philip B. Eppard, and Heather MacNeil, “Exploring Perspectives and Themes for Histories of Records and Archives. The First International Conference on the History of Records and Archives (I-CHORA I), 2005,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 3.

8 Terry Cook, “The Archive(s) Is a Foreign Country: Historians, Archivists, and the Changing Archival Landscape,” *The Canadian Historical Review* 90, no. 3 (September 2009): 531.

9 Tom Nesmith, “Reopening Archives: Bringing New Textualities into Archival Theory and Practice,” *Archivaria* 60 (Fall 2005): 271, 273.

dispute of 1903. Canada's scattered and incomplete collection of records proved injurious: during proceedings, delegates were unable to provide crucial evidence and documentation in support of Canada's boundary claims.¹⁰

External Affairs was, therefore, intended as a solution to a *records* problem, and its small staff was to make acquiring diplomatic material a main priority. The department was not to serve as a Canadian foreign office; rather, it was to act only as a conduit of information between Great Britain – which controlled imperial foreign policy – and Canada's federal departments. The position of secretary of state was to be held by the prime minister; Pope was appointed the first under-secretary of state for External Affairs.¹¹

The role and function of the department continued mostly unchanged during the years that followed, although Canada's diplomatic responsibilities were to expand to some extent. Subsequent to the end of the First World War, Prime Minister Borden successfully insisted that Canada be granted separate representation at the Paris Peace Conference. A year later, Canada was also to join other dominions in receiving full membership in the newly established League of Nations. Yet although Canada had, rather inadvertently, drawn a "rough outline of objectives for external policy," the Department of External Affairs was, by all accounts, still a "one-man office" and was to continue to play the role of a small agency in government while most diplomatic activities remained the prerogative of other Canadian departments.¹²

This was to change under Prime Minister William Lyon Mackenzie King, who assumed office in 1921. King brought with him an understanding of Canada's current diplomatic situation and a vision for where the nation should head in the future. This outlook was "well established on the side of change" and rooted in the belief that Canadian foreign affairs should be based on domestic policy rather than on the policies of an empire steered by the Foreign Office in London.¹³

Early in King's tenure, a series of clashes with the British government – including the Chanak Affair of 1922 – served to strengthen this resolve and to present King with a "moral justification for working out his own conception of Canada's imperial relations."¹⁴ In 1923, Canada was the sole signatory in a

10 Don Page, "Unlocking Canada's Diplomatic Record," *International Journal* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1979): 251.

11 C.P. Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict: A History of Canadian External Policies*, vol. 2, 1921–1948: *The Mackenzie King Era* (Toronto, 1981), 6.

12 Gaddis Smith, "Canadian External Affairs During World War I," in Hugh Keenleyside et al., *The Growth of Canadian Policies in External Affairs* (Durham, NC, 1960), 57.

13 John Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, vol. 1, *The Early Years, 1909–1946* (Montreal and Kingston, 1990), 88.

14 Philip G. Wigley, *Canada and the Transition to Commonwealth: British-Canadian Relations, 1917–1926* (London, 1977), 169.

treaty with the United States – the first time a treaty signed by a Canadian minister lacked what had been a prerequisite British counter-signature.¹⁵

Canada's pursuit of diplomatic autonomy was to culminate with the Locarno negotiations of 1925. The negotiations were initiated by Great Britain, and the seven treaties that followed were intended to help regain stability and security in Europe after the conclusion of the First World War. This was to be done by formalizing the borderlands of Germany, France, and Belgium; the three powers in question agreed to enter a non-aggression pact, and Great Britain and Italy were to serve as guarantors.

At the signing of the treaties, Great Britain had celebrated diplomatic success, fully anticipating empire-wide acceptance. This support was not forthcoming. British statesmen had manoeuvred through the Locarno negotiations "without recourse to any machinery for collective imperial policymaking" and had, in effect, excluded the dominions from participation. Overall, the process had been fully an "independent British undertaking."¹⁶

On the Canadian front, the new under-secretary of state for External Affairs, O.D. Skelton, saw the treaties as a clear point of departure and as an opportunity to assert Canadian diplomatic sovereignty. His predecessor, Joseph Pope, had by this time quietly faded into the background, owing in large part to a conservative, imperialist viewpoint considered at odds with that of King.¹⁷ In contrast, Skelton was a staunch proponent of total autonomy and one who considered the British-led system to be "a slur upon the dominions' post-war status."¹⁸ His ideas impressed Prime Minister King, who was to seek out Skelton as an adviser in diplomatic affairs. In 1923, Skelton was invited to accompany the Canadian delegation to the Imperial Conference, and by April 1925, Skelton was persuaded to leave his post at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario, and pursue a career in the civil service as deputy head of External Affairs.

King and Skelton were to work together to build a foundation for policy on External Affairs that was distinctly Canadian. The Locarno Treaties afforded such an opportunity, as the negotiation process had revealed a growing disparity between the strategic security of Great Britain and the rest of the dominions. Indeed, the occasion served to underscore "the fragmenting multiplicity of views about the empire's foreign policy" and caused the dominions to reassess the current imperial arrangement.¹⁹

The Imperial Conference of 1926 provided a forum in which these differing views could be expressed. The Canadian position was clearly on the side

15 Ibid., 173.

16 Ibid., 243–44.

17 Smith, "Canadian External Affairs During World War I," 47.

18 Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, 94; Wigley, *Canada and the Transition to Commonwealth*, 153.

19 Wigley, *Canada and the Transition to Commonwealth*, 244.

of change: in a private letter, Skelton asserted that "Canada must decide on her course in the full light of the facts and situation of the time." These views were explicitly conveyed by King at the conference itself; the Prime Minister emphasized that Canada would not be bound by treaty obligations in a European field and maintained that future foreign affairs should be based on the concept of equality.²⁰

This position was affirmed by the conference's Committee on Inter-Imperial Relations, which substituted the phrase "Commonwealth of Nations" for the term "empire." In its famous Balfour Declaration, the committee recognized the dominions as

...autonomous Communities within the British Empire, equal in status, in no way subordinate one to another in any aspect of their domestic or external affairs, though united by a common allegiance to the Crown, and freely associated as members of the British Commonwealth of Nations.²¹

External Affairs' Response to Increased Responsibilities

With equality now secured, External Affairs would work to adjust to a new mandate and increased responsibilities. No longer would the department play a minor role in the conduct of Canadian foreign affairs, with Britain taking the full lead; instead, additional resources and personnel would now be relied upon to work out the logistics of autonomy. But as the department grew in size and responsibility, it also "outgrew" its recordkeeping practices. Its earlier system was no longer suitable for an evolving, sophisticated foreign office. Thus, in the time following the 1926 Imperial Conference, the Department of External Affairs was to make significant changes to its information management procedures.

First of all, with the establishment of overseas legations, the department was to increase the scope of its operations and, consequently, the number of records being created for diplomatic purposes. Second, it was to adjust to and implement new channels of communication. Third, the department was to expand its secretariat to include individuals engaged with the recordkeeping process. Finally, External Affairs was to institute significant new records procedures.

Offices abroad

With the issuance of the Balfour Declaration in 1926, Skelton turned soon after to initiate plans to establish an overseas diplomatic corps. The move was based on a growing need to make informed policy decisions using accurate facts and information. Offices abroad promised to remove past limitations by

20 Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, 79, 81.

21 Quoted in *ibid.*, 86.

greatly expediting the information-gathering process. Thus, over the next few years, Canada was to establish its first legations in Washington (1927), Paris (1928), and Tokyo (1929).

The establishment of offices abroad marked a new era for External Affairs. For the first time, Canada would have a team of officers who would serve as the eyes and ears of the government in foreign countries and, in the process, would act as gatherers and transmitters of diplomatic information. Legations would also become major records creators for headquarters. The department in Ottawa would rely heavily on the feedback provided through the diligence of overseas staff, and this knowledge would allow for informed decision-making on critical bilateral issues.

The critical role of information is apparent in recordkeeping instructions issued by the department in Ottawa. Early guidelines and regulations dictated that “official correspondence ... books and records [be] kept, with care and accuracy,” and stipulated that registers be established at each legation to record letters and telegrams received and dispatched, as well as Canadian passports and visas issued. Legations were to send reports on “matters regarding the more important political events in the country concerned.” Members of legation staff were to acquire information from various sources, including newspapers, public opinion reports, issued government policies, regulations and court decisions. Information was then to be sent to Ottawa in the form of condensed reviews and briefs. Annually, a general report was also to be submitted, containing a “brief overview of development of country during the year passed” as well as a summary of office operations.²²

As anticipated, the legations were full participants in the vast flow of diplomatic information, and records creation and distribution proved central to the execution of their mandate. Ottawa’s minister to Washington, Vincent Massey, revealed the extent of this work in his 1931 “review of the legation’s operations over the last four years.” The legation, Massey wrote, had come far in actively taking over “all the distinctly Canadian work.” This was evidenced, above all, in its “statistics of correspondence,” deemed as sufficient “proof” of the office’s constant diligence and progress.²³

Responsibilities at the legation included, above all, the continuous sending and receiving of official diplomatic correspondence between the governments of Canada and the US, the work of which was clearly defined and based on instructions conveyed directly by External Affairs. The legation was also tasked with transmitting other, more informal correspondence as well as to enforce

22 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 790, file 430, “Rough Draft of suggestions as to what might be covered by proposed Regulations for the Diplomatic Service of Canada,” ca. 1930.

23 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 793, file 454, Massey to Skelton, “Review of the legation’s operations over the last four years,” 29 May 1931.

the protection of Canadian individuals in the United States by communicating routinely with various consular offices.

Another key function of the legation was the gathering of information for the Canadian government. To this end, officers and staff spent considerable time "consumed in the collection and study of documents" deemed to be of relevance and concern to Canadian affairs. According to Massey, this particular work accounted for "considerably over half the correspondence between the Legation and Ottawa," ranging from the "simple transmission of documents" to the creation of "elaborate reports" and studies. In total, this amounted to "several thousand documents – reports, bills, and other official publications," and tens of thousands of congressional bills for the previous year alone, to be examined and briefed and sent to appropriate departments in Ottawa.²⁴

Finally, the legation also served to represent Canada's government and society abroad. To this end, the office worked as a "repository of accurate information" on various aspects of Canadian society, which included making this information available to the American public and government.²⁵ A significant aspect of this responsibility involved responding to inquiries from individuals, but the legation also made available such things as Canadian statutes, yearbooks and departmental reports.

Along with the legation in Washington, similar attention to records creation and information management was paid by legations in Paris and Tokyo. Hugh Keenleyside, head of the Tokyo legation from 1929 to 1936, was especially devoted to keeping Ottawa well supplied with information relating to Japanese society and government. As is made clear in his annual report, this included the issuance of "monthly summaries of current developments" in Japan based on the travel reports of the minister, as well as official and unofficial correspondence. In all, "over three thousand three hundred and seventy letters" were dispatched during the first year alone, work that, as Keenleyside noted, required "a considerable period of study and preparation."²⁶

Due to the nature of Canadian–Japanese relations, the Tokyo legation also spent considerable time focused on immigration issues. In its first eight months of existence, the post issued eighty-seven visas, fifty-three passports, and affixed visas to 119 passports.²⁷ The office also had established an impressive reference library, from which insight "on various aspects of Japanese life and politics" could be gleaned and made use of by government departments in the capital. The legation's aptitude for recordkeeping – particularly its well-ordered and efficient system of documentation and filing – earned the highest praise of

24 Ibid.

25 Ibid.

26 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 794, file 469, "The Canadian Legation in Japan Memorandum," 23 December 1929, 4.

27 Ibid., 3.

External Affairs in Ottawa. Agnes McCloskey, the department's chief accountant, and O.D. Skelton, were to cite the legation as "a model for other Canadian offices" to aspire to and emulate.²⁸

For its part, Ottawa continued to oversee the constant stream of records flowing between the legations abroad and the main "port" in Ottawa. This entailed making special accommodations for the *transport* of departmental correspondence and records. By 1929, a "system of special bags" had been instituted to "carry all Governmental communications and documents" between Canada and each of its three legations.²⁹ This system of diplomatic bag service – designed to meet the standards set by other diplomatic powers – served to protect records from deterioration and damage; at the same time, it served to safeguard the secrecy and confidentiality of material by ensuring that documents would not be opened or tampered with.

On a level different from that of the overseas legations was Canada's delegation to Geneva. Although Canada had participated in the League of Nations proceedings since 1920, it adopted a more active role in 1927, after successfully bidding for a non-permanent seat on the council. With an expanded role, Canada's delegation was now able "to take part in the work of more Conferences and Committee meetings than would otherwise have been possible."³⁰ Along with increased representation at sessions of the assembly as well as at numerous international conferences, was a need for greater attention to information gathering and recordkeeping. W.A. Riddell, Canada's advisory officer to Geneva, noted that upwards of 200 days had been dedicated to conference work in 1929 alone, and out of this activity, twenty reports had been made and submitted to External Affairs. In addition, Riddell acknowledged the extensive "preparatory work" that was necessary; this involved the submission of questionnaires to the department in Ottawa intended to procure valuable insight into Canada's diplomatic stance. This information was then "included in the documents submitted" to League of Nations boards and committees.³¹

New channels of communication

With the establishment of its overseas legations, and with an expanded role in Geneva, Canada's approach to conducting business with other countries was evolving. At the same time, along with this extended overseas reach, came a

28 Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, 122.

29 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1532, file 1929-77-B, W.A. Riddell to O.D. Skelton, 15 March 1929.

30 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 795, file 474, "Memorandum on the Permanent Delegations to the League of Nations," 1930.

31 *Ibid.*; LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 795, file 47, "Memorandum on Departmental Work" LP/S, 17 November 1930, 4.

series of key adjustments to Canada's diplomatic channels of communications. This included new procedures for transmitting dispatches and telegrams to governments in both Commonwealth nations and in other foreign states. For the former, communications were now to travel through the respective ministers for external affairs in each member state. Communications with the US, France, and Japan would travel through the three legations, established since 1926, and communications with all other foreign states would pass through consular representatives or the British Foreign Office.

The most significant changes relating to the transmission of records were to take place between Canada and Great Britain. At the Imperial Conference, the long-established role of the governor general as "agent" of His Majesty's Government in Great Britain was deemed "no longer wholly in accordance with the constitutional position of the Governor General."³² In its place, the 1926 Committee of Inter-Imperial Relations recommended that future communications be directed between "Government and Government direct," while the governor general would act solely as a representative of the Crown, to be kept fully informed "as is His Majesty the King of Cabinet business and public affairs."³³

King was quick to act on the committee's advice. In a memorandum sent to Skelton in December of that year, the Prime Minister discussed the need for a new "system of communications" to reflect Canada's changing role in international affairs. Legations abroad were to be advised to "communicate with the Secretary of State for External Affairs instead of the Governor General," and the Canadian High Commission was to be considered as a new "channel of communications" in Great Britain.³⁴

Plans to implement the new system were in full effect by the following spring. The Dominions Office acknowledged its acceptance of the government's new procedures, slated to begin on 1 July, and noted that it would comply with directions to address dispatches to Canada to the Secretary of State for External Affairs. Included among these dispatches would be "weekly sets of secret Foreign Office prints" transmitted regularly to the Canadian government as a means to meet "the new situation very appropriately."³⁵ On a logistical level, the communications in general would no longer bear the phrase "for the information of your Ministers" – a reference to the long-established position of the governor general. Rather, official correspondence would now be employed "for

32 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 753, file 214, "1926 Imperial Conference," 14; Stacey, *Canada and the Age of Conflict*, 87.

33 "1926 Imperial Conference," 14.

34 The Canadian High Commission in London was well established by this point, having been opened in 1880. LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 753, file 214, Prime Minister King to O.D. Skelton, "System of Communications," 28 December 1926.

35 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1500, file 1927-767, Prime Minister King to Amery, 14 October 1927.

the information of His Majesty's Government in Canada" and addressed to "External, Ottawa."³⁶ These changes in records processes, although seemingly minute, reflected a major turning point for Canada's Department of External Affairs. In 1926, the Committee of the Imperial Conference had established *formal* declaration of Canadian diplomatic sovereignty; the emerging system of communications and record gathering signalled the *practical* consequence of the committee's ruling and reflected growing international acceptance of an equal, autonomous Canada.

Additional staff

As Canada's Department of External Affairs continued to expand in the 1920s, new members of staff were required to handle the increased responsibilities and duties. To this end, in a report on "Foreign Relations: Consular, Extradition and Immigration," a proposal was made "to amend the establishment to provide for additional work in connection with foreign affairs" as was dictated by departmental needs. Although an additional secretary was deemed sufficient for the interim, it was expected that first, second, and third secretaries would ultimately be required.³⁷ But in addition to the recruitment of diplomats and officers came a host of other personnel – translators, accountants, stenographers, secretaries, and various clerks. These individuals were to be engaged with the administrative aspects of External Affairs and, in large part, were the hub of the department's recordkeeping operations.

Several members of the recordkeeping sector were especially prominent. These include Agnes McCloskey, the department's head accountant and overseer of the "routine of daily operations." There was also Marjorie McKenzie, a grade 3 stenographer and O.D. Skelton's personal secretary, who controlled the paper flow directed through the office of the under-secretary of state. McKenzie was to become an influential member of the core staff at External Affairs; she was ultimately made keeper of the confidential records and was often called upon to author diplomatic correspondence for Skelton's signature.³⁸ Another member of the administrative team, Jocelyn Boyce, was elevated to the position of chief clerk in 1926. As overseer of the departmental records, Boyce was regarded as "one of the highest officials" of the department as a whole, and his office was considered the basis upon which "the machinery of the entire Diplomatic Service is kept oiled."³⁹

36 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 753, file 214, Dominions Office to Skelton, 31 May 1927.

37 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 787, file 408, Skelton re: "Appointment of assistant counsellor, Department of External Affairs," ca. 1926.

38 Hilliker, *Canada's Department of External Affairs*, 103–4.

39 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1542, file 312, "The British Foreign Office," *Foreign Policy Association, Inc. Information Service* IV, no. 24 (6 February 1929), 465.

Increasingly, members of the department found resources inadequate to “secure the same degree of specialization” of other, more established foreign offices. One solution was to build up a respectable library of research material, to be made accessible to policy-makers and diplomatic officers.⁴⁰ In 1928, this task was assigned to Grace Hart, who became the department’s first professional librarian. Hart established a working reference facility for departmental staff and for other government officers. She took great pains to acquire an extensive collection of diplomatic material, adequate for a Canadian foreign office, and introduced the Library of Congress classification system as a means of organizing this collection. The appointments of Hart, Boyce, McKenzie, and McCloskey, as well as other administrative appointments, reflected the growing need of the department to establish a secretariat “proportional to the direct participation of Canada as a nation in foreign affairs,” and also reflected the central position of information management in the burgeoning scheme.⁴¹

Recordkeeping procedures

As External Affairs continued to expand and manoeuvre within the international diplomatic sphere, it also turned inward to reassess and reconfigure its operations in Ottawa. Among things considered were changes to the established record processes. This included, for one, consideration of the revision of passport forms and procedures, so as to be issued by the Secretary of State for External Affairs rather than by the Governor General on behalf of Great Britain. The department also worked to implement a continuous, numbered system for telegrams and dispatches to and from Commonwealth nations. The approach was anticipated to provide a “more convenient and rapid method of checking receipt of telegrams.”⁴²

External Affairs was also to accept new responsibilities and duties, previously held by Great Britain. This included cipher and code work. Cryptography had previously remained the exclusive domain of the British Foreign Office, the only cipher facilities in Canada having been located in the governor general’s office. Now, in the few months following the Imperial Conference, the governor general requested “provisions as to the transfer of ciphers and codes” for the Canadian government. The Dominions Office soon after sent its approval of the request, along with an offer to set up new procedures for the dominions, relating to ciphers and to communications in general.⁴³

40 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 787, file 408, “Memorandum on the Work of the Department of External Affairs,” 1930.

41 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 787, file 408, “Foreign Relations: Consular, extradition and immigration,” ca. 1927.

42 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1513, file 1928-249, Skelton to Larkin, 15 December 1928.

43 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1488, file 1927-142, Governor General to Secretary of State for

The Dominions Office was to make good on this offer the following summer; enclosed along with a 9 June 1927 dispatch were copies of the existing cipher “C.O.3,” the new cipher “Dominions, 1927,” a cipher “C.O.2” to be used in times of crisis, and an “interdepartmental” cipher, official distribution list, and instructions to implement the system on 1 August for “all our cypher [sic] communications with the Dominions.” The governor general was asked to transfer his copies of the Government Telegraph Code to External Affairs by 1 July, along with the noted cipher codes.⁴⁴

With this transfer, the Department of External Affairs assumed a fairly substantial increase in its daily workload. At the time, cryptography had to be accomplished manually, using dictionaries and “one-time (numbered) pads” or scripts. As such, the process proved an “extremely laborious and time-consuming” endeavour, one based on precision and meticulous organization.⁴⁵ Thus, the adoption of ciphering capabilities necessitated new trained clerical staff.

At the same time, External Affairs was now faced with a need to devise a system to facilitate the sending and receiving of coded communications. This entailed the creation of a number of schedules for the transmission of “confidential and secret” dispatches. It also involved putting into place procedures for duplicating and filing messages. In its first phase of implementation, the department was to keep a number of copies of telegrams – a “top heavy” copy for file, one copy each for Government House, the Prime Minister’s Office, and External Affairs, and one copy to be filed and made available for reference purposes.⁴⁶

Another area of change concerned the department’s filing methods. From its beginning, the department had maintained two central registry systems. The first was the main “39 series,” itself divided into two parts: the “File List” and the “Indexes and Registers.” The former included files “numbered consecutively as they were created” and stored in the permanent departmental filing room.⁴⁷ In other words, files were arranged by the year they were created, with each subject being assigned a distinct file number based on the order that it was dealt with by the department for that particular year. For example, the file relating to “subject one” for the year 1912 would be labelled “1-1912,” the second would be “2-1912,” and this would continue until the last file for the year had been created. The file list would then revert back to “1” for the first file of the next year (i.e., “1-1913”). The second part of the 39 series, the “Registers and

Dominion Affairs, 29 December 1926.

44 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1488, file 142, C.W. Driscon to Skelton, 9 June 1927.

45 Hilliker, *Canada’s Department of External Affairs*, 125.

46 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1488, file 1927-142, Dominions Office to Governor General, 4 July 1927.

47 Hilliker, *Canada’s Department of External Affairs*, 46, 362.

Indexes," was used to keep track of the documents in the file list and essentially served as a finding aid for future reference.⁴⁸

The second registry system pertained to the filing room of the Prime Minister's Office, which contained both the personal and political records of the prime minister, as well as one set of official dispatches. The latter collection was considered part of the prime minister's papers and as such was routinely removed by the outgoing leader at the end of his tenure. Skelton perceived a serious shortfall in this customary practice. In a memorandum sent to King in 1926, the under-secretary noted that although mailed dispatches from the Dominions Office were regularly forwarded to the department, copies of telegraphic dispatches were not. Only the prime minister received a complete copy of all telegraphic dispatches and, as he removed these upon leaving office, the department had been left with an incomplete collection of files. In addition, as a comparison of lists from External Affairs and the Prime Minister's Office revealed, it was apparent that "no logical division or continuity" existed in the selection and acquisition of files.⁴⁹

As a solution to the problem, and in order to capture a "continuous record of all transactions" relating to Canadian foreign affairs, Skelton recommended that carbon copies of telegraphic dispatches be regularly made and forwarded to External Affairs.⁵⁰ This practice was subsequently adopted by the department in the years following. In its first phase of implementation, External Affairs made a practice of retaining original dispatches, while forwarding duplicate copies to the Prime Minister's Office. As the latter procedure proved rather untenable to implement, the duplication of dispatches was eventually discontinued, and the department of External Affairs continued to acquire official correspondence, organized into "secret," "confidential," and other categories.⁵¹

Major new procedures were instituted in the department following Canada's assertion of diplomatic independence, and External Affairs was fast becoming the "central agency" that Skelton and King had envisioned. At times, however, this centrality was apt to be questioned by those within government, including staff in the department itself. One such instance occurred soon after the opening of the US legation, when Hume Wrong, a high-level officer, forwarded to

48 Many of the details relating to the arrangement and operation of the "39 series" registry system were provided by Paulette Dozois, Senior International Affairs Portfolio Archivist, Library and Archives Canada. The 39 series registry system was so called because it existed as the department's main registry until 1939, when significant increases in records creation during the Second World War led to the institution of a new "40 series" system. The 39 series was directly transferred from the Department of External Affairs to Library and Archives Canada during the 1970s; all surviving files in the original registry were acquired at that time.

49 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 828, file 737, Skelton to Prime Minister King, 17 July 1926.

50 *Ibid.*, Skelton to Prime Minister King, 6 July 1926.

51 *Ibid.*, Memorandum for the Prime Minister, 6 February 1939.

Skelton an inquiry relating to the proper channel of correspondence. "A certain amount of correspondence," wrote Wrong, "dealing almost exclusively with individual cases of deportation from the United States to Canada, has been exchanged between the Legation and the Commissioner of Immigration in Ottawa direct." The question directed to Skelton was whether there was any objection to continuing the practice of direct correspondence with another Canadian department, despite the fact that "technically ... all such matters should pass through the Department of External Affairs." Wrong went on to defend the action as a "considerable saving both in time and in letter writing" and assured the under-secretary that "questions of general principle relating to immigration and deportation" would still be directed to External Affairs.⁵²

In his reply, Skelton acknowledged the convenience of Wrong's approach, but made clear that "direct communications" with any department other than External Affairs "should be discouraged" to avoid both confusion and error.⁵³ In his assertion that all correspondence be returned to External Affairs first, Skelton was, in effect, affirming the new phase that had begun in Canada's foreign affairs. No longer would the department be cast a minor role within Canadian foreign affairs. With full autonomy now secured, External Affairs was increasingly to serve as the "brain" of all Canadian diplomatic operations.

Conclusion

An understanding of a wider context of External Affairs' records provides users and archivists with additional insight when researching records and information. Looked at in another light, it can be said that records are the evidence that an organization leaves behind. This evidence encapsulates in time a specific moment in that organization's history, reflecting such things as its functions, its level of complexity, its scale and organization, and its interactions with other organizations and entities. It must be understood, however, that this evidence is part of a wider history, and only by placing the records in this greater context can they be fully comprehended and given meaning.

One way to achieve a greater understanding of records is by examining the organizational context in which they were created. Canada's Department of External Affairs and its wider system of information management, set in place during a time of widespread institutional change, is itself a distinct organizational context. External Affairs had acted in an "advisory capacity" in its formative years.⁵⁴ In the 1920s, this role was transformed following the Locarno

52 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 1498, file 1927-686, Wrong to Skelton, 8 July 1927.

53 Ibid.

54 LAC, RDEA RG 25, vol. 790, file 416, "Memorandum on Departmental Work," 17 November 1930.

negotiations and the Imperial Conference of 1926, during which time Canadian diplomatic sovereignty was asserted. But along with an evolving mandate and responsibilities came extensive changes to the department's administrative and recordkeeping processes. These included an increase in the number of records and records creators, the institution of new channels of communication, an expansion of the department's recordkeeping personnel, and the implementation of new recordkeeping procedures.

Examining this recordkeeping history, along with the wider context of External Affairs, is an essential step in coming to understand the records this institution created. This knowledge can be used as a springboard for further investigation and then drawn upon to perform key archival responsibilities, such as description. In this way, archivists must prioritize their role as "historians of the record." In other words, they must go "back to the basics" of studying the multiple provenances of records in order to utilize the "power of this provenance information" in all aspects of archival work.⁵⁵ For it is only by viewing records as "evidence" of wider systems and processes that archivists can accomplish and perform their most meaningful archival functions.

Anna Shumilak is a recent graduate of the Master's of Archival Studies program at the University of Manitoba/University of Winnipeg. She has worked at the University of Manitoba Archives and Special Collections, The National Archives (Kew, London), and Library and Archives Canada. She is currently an archivist at the Hudson's Bay Company Archives in Winnipeg.

55 Tom Nesmith, "What's History Got to Do with It?: Reconsidering the Place of Historical Knowledge in Archival Work," *Archivaria* 57 (Spring 2004): 27.