

# Obituary



## Jay Atherton, 1936–2012



Image courtesy Adrienne Herron, 2004

Members of the archival community in Canada were saddened to learn of the death of long-time friend and colleague Jay Atherton. Jay passed away in Ottawa on 6 November following a period of illness. He is survived by Peggy, his wife of forty-seven years.

Jay was born in Vancouver, attended schools in that city, and was a graduate of the University of British Columbia, obtaining an honours degree in Canadian history in 1961. Like many of his contemporaries, Jay emerged from university filled with enthusiasm and idealism, and he decided to devote himself to teaching. Again, like many of his contemporaries, he soon discovered that the public school system did not provide an environment in which he could readily share his love of Canadian history and his enthusiasm for the subject. Following his brief teaching career, he applied for a staff position at the Public Archives of Canada (PAC) in Ottawa, and there he found an institution that would happily provide a workplace in which his great energy and his love of Canadian history could be put to good use. In the early 1960s, the Public Archives, under the able leadership of W. Kaye Lamb, was experiencing a period of rapid growth, both in scale and in the complexity of its programs. In this environment, Jay found the perfect career home. One of the major projects in the Manuscript Division of PAC at that time was the organization and description of the massive papers of Prime Minister Mackenzie King, and Jay was assigned to lead the group of archivists and support staff on that project. Always the innovator, Jay adopted a set of descriptive rules that the archival team members were to follow, in what was one of the

early efforts within the PAC to impose descriptive standards. Jay was always an advocate of efficient time management and effectively put his theories into practice during this period by successfully working toward a master's degree in history at Carleton University, Ottawa, while working full time.

The rapid growth of the institution during the 1960s led to a number of organizational changes reflecting the complexity of the work of a modern national archives. In 1973, a new Public Records Division was created to manage the historical records of the federal government, and Jay was appointed director of this new division. The appointment took his career path in a new direction, and he would devote much of the remainder of his time in the federal public service to the considerable task of managing the records of the national government. In 1978, he became the director general of the Government Records Branch, with responsibility for advising departments and agencies on the management of their records and overseeing the network of regional records centres. Jay had become known in the archival community in Canada as someone who was not intimidated by change, who loved innovation, and who could always be counted on to question conventional wisdom. His position as general overseer of the management of the records of the Government of Canada offered great scope for his talents and abilities. A particular challenge of the period was the management of records in the new electronic formats. Jay became a leader in the field, writing and lecturing on the subject and aiming his message not only at the records creators, but also at members of the records management and archival professions. His article "From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management–Archives Relationship" is still widely quoted.<sup>1</sup> During the 1980s, he was one of the leaders of the Association of Records Managers and Administrators (ARMA), both nationally and internationally, and because of his strong background in archival work, he was able to forge important links between the two professional groups. From 1986 until his retirement in 1993, Jay served the National Archives, as it was then known, in a number of senior management positions. He developed an expertise in the fields of archives legislation and in the emerging field of access to information and privacy. In an advisory capacity, he made valuable contributions to the development of legislation in these fields, consistently advocating the right of historians and the general public to information about how they are governed. Because of his long experience in the fields of archives and records management, he knew better than most that legislation guaranteeing citizens a right to information about their government is meaningless in the absence of effective records management and archives regimes.

1 Jay Atherton, "From Life Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management–Archives Relationship," *Archivaria* 21 (Winter 1985–86): 43–51.

It was no surprise to those who knew and worked with Jay that his retirement would not be spent in a rocking chair. After leaving the federal government, he became the archivist of Carleton University, taught courses in records management at Algonquin College, acted as a mentor for students of archival studies, worked actively with the Gatineau Valley Historical Society (in the beautiful area of west Quebec where he and Peggy lived for many years), and worked tirelessly for the Friends of the Library and Archives of Canada. His boundless energy and enthusiasm, as well as his personable managerial style, always guaranteed that he would have leadership responsibilities thrust upon him. He was one of the early advocates of the formation of a society of professional archivists in Canada, later becoming ACA president in 1989–90, and serving as the general editor of *Archivaria* from 1993 to 1995; he held various offices in the Ottawa Chapter of ARMA; and he served as president of the Gatineau Valley Historical Society, and was the society's archivist for many years. In another facet of his life, little known to many, he was president for several years of Sinfonia Ottawa, a small summer string orchestra, and he often did volunteer work for the Canadian Amateur Musicians' annual Come Sing Messiah at Dominion-Chalmers United Church in Ottawa.

Not surprisingly, the strong contributions he made in his multifaceted work life did not go unrecognized: he received several awards in relation to his work with ARMA, including the Cardillo Award from the Ottawa chapter; he was a recipient of the Commemorative Medal for the 125th anniversary of Canadian Confederation in recognition of the contributions he made during his career to the preservation of Canada's documentary heritage; he was made an honorary life member of the Gatineau Valley Historical Society in recognition of his many contributions to the work of that society; in 2009, the Association of Canadian Archivists named him a fellow of the ACA in recognition of a lifetime of distinguished service to the profession.

All who work or have worked intensely in response to the demands of a profession know that from time to time we need an outlet or a brief getaway from those demands. Jay found his outlet in two not totally unrelated passions: jazz and baseball. He loved the work of the jazz masters and owned a fine collection of their music. Anyone who was fortunate enough to be the recipient of Jay and Peggy's hospitality in their beautiful retreat in the Gatineau Hills will recall that a jazz LP was always playing in the background. As a baseball fan, he was a true aficionado. He understood and appreciated the intricacies of the game as well as anyone, and enjoyed nothing more than an afternoon sitting in the sun, not simply watching the game, but anticipating the plays and second-guessing the strategy of the managers. It would not surprise me to learn that, as he watched one of those games, he thought about writing an article on the similarities between the two art forms that he loved. It was something he could have done.

In all of the institutions, societies, and organizations in which Jay worked, including his managerial positions with the National Archives, he was known

as a people person. He had a well-practiced ability to solve people problems, to see the “big picture,” and to keep egos in line. He unfailingly saw the best in people, and he freely used his wonderful sense of humour to defuse difficult situations and to lead people to a practical and appropriate consensus. He served his institution under three very different but very able chief archivists: W. Kaye Lamb, Wilfred Smith, and Jean-Pierre Wallot. Throughout his career with the Archives, he was the consummate “public servant” in the best sense of the term: dedicated, intelligent, loyal, hard-working, and honourable. His legacy is a lasting contribution to the preservation of an important part of his country’s patrimony.

**Michael Swift**  
**Assistant National Archivist, 1986–1996**