

Notes and Communications

The Canadian Archives Summit, 2014



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Canadian archives are the foundation of Canadian studies, and the development of Canadian studies will depend in large measure upon the satisfactory development of Canadian archival resources.¹

This forthright assertion of the essential value of the archival record remains as clear today as when it was written by T.H.B. Symons in 1975. The title of his influential report on Canadian studies provided the best expression of the ultimate goal of the archival endeavour: *To Know Ourselves*. It gave inspiration and context for the 1980 *Report on Canadian Archives*. Dr. Symons readily accepted our invitation to attend the Canadian Archives Summit as its honorary chair, and his presence symbolized the continuity of our challenge.

The Canadian Archives Summit was organized by the Association of Canadian Archivists, L'Association des archivistes du Québec, and the Canadian Council of Archives as a unique event to stimulate creative thinking and new approaches to archival services. While focused on “a new blueprint” for the archival system, the summit was intended to inform and engage the two expert panels that were in the midst of their work. Library and Archives Canada sponsored a broad-ranging study through the Council of Canadian Academies, addressing the role of memory institutions in a mobile, digital society. The emphasis in the questions posed was on social media but also included the larger issues of recordkeeping and appraisal. The wording of the questions seemed hesitant, with libraries, archives, and museums seen as reacting to the challenges of changing communication, and the final question was ominous: “How can memory institutions remain relevant as a trusted source of continuing information?”

At the same time in 2013, the Royal Society of Canada, one of the member academies of the Council, launched its own expert panel, with a

1 Thomas H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of The Commission on Canadian Studies*, vol. 2 (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975), 82.

specific mandate to report on “the status and future of Canada’s libraries and archives.” The mandate opens with the clear recognition that these institutions “are actively meeting the challenges of unfolding digital technologies, changing cultural practices and society’s expectations.” The members of both expert panels were invited to attend the summit. Both are expected to report later in 2014.

The summit and the two expert panels reflect a profound concern about our key memory institutions and their evolving roles and relationships in a technology-enabled, mobile, information-rich society. The summit sought to include not just the archival community, but also the many allied professions and enthusiasts to begin a national dialogue on the future of archives. The organizers were uniformly impressed by the immediate and often enthusiastic response of all whom we contacted to help sponsor and participate in the summit. A generous donation from the Open Text Corporation funded live-streaming of the morning’s presentations and enabled the summit to be held in thirty venues throughout the country. A number of “thought leaders” were asked to prepare background papers, which were published online in advance to help inform the discussions. All of them readily agreed, and together they produced a solid fact base for the discussion.² The summit was planned as an intensive day, providing the opportunity to learn from many perspectives and then participate in discussion to advance new thinking and directions for the archives system. The morning was especially full, with welcoming and context-setting comments, followed directly by a series of short talks by “*les agents provocateurs*,” each strictly held to seven minutes.³ The speakers came from a variety of backgrounds and brought many perspectives. They were assigned a difficult task: “to be honest, direct and, where necessary, blunt to stir new insights and thinking about archival services over the next decade.” They were given licence to think outside the usual archival boxes, and to be controversial and creative. Their remarks were to provide the fuel for the afternoon’s discussion tables, organized both at the main venue, the Munk School of Global Affairs, University of Toronto, and in all the other venues. In every instance, researchers, genealogists, librarians, local historians, information commissioners, and others concerned about the integrity of the record were invited to join for the day. The extensive notes from these discussion groups are being reviewed and brought together as a report to be considered as a key step toward developing an archives system action plan.

2 These have been published in both languages by the Association for Canadian Studies and distributed to journalists and politicians in *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens: Towards a New Blueprint for Canada’s Recorded Memory*, special edition (Spring 2014).

3 All of these presentations can be found at Association of Canadian Archivists, Canadian Archives Summit, “Les Agents Provocateurs,” <http://archivists.ca/content/les-agents-provocateurs>.

The Canadian Archives Summit was organized quickly and collaboratively, and was encouraged, facilitated, and enlarged by several national associations involved in archives, Canadian studies, and popularizing history. The process was a tangible demonstration of the widespread public interest in the state of our documentary heritage. The quick and generous response to the idea of the summit hints at the potential for a new coalition of groups and professions to advance archival services. We seek a renewed vision for the role of archives in society: one that can rally a broad coalition with a shared agenda. It may take a generation to realize the full scope of such a vision, but much has been accomplished in the past three decades. This is a solid foundation on which to build.

With the kind forbearance of the General Editor of *Archivaria*, the Notes and Communications section of this issue is devoted to a selection of the brief presentations by the *agents provocateurs*. To these we have added the opening comments of the summit's honorary chair, T.H.B. Symons. These reflect the speaking style of their authors and give an impression of the lively dynamic of the morning's proceedings. Collectively, they now stand as a permanent record of current thinking about the Canadian archives system.

The stated ambition of the summit expressed the broad vision for the hundreds of archives that voluntarily co-operate and collaborate to form the Canadian archives system. The intent was clear:

- 1) To ensure that Canada's documentary heritage continues:
 - to grow systematically, using all media to document the Canadian experience in its complexity and diversity;
 - to maintain the integrity of the record of Canada as evidence valid in law, as the basis for studies in many disciplines, and as a way "to know ourselves";
 - to be available to all who are interested in it now and to those of generations to come.
- 2) And to advance public recognition of our documentary heritage as a source of enduring knowledge accessible to all, contributing to the cultural, social, and economic advancement of Canada as a free and democratic society.

I wrote those phrases when proposing the summit, borrowing heavily from the preamble to the *Library and Archives of Canada Act* (2004). I would rewrite this statement after the summit. The speakers, and especially the discussion tables, shifted the focus subtly but significantly away from the needs of archives, archivists, and the record toward an emphasis on use, users, and citizen expectations. The perspective moved perceptively away from internal archives issues and maintaining institutions toward providing archival services in a twenty-first-century society. And the vocabulary became that of engagement and meaningful interaction with others who are just as deeply invested in the integrity and authority of the record as we are. In this transition lies a glim-

mer of a new future. This is not about convincing funders to reinstate a program or two; it is about a vision and partnership building for a confident new future.

Dr. Symons, reflecting on his long career and the frequent demands on him to lead commissions of inquiry, provided intensely practical examples of the essential role of the archival record in providing the context for each of these inquiries: “Simply put, archives are the point of departure for virtually any undertakings in the fields of scholarship and, certainly, for any activity in the area of public policy.” This was apparent in Ry Moran’s remarks on the centrality of the record in addressing the complex issues involved in the Truth and Reconciliation process.⁴

Though seldom classified as an archival service, one of the unique services an archives provides to society is documenting it. Many of our *agents provocateurs* took this as their theme, from Kate Theimer who emphasized the need to document the “now,” as modern communication fades or is lost in the clutter so quickly, to Craig Heron and Laura Madokoro, who urged archives to take a proactive role in working with and empowering new Canadians in preserving their own record. As Madokoro observed, Canadian demographics are changing quickly and the lives of many groups are woefully under-represented in Canada’s larger archives. Many of these groups are not recent arrivals. Official records exist but, as for all of society, these offer a very limited perspective on the Canadian experience. As Heron summarized, “It means trying to change the public face of archives and to make the archival process more participatory and engaging for communities, not just for individuals.” The new blueprint must find a means to include and affirm all peoples of modern Canada as an integral part of our historic record.

Many of the *agents* spoke of the necessity of knowing and working with the users of archives. Bill Waiser brought his perspective as one of the leaders of the access side in the census wars, demonstrating the vital role archives users and allies can play as advocates for archival issues.⁵ Many leaders of the archival community are public servants and are thus restrained from being visible advocates on public policy issues affecting archival interests. Informed users like Waiser have been effective. Deborah Morrison, President of Canada’s History Society, has been another knowledgeable user of archival services and an active supporter. Her perspective on communicating with the younger, tech-savvy generation provides blunt advice to archives on marketing services,

4 For Ry Moran’s *agent provocateur* presentation, see “Ry Moran,” YouTube video, 6:39, posted by Archivistsdotca, 19 February 2014, <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IVOZ-lpKoXM&feature=youtu.be>.

5 See Terry Cook and Bill Waiser, “The Laurier Promise: Securing Public Access to Historic Census Materials in Canada,” in *Better Off Forgetting? Essays on Archives, Public Policy, and Collective Memory*, ed. Cheryl Avery and Mona Holmlund (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2010), 71–110.

and even just the fact of their existence, to a broad public. As she notes, “you have to be bold,” and her confidence is such that she argues that by working with the many others in the broad heritage community, “creating a future for history has the potential to become a movement.” Can our new blueprint be as dynamic and ambitious?

Continuing the theme of a focus on users, current or potential, Richard Dancy reminded the summit that Canada’s descriptive standard, *Rules for Archival Description (RAD)*, is now twenty-five years old and is out of tune with international developments. In its early days, the Canadian Council on Archives concentrated considerable effort on developing *RAD* and gave reality to the concept of an archival system. Both need renewal. Librarians have shifted away from the approach of *AACR2*, which underlays *RAD*, to rethink the purpose and intent of description, using the new concept of “resource discovery.” Similarly, librarians have been exploring new possibilities for partnerships, both as collaborative efforts and with the private sector. Leslie Weir, Chief Librarian at the University of Ottawa and a leader in this kind of effort, spoke of a variety of economic models to fund and sustain mass digitization projects. The experience of the private sector, particularly with the genealogical market, suggests that researchers are willing to pay reasonable amounts for value-added services and convenience. In developing our new blueprint, we should learn from this experience and consider not whether, but how best to partner with the private sector.

Chad Gaffield, President of the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada, has long been in the forefront of adapting new technologies for research and archives. His commitment was evident in his active participation in the summit and especially in his optimistic but challenging “provocation.” Inspired by the summit and his discussions, he extended his brief presentation into a full paper, giving his reflections on the main themes of the summit. I include in this section his full paper, as his perspective is informed and demanding but powerfully supportive:

Since the early 1980s, I have viewed optimistically the potential for both libraries and archives to play a significantly enlarged, centrally positioned, and consequential role in the paradigm-shifting era that is transforming the private, public, and non-profit sectors in Canada and around the world.

Gaffield traces the history of the archival community’s encounters with digital records from the viewpoint of his efforts to advance archives and their interaction with scholarship. The title of his remarks, “Making an Archival Golden Age,” brings to mind one of the earliest statements about the Canadian archives. In 1885, Douglas Brymner, the first of our national archivists, spoke at the annual meeting of the American Historical Association. Though the archives then occupied but three basement rooms, Brymner outlined an ambitious plan for a multimedia-inclusive archives documenting our new country.

He admitted that “it may be a dream but it is a noble dream. It has often spurred me to renewed effort, when the daily drudgery – for it is drudgery – was telling on mind and body.”⁶ Our new blueprint must inspire a similar “noble dream.”

All of the summit speakers and participants were wrestling with the implications of a fundamental reality: society is changing. Mobile devices are ubiquitous globally. Their capabilities advance rapidly. Recordkeeping in all major organizations, from governments to NGOs, is shifting from paper to digital. Enterprise content systems, apps, Wi-Fi, and big data, coupled with semantic searching and proliferating social media, profoundly impact not just our ways of storing information and communicating, but also the fundamental nature of social interaction. This is not some passing fad but a meaningful transformation of the social fabric. It is transforming all bureaucracies. Traditional business models – in the production and distribution of content, broadcasting and news, in customer interaction, financial services, education, and other fields – are being disrupted. It is a time for creativity and innovation as new business models, structures, and even professions emerge to thrive or fail.

The archival perspective on the role of the record in society over the generations, our established principles to maintain the integrity of the record as evidence, and our technical capabilities for long-term preservation offer a confident and essential contribution to managing information as an asset. Yet it is also clear that old boundaries across the full range of information disciplines and institutions fade as all information professionals have perspectives and skills to bring to this immense task.

The summit echoed the key words that today resonate through all our established institutions: *Collaborate*, *innovate*, and move ahead with *courage*.⁷ We are venturing into a new land with new horizons. Ours is a pioneering generation, privileged to explore and settle this new territory. On the frontier, we are permitted to question old habits and traditions, free to break out of old mental boxes while remaining true to underlying principles and values. Communication, understanding, and collaboration can lead to a renewed focus on shared values and commonalities rather than the usual emphasis on differences. Discussion and studies provide a solid base, but now is also the time for action. It is an exhilarating time. It can also be painfully difficult. It is unavoidable.

6 Douglas Brymner, *Report on Canadian Archives* (Ottawa: Public Archives of Canada, 1890). Quoted in Ian Wilson, “Towards a Vision of Archival Services,” *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990–91): 100.

7 For an expression of this challenge, see Clerk of the Privy Council, *Eighteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada* (2011), <http://www.clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pageId=275>; and Clerk of the Privy Council, *Nineteenth Annual Report to the Prime Minister on the Public Service of Canada* (2012), <http://www.clerk.gc.ca/eng/feature.asp?pageId=294>; both accessed 14 August 2014.