

To Know Ourselves: Archives

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I am honoured, and in fact touched, to be invited to serve as your honorary chair, and to say a few words. May I begin by congratulating those who undertook the planning and arrangements for this significant and unusual summit. It is an enormous undertaking, and one that will make a most important and timely contribution to the further development of archives in Canada and to the vital services they provide.

I take it that the convening of this Canadian Archives Summit is a call to arms. If so, it is the right thing at the right time. It is, indeed, time to rethink and re-examine the state and role of archives in Canada. There are many proposals and propositions before us in nine admirable papers, with more to come. Let us examine all of them with care and an open mind. Decisions as to priorities, policies, and directions are needed, and these should be followed by action.

It is fitting that this call should come from our chair, Dr. Ian Wilson, who, after successive and successful service as a university archivist, as a provincial archivist of two provinces, and then as National Archivist of Canada is rightly the grand panjandrum of the Canadian archival profession. It is fitting, too, that the first person to address this summit should be the Chief Librarian of the University of Toronto. Archivists and librarians are first cousins. Indeed, they often cohabit, perhaps particularly in the academic world. But they are not one and the same. They are kindred but distinct occupations, and this is one of the areas that need constructive thought and exploration.

I do have a few broad comments – concerns if you like – to share with you on the subject of archives. But first, I must make a confession: that is that I have absolutely no formal or professional or special qualifications to speak on the subject of archives. I have never taken even a course on archives, let alone a degree or diploma in the field. I do not know a digitization from a molecule. My only possible excuse for accepting the invitation to participate today is my profound interest in archives, and my profound indebtedness to them and to your profession. I am simply a user, *an archives addict*, who has developed a tremendous appreciation of how greatly our national life has been enriched by

archives, and how much our national agenda depends upon them, always working upward from them as it endeavours to move ahead.

Looking back over the years, I find that I have chaired or served on a very substantial number of commissions, boards, committees of inquiry, and such – federal, provincial, local, and international – some fifty of them. Some of them have been genuinely useful; others might possibly be described as a train wreck. But perhaps, on balance, I might be allowed to believe that this work, done with many others, has been of public value. On reflection, I note that, in every one of these diverse assignments, I found that the effective point of departure was archival work: What were the origins and beginnings of the matter under study or proposed? What ground had been covered to date? What had been neglected? What were the findings to date? By whom? How reliable were these findings? What aspects were unresolved? What avenues should be explored further? One worked forward from these fundamental archival facts to find a way ahead. Simply put, archives are the point of departure for virtually any undertaking in the fields of scholarship and, certainly, for any activity in the area of public policy.

From this, you may conclude that I have not changed or wavered from the conclusion of the Commission on Canadian Studies: that archives are the foundation of Canadian studies, but that I have strengthened in this belief and, indeed, enlarged it to one that sees archives, through the information, materials, and perspective they provide, as the foundation for the advancement of knowledge in any subject.

I am profoundly indebted, as are we all, to archives, to the archival profession, and to the archival approach – so much so that I have some broad thematic concerns that I will, if I may, share briefly with you. In doing so, I should note the dramatic and extensive progress there has been in the development of archives, in archival education, and in the creation of a Canadian archival system in the forty years since I ventured to write on the subject in *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*.

The growth in the number and spread of opportunities for archival education is extraordinary. Archival studies have found their place as a respected discipline, and archivists are established as valued professionals. But there is scope and need for further advancement in this field. Advancements, in methodology, inventions, and technology, increase dramatically the utility and reach of archives. But they also pose problems and challenges in regard to stability, costs, and possible misuse. As populations grow, as history accumulates, as complexities increase, so does the sheer volume of archival materials – posing questions about appraisal and selection and the practical ordering, the classification, the storage, the preservation, and the proper use of archives. Indeed, there is a large and growing challenge to be addressed about costs, about how best to finance and to sustain this growing and unending, but vital, activity.

There are mounting ethical and political questions about the proper and

improper use of archival information, and about what controls and regulations should govern such matters – for example, who should design them, who should monitor them, and to what end?

There is always the most basic question, which it may be useful to take under consideration and to review at periodic intervals: *What are archives?* What is the definition of archives? Is there, in fact, an agreed definition of what the term “archives” includes? Over the years, and in different cultures, the meaning and intent of the term have differed. Questions about the definition of archives are not just semantics. In the age of social media, what does the term embrace and, by inference, what does it exclude? How much does our society want to preserve? These are proper and important questions. The answer to them is fundamental for the education of archivists and for the allocation of their time, talent, and financial resources.

What is the relationship between documentary archival resources and other artifactual heritage resources, which clearly have archival dimensions, such as documentary art, portraits, ceramics, wampum, carving, structures, buildings, sites, designs, and more – all of which also tell a story and provide a record to be read of human experience.

What steps may be taken to strengthen the Canadian archival system? Is it possible to bring into closer collaboration all of the activities, organizations, and agencies that are engaged in the pursuit and preservation of the country’s heritage and which record and study this heritage?

I feel a deep sense of urgency as we are engaged in a race against time. We need to move more swiftly if we are to preserve for future generations the record – the archives and the artifacts – of our own generation and of the many generations that have preceded us. At present, it is not a race we are winning, despite the good work of many people, including many in this room. Every day, invaluable documents and items that embody or convey knowledge of our society and its historical experience are lost – through flood or fire or strife or any of the many forms of human negligence, or, simply, through the wear and tear that results from the passage of time.

I first became conscious of this reality some six decades ago when two incidents, coming close together, rammed the message home. The first involved a recently retired chief justice of Canada with whom I was meeting to discuss some aspect of Canadian studies. We talked of the importance of documentary legacy and I ventured to ask him what disposition he had made of his papers – meaning his personal papers, as all his official papers remained then with the Supreme Court. He was quite surprised, as the matter had never been raised with him, and most of these papers had gone during what he called the “cleanup” after he retired. Yet these were documents that might, after a suitable lapse of time, have significant information for the study of Canadian affairs.

Not long after this, I was visiting M.J. Coldwell, the veteran Canadian politician, a founder and leader of the Co-operative Commonwealth Federation

(CCF) and the social democratic movement in Canada. I asked after his papers. He was quite surprised, explaining that they had been discarded “from the attic,” some twenty boxes of them, when he retired and moved to an apartment. What a loss of information and insights into the political life of our country over a period of some sixty years! It was these two episodes, coming close together, that moved me to write strongly about the need for more attention to our archival heritage in the 1975 *Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*.

These are but a few of the many challenges faced by archives and those responsible for their care. Finding right and effective responses to these challenges is a task of national importance in a world where knowledge and understanding are so very essential. There is, I think, in particular, a need for further development of our national archival system through linkages and collaboration. There is also scope for more collaboration among all who are engaged in the preservation, use, and presentation of the many and varied components of our national heritage – whether man-made, natural, cultural, or spiritual – for all of which archives are at the very heart and core.

This summit should prove to be a landmark event in the history of Canadian archives, to which the profession can, in future years, look back with appreciation as it resets its compass.