

# Archives: Public Awareness and Engagement



CRAIG HERON

Professor, Department of History, York University, Toronto

What does the public want and expect from archives? Pollsters report that there is an overwhelming consensus that old things should be kept. But as Jack Jedwab reports in his background paper<sup>1</sup> for this Canadian Archives Summit, people are not so sure what to make of the archives themselves as repositories of our documentary heritage. Far too many of those polled are essentially unaware of what archives do, and only a small percentage of them have knowingly engaged with an archives. The polls tell us that this is particularly true for Library and Archives Canada (LAC).

There is nonetheless a lot to build on in the popular consensus about the worthiness of archival recordkeeping. Over the past decade, a group of prominent Canadian historians oversaw a project (Canadians and Their Pasts) to interview some 3,400 Canadians about their consciousness of history. They discovered that a large proportion of them integrate historical consciousness into their identities and are likely to turn to institutions of memory to connect to their past and to invigorate the present and future. My own experience has confirmed that. Several years ago, I was part of a group that attempted to keep the United Church Archives at the University of Toronto. The groundswell of support that we encountered was astonishing, but so was the diversity of that support. People from widely different backgrounds came forward to proclaim the value of that institution for their own work – not just the professional historians and genealogists, as you might expect, but also novelists, journalists, artists, architects, musicologists, undergraduate students, and many more.

I wonder to what extent archives recognize the breadth of their potential constituency and the importance of working with all of its members. Certainly over the past decade, the wave of digitization of certain archival records has encouraged an archival populism that invites Canadians to access the records

1 Jack Jedwab, "Public Awareness and the Image of Archives," *Canadian Issues/Thèmes canadiens: Towards a New Blueprint for Canada's Recorded Memory*, special edition (Spring 2014): 68–72.

of their own families. LAC's wonderful TV show *Who Do You Think You Are?* was a huge stimulus to that engagement.

Similarly, there have been efforts to engage students through access to census or military records. One of my colleagues at York University sent all 300 students in his introductory Canadian history course to the Archives of Ontario to use manuscript census data. The feedback from students indicated that this was an extremely positive learning experience. The relationship between archives and the school system, especially at the secondary and post-secondary levels, is immensely important and needs to be cultivated as the seedbed for deeper appreciation of the kinds of sources that will illuminate the past and the importance of preserving them.

There has been a similar surging interest in visual history. Often those looking for historical images work in publishing or the media, or are preparing public-history exhibitions in museums and historic sites, but certainly academics also use images and students are encouraged to find them. Within the education system, there is a new emphasis on visual literacy, on the complexities of visual representations and the approaches to interpreting them. Some archives have launched online exhibitions to showcase the visual resources in their collections, but, on the whole, it seems to me, many archives have been slow to respond to the demand. Far too many images have not been digitized. Most are poorly described for easy searching. In a visually saturated age, addressing this has to be a top priority.

All of these new efforts to engage the public have concentrated on drawing people into the archives or through their computers to make use of existing collections. But there could be a great deal more outreach beyond the brick walls and websites of these institutions. A century ago, Arthur Doughty spent a lot of time tramping around the United Kingdom looking for manuscript collections, and in the 1970s, I recall, the staff of the Public Archives of Canada were still doing that kind of work. Today, the archival staff are intensely focused on managing their collections and encouraging citizens to use them, though in this difficult financial context they are just as likely to be trying to reduce our expectations. I don't always get a sense that they are getting out to look for new records. How much effort is put into reaching out to ordinary Canadians to encourage them to put their own private collections into public hands? How much education is going on to sensitize the public to the value of personal diaries, collections of letters, photo albums, minute books of voluntary associations, and so on that are sitting in households and offices across the country? I have in mind what could be a wonderfully rewarding process that would mimic the hugely popular *Antiques Roadshow*. Perhaps in collaboration with local museums or historical societies, archives could hold well-publicized events in public libraries, community centres, or shopping malls to encourage people to bring out the records that have been mouldering away in their attics and basements. If feasible, the proceedings could be tele-

vised or podcast. Certainly a good audience could be assembled. These could be educational events on the historical importance of these documents (not the commercial value of them) and on the best practices for preservation. Popular and academic historians could join archival staff in helping with historical interpretation. If people didn't want to donate their records, they could be scanned on the spot and thus brought into the public domain to be shared by the whole community and to enrich research possibilities. Through this process, Canadians would find public archives more accessible, less intimidating, and more relevant to their lives. It would validate the history that most people think matters – that of themselves, their families, and their immediate communities.

In a similar way, archives could be reaching out with oral history projects that tap into fading memories – a kind of record that I don't think any of this summit's background papers addresses. We now have three or four decades of rich experience in carrying out interviews with Canadians to document aspects of the Canadian experience that would otherwise be lost. Archives are the best place for gathering in and storing these memories. They can now be recorded digitally and made available much more widely than in the past.

It may be that archives will need to work in partnership with intermediary groups to be able to engage in this kind of outreach. At York, we have two such groups working with the university's Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, and I think both are excellent models for public engagement. Each grew out of the research work of PhD students in our history department – one related to the postwar history of Toronto's Portuguese Canadians, the other covering Hellenic immigrants. The Portuguese Canadian History Project<sup>2</sup> and the Greek Canadian History Project have developed working relationships with the university archives, in which they locate archival material being held in private hands in these two ethnic communities, negotiate with usually elderly citizens in those communities to donate their records, and then assist in the archival identification of them. Equally importantly, they have used materials collected in this way to create small exhibitions so that the communities can collectively appreciate what has been assembled in this distinctive archive. The Portuguese Canadian History Project organized an exhibition of photographs that was first displayed in City Hall and then as part of the city's downtown summer street festival in the Portuguese neighbourhoods. At least some of those who saw these pictures must have noticed the connection to a university archives that they would otherwise never have encountered.

2 York University, Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections, "Portuguese Canadian History Project/Projecto de História Luso-Canadiana," <http://archives.library.yorku.ca/pchp/>; "Greek Canadian History Project/Πρόγραμμα Έρευνας Ελληνο-Καναδικής Ιστορίας," <http://archives.library.yorku.ca/gchp/>.

What I am trying to argue is that the hope for the future of archives must rest in part on the ongoing fascination of millions of Canadians with what happened in the past, especially a past that they can reach through their own family connections, but there must be some new approaches to tapping into that enthusiasm. It involves more than loading up an archival website with material that Canadians can reach through their own computers – that is certainly important. 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. Go out and find people, show them you care about their history, and they'll be much more ready to challenge politicians who want to further erode an already fragile system.