

# From the Guest Editors To Understand Ourselves: Introduction to the 40th Anniversary Issue of *Archivaria*



JENNIFER DOUGLAS, FIORELLA FOSCARINI,  
AMY FURNESS, and HEATHER MACNEIL

This special issue celebrates *Archivaria*'s 40th anniversary. In the winter of 1975–76, the journal's first issue was published, following the formal establishment of the Association of Canadian Archivists earlier in 1975. That was also the year that the Commission on Canadian Studies published *To Know Ourselves*. Called the Symons Report after the commission chair, Thomas H.B. Symons, the report described self-knowledge as central to the development of Canadian identity and society, and emphasized the corresponding importance of Canadian studies as part of Canadians' education.

In the fall of 2014, reflecting on the close timing of the origins of *Archivaria* and the publication of the Symons Report, the *Archivaria* Editorial Board drafted a call for papers that would look at – to borrow words from Symons' introduction – “who we are; where we are in time and space; where we have been; where we are going; what we possess; what our responsibilities are to ourselves and to others.”<sup>1</sup> The 40th anniversary issue was conceived as a forum to consider the history, development, and purpose of *Archivaria*, and its contributions to archival thinking since its inception, as well as to reflect more broadly on the role, scope, and nature of archives, and to speculate on the future of the profession and the discipline. The call for papers invited contributions from archivists and archival scholars, as well as from allied professionals, users of archives, and others with a stake in the archival endeavour.<sup>2</sup>

The first article included in this special issue takes up the call directly. Laura Millar's article, echoing the Symons Report's focus on self-knowledge, examines 40 years' worth of *Archivaria* articles in order to try to explain how

- 1 T.H.B. Symons, *To Know Ourselves: The Report of the Commission on Canadian Studies*, 2 vols. (Ottawa: Association of Universities and Colleges of Canada, 1975), 12.
- 2 *Archivaria* General Editor Heather MacNeil, Senior Associate Editor Jennifer Douglas, and two other members of the Editorial Board, Fiorella Foscarini and Amy Furness, served as guest editors for the 40th anniversary issue.

archivists have come to know themselves – and explain themselves to others – through the pages of this journal. Millar examines several fundamental debates discussed throughout *Archivaria's* history, including, for example, questions about whether archivists require formal education and what that education should consist of; how the archival profession differs from related professions (e.g., historian, librarian); and exactly what constitutes a theory of archives and whether one is necessary to the profession. She argues, convincingly, that *Archivaria* has played a significant role in helping to explain archives and the profession to archivists and to others, but also suggests that “in reality ... the question of who the archivist is or ought to be is no more resolved than it was in 1975.”

Millar insists that there is continuing need for debate and discussion about the nature and purpose of the profession and the body of knowledge that informs it. Several recurrent themes in the articles published in this special issue engage in this debate. Key among these is the theme of archival power. Millar, reflecting on the evolution of thinking about archives, asks whether there is still a place for postmodernism in archival theory or whether “that conversation has run its course.” Much of the writing about postmodernism and archives has focused on the power inherent in archives, in archival institutions, and in archivists’ ability to choose what to preserve and how to represent it. Articles written by archivists increasingly acknowledge this power, and it may be true that it is no longer necessary to proclaim oneself a postmodernist: the idea that archives wield power seems now to be generally accepted by the archival community. Several of the articles included here, however, clearly show that the discussion about power and archives is not over, and that it is more nuanced than some of the earlier writings on postmodernism and archives might suggest. Susan Pell’s article and the article co-authored by May Chazan, Melissa Baldwin, and Laura Madokoro show that while the tendency has been to portray archival power as power *over*, or as domination, especially by archival institutions, there are also opportunities for communities to wield power themselves through the creation and preservation of their own archives. Pell states that “power does not just restrict, control, and dominate; it also enables, creates, and transforms.” Recognizing that the term “archive/s” confers status, these authors show how different communities – traditionally underrepresented in archives – can, “by claiming the title of archive,... give greater authority and credibility” to their materials, “and by extension [to] their [own] knowledge claims.” This is a different view of archival power, one that sees the power of the archive/s as performative, enabling, and, ultimately, *empowering*.

The articles by Pell and by Chazan, Baldwin, and Madokoro take a clearly activist stance: according to Pell, “archiving is becoming an increasingly visible part of activist practice.” In recent years, there has been an increased focus in the archival literature on the role of archives and archivists in the

pursuit of social justice. In these articles, we see also that activists themselves are thinking about how archives can be used to bolster knowledge claims, tell stories from a community's perspective, and stake out legitimacy beyond that community.

These types of activist, community archives may not always conform to traditional archival expectations; they may contain material not traditionally considered archival, and they may be organized in ways that do not reflect archival ideas about arrangement and representation. Another recurrent theme in this special issue is the need to adopt a notion of archives and archival studies that is more open, inclusive, and diffuse than it might have been 40 years ago. In working toward a more open approach, it might help to keep in mind Pell's ethnographic approach to "archiving," which considers the archive as "a space and as a set of practices," and which promotes a "critical exploration of the formation of the archive as a historically, socially, and spatially constructed phenomenon."

Lisa Nathan, Elizabeth Shaffer, and Maggie Castor's contribution to the special issue considers the archive as "a space and as a set of practices" as well, with a particular focus on the ethics and responsibilities of archivists working with collections of trauma. The association of archives with trauma, and the implications for archival theory and methodology, is another theme that is increasingly addressed in the wider archival literature. Nathan, Shaffer, and Castor ask how archivists, and others who work with archival material, can "make choices and take action" in a way that "avoids perpetuating harms and reinforcing dominant power imbalances." Here, the themes of power and activism are again present, this time with a focus on the colonizing legacy of archival theory and practices in the context of the development of the archives of the National Centre for Truth and Reconciliation.

The articles discussed so far are not just the writing of archivists and archival scholars, but also reflect the engagement of scholars, professionals, and activists from outside the archival profession. The articles focus on archive/s that are fundamentally collaborative and participatory. They call attention to the need for alternative archival practices that reconsider the relationships between archivists, users, creators, records, and communities. If 40 years ago our priority was to define *ourselves* as a community, today we need to define ourselves through continual dialogue with other communities who create, use, and think about archive/s.

Tom Nesmith's contribution is a clarion call to engage in this type of continual dialogue, with the specific aim of showing how deeply embedded archives are in daily life, and how crucial it is that archivists communicate the significance of this embeddedness. Nesmith proposes that we have "entered what might be called the archival stage in the history of knowledge." He provides a rich account of how archival research has become an increasingly important component of a broad range of research, not only in the social

sciences, but also in the fields of economics, natural sciences, and medicine. As well, archives are more frequently recognized as means to address human rights, particularly Indigenous rights, and social justice concerns more broadly. At the same time, Nesmith suggests, archives are more regularly present in our daily lives through, among other things, books, newspapers, web content, theatre, galleries, and museums. Nesmith is concerned, however, that despite their ubiquity, archives are at risk because of a “profound lack of public understanding of the uses of archives and the work of knowledge creation that archivists do.” A primary task for archivists, then, is to ensure not only that archives are present in daily life across a broad spectrum of activities, but also that this presence is acknowledged, promoted, and perpetuated.

In its own way, each of the articles published here treats the creation and preservation of archives as social practices, and each also situates the archive/s as future-oriented. Archives do not simply provide evidence of past acts and events, or show us how we have come to the place we are in; archives are also aspirational – they offer intimations of what we might become. The same might be said for *Archivaria* itself. Over the past 40 years, it has given voice to a wide range of archival aspirations and provided a forum for debating the nature, purpose, and value of archives, archival institutions, and archivists. As guest editors of this special issue, our own aspiration for *Archivaria* as it moves forward into the future is that it continue to provide a voice and a forum – albeit for a more broadly defined “archival community” – for explaining ourselves “to ourselves and to the world.”