

WHAT TRAINING DO ARCHIVISTS NEED?

by

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Most of us would agree that the main characteristic of a profession is that before entering on a career its members should have attained an agreed standard of proficiency in the disciplines required in the exercise of that profession. Unfortunately where archives are concerned there are no agreed standards obtaining in Canada. To the best of my knowledge the only regular course available for instruction in archives administration is one of the elective courses open to students taking the Master of Library Science degree at McGill: the course is entitled Archival and historical materials, their care and use. As and when the demand arises, special lecturers are invited to hold seminars on aspects of archives work. As an introduction to general principles this is all very well, but I wonder if it goes deep enough for our purposes.¹ I would remind you, too, that the Master's course is open only to graduates who have had an equivalent of 5 years' academic study plus at least 2 years' professional experience in libraries. The field is restricted and I would suggest that any regular course designed for training archivists should be pitched more on the Bachelor of Library Science admission level, namely, that candidates should hold a degree equivalent to four years of study at a recognized University, beyond matriculation. Some practical experience would be desirable but not, I suggest, essential.²

This, however, is peering into the future and I would say that right at this moment our profession stands in much the same position as the medical profession stood 150 years ago before any medical schools were established in Canada. If one wanted to study medicine one accompanied doctors on their rounds and learned empirically: a final gloss might then be achieved by gaining a diploma of one kind or another from one of the old countries. The strain on practitioners and the risk of uneven instruction were important factors in leading to regular courses being provided - and as time has gone by we know what exacting demands have come to be

¹ During the 1964 business meeting of the Archives Section, reference was made to the possibility that instruction in archives science might be provided at Laval University as from the fall of 1965.

² In discussion, stress was laid on the fact that a good archivist can reach maturity in his profession only with experience, and it was therefore suggested that it might be advisable to defer admission until applicants had devoted some time in a records office.

expected in the training of our doctors. I imagine that the type of questions posed in the medical field early in the 19th century are just those which we ought to be putting among ourselves.

- (a) Is a good practitioner necessarily a good teacher of his craft?
- (b) Is it not likely that a trainee might become well versed in those topics of interest to his mentor to the neglect of wider issues?
- (c) Is there not a chance that short cuts will be revealed to the trainee before time has been allowed for the proper assimilation of basic principles?

If it is agreed that an important feature in the identity of a professional person stems from the recognized instruction which he has received, is it not timely - when the thoughts of many here are turning towards the possibility of one day forming our own independent association - that we should devote serious thought to the training facilities to be provided for coming generations?

In this paper I have considered it my task not to review the occasional and admirable courses laid on by Carleton or other North American universities, but rather to consider what action might be taken by way of providing regular training for students. The first point to decide then is what kind of an animal do we want to produce and what sort of tricks should he be trained to perform.

The work of an Archivist

In my view, an archivist is primarily a keeper of archives, whose main job is to see that records are preserved for the benefit of others. Jenkinson has written that "the Archivist is not and ought not to be an Historian" - in the sense of a professional user of records. For one thing there is a risk of the historian-archivist neglecting the whole in favour of his specialty - and this would place him in conflict with the impartial approach which should colour his attitude towards all collections. I know that the topic as to whether an archivist should write about general historical matters which are outside the realm of archives administration is a vexed subject generating heat - but I believe that, as in most human activities, there is a via media. This was neatly put by Professor Raymond Irwin of the London School of Librarianship and Archives Administration in his essay on The Education of an Archivist published in the memorial volume to Sir Hilary Jenkinson two years ago. He wrote: "We must not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn; though treading out the corn may be his main duty, the wise animal seizes a mouthful whenever he can, and the corn will be the better trodden

if he does."

An archivist is a keeper of archives - and archives are records of any kind created during a transaction of any description whatsoever and preserved as evidence of such transaction. Age does not enter into the definition: the distinctive characteristic of an archive is that it should have been raised for a specific purpose, and not for acquiring antiquity. In essence, an archive started as a tool of management and it is for this reason that an archivist's approach to the business of arranging his material is fundamentally different from a librarian's. His arrangement should reflect the pattern and activities of the organization which created the archives: he will concentrate upon the source, whereas a librarian is more likely to be concerned with the subject matter or possible use to which material will be put.

If my definition of an archivist's work stands, it automatically follows that an archivist should be on hand to advise in the matter of managing current records. I would imagine that most of us here have seen how records pass from an active current stage to one of semi-currency and finally to non-currency. In this life cycle, different categories reach the final stage at completely different periods, - 6 months, 3 years, 10 years, 25 years. Of all the administrative personnel, a properly trained archivist should be in the strongest position for planning disposition programmes for all categories of records thus ensuring that the routine is discarded at an early date, that waste in storage space is eradicated, and that the most valuable sections of a collection can be given the best treatment. From his work in a number of departments or related agencies, the archivist is bound to have a wider knowledge of the records generally produced (and their contents) than most of his colleagues whose experience is normally limited to that of the departments they serve. His advice to his colleagues in disposing of their records places him in the role of an efficiency expert - if that term has not acquired a pejorative sense!

Where records are concerned, laymen usually take up one of two extreme positions: they either believe in keeping everything, thereby submerging the good material in a morass of unnecessary paper, or else they are root and branch men who, without any thought for the future or other sections' needs, happily throw the baby out with the bath water as soon as the baby's presence begins to make itself felt. In both cases the archivist can play a useful part: in the one case he can point out the practical benefits of judicious destruction (saving space, cutting down costs in equipment, ironing out duplication, facilitating reference) and in the other case he can act as a brake to his colleague's unbridled enthusiasm. He can demonstrate the unique informational value of certain of his records and at the same time offer to relieve his colleague of the burden of having to keep and produce such material.

From this sketch of what I, at least, consider to be the main functions of an archivist, you will see the variety of roles which he has to play to the end that records are preserved. He needs to be something of a scholar and research worker, an office manager, an organization man and a diplomat. An archivist-in-training who has studied history will have more background knowledge and perhaps a better awareness of the problems of research than somebody who is versed in other disciplines. I suggest, though, that it is even more important that archivists-in-training should have - or should be encouraged to develop - correct attitudes in respect of archives work. Enthusiasm, a respect for an impartial approach towards any records of any century, integrity and a sense of service to the community should, I submit, weigh no less than historical knowledge.

The scope of a training course

Because the profession calls for more than just historical knowledge, I would deprecate any move to restrict admission only to those holding a degree in History. While such a degree would be desirable, I do not feel it should be a compulsory requirement. As I said earlier, I would suggest that the entrance requirement be to admit persons holding a degree equivalent to four years' academic study in a University, beyond matriculation.

Any regular course should provide instruction in both theory and practice and I think it would be desirable for the lectures to comprise certain basic topics and some optionals. In the first category in which all should receive instruction, should be the following:

1. General archives administration - definitions, the maintenance of registers, the principles of sorting and arranging, the preparation of lists and indexes.
2. Physical care - general building requirements, the layout of storerooms, atmospheric control, and the selection of such equipment as shelving, boxes and map cabinets. In addition, attention should be paid to the principles of repair and rebinding with commentaries on the relative merits of traditional methods and lamination.
3. The administrative history of selected federal, provincial and ecclesiastical institutions and of certain business corporations.
4. A study of the federal and provincial laws respecting the custody of archives, the validity of microfilm, the establishment of land registries and so forth.
5. An introduction to the palaeography of the 16th to 18th centuries using French and English materials.³

³ A case for a wider use of Spanish and Portuguese sources was presented in discussion.

6. An introduction to current records management, dealing with the life cycle of records and disposition programs, general principles in the treatment of correspondence, and weeding and stripping.

Over and above these basic lectures, I think that there should be at least two specials or electives such as

- (a) Advanced palaeography and diplomatic including a more detailed study of handwriting - even into the 19th century.
- (b) Bibliographical studies
- (c) A detailed study of methods of treating correspondence, with particular reference to registry systems.
- (d) The administration of records centres.
- (e) The preservation and use of modern types of records such as tapes, discs, films, IBM cards.

There are just two comments which I should like to make regarding the curriculum. Firstly, I would hope that in the instruction on methods of listing and indexing, the greatest attention would be given to the admirable rules and procedures drawn up for the Union List of Manuscripts so that they might serve as a basic tool of description. Secondly, I do feel that palaeography is an important discipline to master and that room should be made both for an elementary course and for an advanced study of handwriting and documentary forms. Although the bulk of our records may be post-1700, there is still a respectable quantity prior to that date, and an archivist should be the expert to whom laymen should turn for help in interpreting early source material wherever it is located.

After a year's full time course, the students should be examined in the basic subjects and the optionals chosen.⁴ I would recommend, however, that a diploma or degree should not be awarded to a successful student until he has completed a year's practical work in a recognized archives repository, or written a dissertation on an archival subject, or done both. Some such stipulation is essential, I think, if we are to draw the best out of the archivists-in-training.

Now, instruction in archives work can be extraordinarily

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The idea was voiced during the business meeting that the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association might act as an Examining Board or else be represented in a licensing authority.

dull unless the tedium is relieved by a copious use of illustrations and specimens, and by visits to repositories and repairs shops. I am sure, therefore, that in planning any course of a regular nature, one would have to give a lot of thought to preparing photographs of repositories, equipment and individual documents, to selecting specimens of numerous categories of records, to choosing examples of lists and catalogues, and to making up charts and diagrams. One would need mock files showing how current correspondence should be treated with foliation, cross references, charging out panels and so on. The contents of certain innocuous files could be abstracted so as to form a basis for file-stripping exercises where so often one can demonstrate how high a percentage is of ephemeral value. By watching document repairers at work surrounded by all their paraphernalia, students will be enabled to relate the principles of restoration to the practice, and similarly I consider that it would be in their interests to visit some time in the latter half of their course the record centres and archives repositories of two or three different organizations. Whether it would be feasible for students to engage in two or three weeks' practical work during and as part of their academic course I do not really know. In England, students are assigned a total of three weeks' practical work in recognized repositories during the Christmas and Easter vacations - but as the holiday arrangements are somewhat different in Canadian universities, I am not certain that the plan could be operated here.

Manual

So far, I have dealt with the type of formal academic course which might regularly be provided: but as I hope to show, tied up with the business of training archivists and further educating ourselves, yet more could be done. Those of you who have had experience in teaching the theory and techniques of archives keeping, know how very difficult it is to obtain up to date books on archival subjects which can serve as students' text books. Jenkinson is sound, traditional, and a quarter of a century old: nobody is likely to quarrel seriously with his statements of principles, but his comments on equipment, for instance, are outmoded. Schellenberg is the authority on the management of modern records - yet, you know, I often wonder how comprehensible he is to students who have had little or no practical experience of the problems of management - let alone initiation into the ways of the United States government agencies. Holmstrom's book on filing systems and the treatment of correspondence⁵ is the best I know on the subject - but this is a rara avis which seems to escape the net of most bibliographies on records management. How many valuable commentaries on new techniques, experiments and new methods of administering archives are locked away in various non-Canadian journals to which not everyone may subscribe.

⁵ Facts, files and action in business and public affairs by J. Edwin Holmstrom, published 1953.

Nearly seventy years ago three remarkable men produced a manual on archives for use in a community numbering less than 5 million souls. In a land of rising 20 million is it untimely to ask where are our Mullers, Feiths and Fruins? Reading through periodic reports produced by archivists throughout the country one is struck by the tremendous wealth of knowledge and practical experience which could be tapped for the benefit of posterity - not just in a given region, but throughout the country as a whole. Just as a team of experts got together to produce Local Records for English archivists some ten years ago, could Canada not muster a group of men and women versed in the practical care of all kinds of records? Could we not assemble the collective experience of contemporary Canadian archivists and encourage them to produce a manual which would not only honour the professional standards already achieved but which would also become an indispensable aid in training? I personally believe that there is a real need for such a book dealing inter alia with

1. the general principles of managing current and non-current records
2. the legislative aspects of archives keeping in Canada
3. the legality of microfilm in the Provinces
4. the storage conditions and requirements in different climates
5. traditional and modern methods of repairs
6. map preservation
7. arrangements for the care of archives of various religious denominations
8. business records.

Other important topics will doubtless occur to you and I am sure that a longer and more comprehensive list could be made out. Clearly, a bibliography would be an important feature of such a work, referring to articles scattered throughout journals in French and English as well as to the few books which have been published elsewhere. In commenting upon the need for a national manual I do not think that I have gone beyond the scope of this paper. Not only would the production of such a book be a service to the profession in Canada, but it would be a valuable and basic text book for the archivist-in-training.

Documentary film

While I am on the subject of teaching aids, might I put in a plea for investigation in a field other than publishing? The public generally have little or no idea at all about the work which an archivist carries out, the conditions he works under, or the services he performs. I would suggest that there are immense possibilities in producing a documentary film on our profession - 20, 45 or 60 minutes long. Whether such a film should be directed to the general public or to the classroom, I do not feel competent to say, but I do believe that a documentary could materially assist archivists-in-training. These are the kind of topics which I think could be handled effectively and which, properly rounded out, could lead to a useful and informative piece.

1. The scene might be set by showing a few historical maps and prints and shots of historic sites, followed up by views of present day industries and commercial activities.
2. It would be useful to depict the variety of materials used in recording transactions - parchment, paper, cards and tape - and the numerous formats which have been employed in 3 centuries on both sides of the Atlantic.
3. To indicate the numerous ways in which records of transactions can be raised, there could be shots of a large Registry at work; a small office filing system, and perhaps a Land Registry could also be shown.
4. There might be a possibility of using animated graphs and histograms to illustrate the rate of growth of records in certain offices and the methods adopted to keep them in check. The work of a records centre where disposition programs can be implemented could be tackled on a visual basis.
5. Clearly, it would be valuable and desirable to include some scene inside the Public Archives and some provincial repositories - with emphasis upon specially designed accommodation, equipment and student facilities.
6. I would hope that methods used in the restoration of records could be shown in some detail - with significant "before" and "after" pictures.
7. Showing the uses to which records are put, could present some difficulty - but one way of surmounting the obstacle would be to unfold a list of topics handled by certain repositories in any given period. Publications based on source material could be treated separately.

Whether one should concentrate upon the activities of one archives repository alone, or select aspects from several, is a matter of presentation on which I think an expert would have to pronounce. I do feel, though, that stress should be laid on the fact that, as keeper of the organization's memory, an archivist should be just as concerned with today's records as he is with those of two centuries ago.

I would suggest that the general proposition is not as fanciful as it may appear at first sight, or hearing; some years ago, I remember seeing a short film along similar lines put out by, I believe, the Federal Archives of the Rhodesias and Nyasaland. It was stimulating, successful and showed great potential as an instrument of instruction.⁶ Having regard to the dearth of teaching aids at our disposal, I submit that there is room for some kind of documentary film.

Conclusion

By way of conclusion, may I perhaps outline the principle benefits which I believe would accrue if a regular course of instruction were provided.

1. Arising out of the course, it is reasonable to assume that a pool of academically qualified people would be created to fill vacancies and new positions arising.
2. Practising archivists and employers would have some assurance that their new entrants had received a basic grounding and knew what archives work entailed.
3. To a large extent, it would help employers to contract their own training schemes, for they could concentrate far more upon the special requirements of their agencies.
4. Providing a course at one point would help to canalise ideas on the curriculum and would probably facilitate the introduction of any modifications which a few years' operation showed to be desirable.
5. It would be a natural corollary to the provision of regular instruction that basic agreed academic requirements became prerequisites for employment. Not only is this most desirable to achieve as an end in itself, but I have no doubt that it would enhance the status of the profession as a whole.

⁶ The discussion meeting was reminded that the National Archives at Washington had issued a film on archives work.

Rightly or wrongly, in presenting this paper, my main design has been to offer ideas (for what they are worth) and to stimulate discussion in this gathering of record keepers, record users and sympathisers - discussion on a topic which should be a matter of profound concern to anyone who is the least bit interested in the future of the archivist's profession in Canada. May I conclude then by recapitulating what I have taken to be the four fundamental questions calling for answers:

1. Is the time ripe for the establishment of a regular training course in archives administration and records management?
2. If the time is ripe, what form should the curriculum take?
3. In the field of teaching aids, is there a need for a manual, and is there a place for a documentary film?
4. The over-riding question: What type of professional person do we want to produce?