

THE ARCHIVIST'S ROLE IN THE PUBLICATION OF DOCUMENTS

By

J. K. JOHNSON

To many archivists the possibility of publishing some of the documents in their custody is an entirely academic question. They are not publishing documents, they do not plan to publish documents, they have neither the time nor the funds to publish documents. I think this situation is unfortunate, because good editions of documents are of great value to scholars and to the public at large. But I am not sure that even given the time and the funds, all archivists would want to see the documents in their care in print. Archivists as a group are popularly supposed to be hoarders, whose mission in life is to keep historians from seeing any document more recent than Magna Carta. While this picture of an archivist is today almost entirely untrue, there is still among our profession a natural reluctance to allow documents to be tampered with, perhaps especially by the horny hands of editors and printers.

Even without this basic bias, the archivist may have good cause to be suspicious of plans to transform original documents into printed books. I am convinced that an archivist ought, in fact, to welcome and support, and if possible to initiate, documentary publication. But he has a right and a duty to see that publication is carried out under clearly established rules, which not only require and maintain high standards of scholarship, but which conform to accepted archival principles as well as to the best principles of historical editing and publishing.

Far from being a hoarder, nothing pleases an archivist more than to see his sources used by competent scholars, and the more sources the more widely used, the better. If the publication of some of the holdings of an archives means that these documents will thereby reach a wide audience, the publication has served a useful purpose. The printed material will make the task of the scholar easier by providing partial documentation for which he need not make an expensive trip or acquire eyestrain. But the word "partial" is crucial. There is a danger that published documents may be relied upon too heavily for documentation, and there is a particular danger that students may be misled into thinking that primary sources come conveniently wrapped and labelled in books. The trip and the eyestrain may be avoided altogether and the other documents in the archives, apart from which any published collection is to some degree meaningless, may be ignored. For this reason the archivist ought to insist, as a condition of publication, that all published documents carry a stern warning, like a package of American cigarettes, "dangerous if used to excess".

This may seem an unnecessary warning. After all, no historian is so naive as to think (as some journalists seem to) that all documents

eventually get published. But I am sure that I am not the only archivist who frequently comes across valuable papers that have been used very little, or not at all, by historians. Nor, I am sure, am I the only archivist who has ever thought that a book could have been better if the author had taken the trouble to look for more sources. Books of documents ought to have the effect of making the scholar want to come to the archives for more, rather than making him think he can safely stay away.

For the archivist, a book of documents ought not only to serve as an introduction to the archival mother lode, it must also be prepared and presented on principles which an archivist can approve. These principles seem to me to be basically two: first, the publication must be as complete as possible, and second, it must be absolutely faithful to the original papers.

No one is likely to quarrel with the proposition that the text of the documents must be reproduced faithfully in print, but the question of completeness is somewhat more touchy. Having selected a body of papers which seems to merit publication, should these papers then be screened to eliminate the trivial or the routine or the vulgar, or for any other purpose, or should they simply be printed as they come, without regard for relative historical significance or, one must add, without regard for cost? Ideally, I think an archivist ought to believe in complete publication. Nothing less than complete publication presents the documents as the archivist wants them presented, untouched and unselected. Any selection is necessarily suspect because it is necessarily subjective, and open to justifiable suspicion on the part of scholars.

But having taken such high ground, I must quickly backtrack, at least half way. Absolutely complete publication is rarely, if ever, a real possibility, though it ought to remain a goal to aim at, and any departure from the ideal must be clearly recognized and labelled as such. If there is a compromise the archivist ought to make sure that it is necessary or wise, and the reader must be told that he is getting a condensed book. He must be told what has been left out and why it was left out.

The truth is, however, that in almost all documentary publications, some selection will be made. In most cases some selection is probably advisable, if money is not to be thrown away on trivia and if the reader is not to be more bored than informed. This need for selection leads me to the central point which I wish to make about the archivist and documentary publication. Someone must select the documents and incidentally someone must introduce and annotate them. I suggest that to do these things, in effect to edit documentary publications, a fully-trained, mature archivist, or team of archivists, is particularly qualified — perhaps more qualified in fact than anyone else.

Let me explain what seem to me the major characteristics necessary in an editor of documentary publications. Most important of all, he must be a trained historian with a special knowledge of the period or subject represented by the documents he is editing. He must know so much about his field that the documents he finds are immediately meaningful to him, and he must have the knowledge to fill in gaps in his material, and especially a knowledge that will allow him to

explain the documents to other people. As well, he must be used to the detailed critical study of documents (and often simply to the deciphering of them); he must have some experience in and some criteria for the selection of documents on historical grounds; he ought to be very familiar with the relevant sources of documents; and finally, he should want to see the documents he has chosen presented fully and accurately to as wide an audience as possible.

Is this a description of a qualified, fully-trained archivist? I believe that it is, because I believe that fundamentally two kinds of training are essential to an archivist: historical training and practical, or on-the-job training. Of the two the former often seems to me the more important. I do not mean to imply that an archivist must be a full-fledged historian before he becomes an archivist, any more than a historian is a full-fledged historian at the beginning of his career. But an archivist ought to begin with as much historical training as he can get, and in becoming a qualified archivist, he ought also to become a historian. If he does not he becomes neither one nor the other.

The fully-trained archivist need not be a historian by virtue of post-graduate degrees; he will not likely teach, nor necessarily write history (though personally I see no reason why he should not), but he will be a historian in the sense of someone who knows a great deal about the past, especially about some particular part of the past.

The business of becoming such a historian is by no means an automatic part of becoming an archivist. It is possible to work with documents without having much knowledge or curiosity about the people or the times which created them. Most of this kind of historical training, post-graduate training one might call it, must be acquired by the archivist's own efforts, by a never-ending study of the primary and secondary sources bearing on his chosen field.

Only when an archivist is thoroughly soaked in history in this way does he become a really useful archivist. He knows the significance of his documents and he can help others to an understanding of them. It seems to me that an archivist of this kind is better suited to the task of publishing documents than is the conventional sort of historian. His historical knowledge may well equal the conventional historian's, but he has the added advantage of greater familiarity with documents and a greater knowledge of the available sources. If he is a conscientious archivist he very likely knows not only his own holdings, but has a good idea of what is to be found in other, similar institutions. He is not likely to make mistakes in transcribing documents. He is used to finding out exactly who or what they concern. He has also one further valuable asset. He is likely to be expert in the task of selection, of separating historical wheat from disposable chaff. In this connection I would like to quote a few lines from a paper read a few years ago by Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, on the difficulty of the work of an archivist. "The archivist", he said, "is called upon frequently to practice the difficult art of prophecy. He must attempt to anticipate needs. Out of a vast mass of material, a high percentage of which must be destroyed, he must try to identify and retain those items that are most likely to be of interest and significance in the years to come. Unlike the historian, the archivist cannot place any convenient sub-

jective limitations on his field of interest. Somehow or other he must find means to pass judgment on the probable value of source material that may relate to any aspect or period of the history of the state or country with which his institution happens to be concerned."¹

To do this, the most difficult of archival tasks, well, the archivist must be the kind of historian-archivist I have described. If he can do it well, he is also well suited to the delicate task of selecting documents for publication, which, if it is no less difficult, is at least a task less awesomely final in its results. No choice in either case will please every prospective user for all time, but documents excluded from a book face only demotion and not total destruction. But the point is that an archivist may well find documentary publication a natural and congenial field for his abilities, and I think it is a field to which more archivists should give more consideration.

So far I have referred in general terms to the archivist's relation to documentary publication. I would like to end by describing some of my own experiences in this field, to illustrate, if I can, the general ideas I have expressed and to show how practice conforms, and often enough falls short of, theory.

The major publications project of the Public Archives of Canada at the moment is a series of volumes to be known collectively as the **Papers of the Prime Ministers of Canada**. We have begun with our first Prime Minister, Sir John A. Macdonald, and we are now, after two years, just completing our work on his pre-Confederation career. As we are approaching a milestone of sorts I think it is legitimate to ask whether we have adhered to the principles of publication which I have suggested ought to apply.

Certainly we try to reproduce the Macdonald letters with complete accuracy; skilled copyists prepare typed copies from the originals; trained archivists who have lived with Sir John for two years now, proofread the copies to see that they say exactly what Macdonald said. This is not always a straightforward job. Sir John, like most nineteenth century letter writers, used his own system of punctuation. His most noticeable quirks are a serious lack of periods and an over abundance of capitals. There are always cases where it is really impossible to tell if a period is there or not, or if a capital letter is really a capital letter or not, but even where no doubt exists, it has sometimes been tempting to add the period or to remove the capital in order to avoid driving the modern reader mad. Where this has been done, it has been done sparingly, and the reader will be informed of any alteration that is made. In general our aim has been literal, verbatim versions of the originals; this rule has been broken only under extreme provocation.

On the question of completeness of publication we are somewhat more vulnerable. We decided at the outset that we would try to locate, for possible publication, every letter ever written by a Canadian Prime Minister. We have been remarkably successful so far in achieving this aim, to a considerable extent because most of you here today have helped us in our search. But despite this success

¹ W. Kaye Lamb, "The Archivist and the Historian", *American Historical Review*, Vol. LXVIII, No. 2, Jan. 1963, pp. 385-6.

we are not, as several great contemporary American publications projects are, giving the reader complete papers, but only one side of a set of correspondence, only the letters sent. We decided to follow this course because it seemed the best use of the resources at our command. This plan can be called a compromise admittedly, but it is a compromise dictated by necessity. It is also a compromise which may ultimately be circumvented, by the publication at a later date of a companion series of volumes of letters received. This method would eventually bring us as close as possible to complete publication and I hope that we will be able to bring it about.

There is, however, another way in which we can be accused of something less than complete publication. We do not plan to print in full every letter which we have found, but only those deemed to be of historical significance. There are, of course, very good practical grounds for this procedure, but in any case we are guarding ourselves against the possibility of excluding anything of value in three ways. First, we are defining historical significance quite broadly; second, we are providing within each volume a complete finding aid, or calendar, of the letters not printed in full; and third, we plan an equivalent series of microfilm copies of all the original letters which will be available to anyone who wishes to see anything not printed in full. The use of calendar entries and complementary microfilm copies solves, I think, as much as it is possible to solve, the problem of complete publication. Incidentally, these means also allow us to keep down the cost of publication and to avoid publishing trivia.

In one way or another we have tried to adhere to principles of publication acceptable to all scholars, archivists included. For my own part, I have found as well that archival training makes a useful background for the job of collecting, selecting, and annotating documents.

Knowing where to look, and knowing who to ask, permits shortcuts, not only to sources of material, but to sources of information. I have not said much about the annotation of documents, because, from the archivist's point of view, annotation is an optional part of documentary publication. Our Prime Minister volumes will be fully annotated editions, and knowing where to look or who to ask has been just as important for this part of the work as it has been in locating the documents themselves.

There is one further and very important way in which being an archivist is an advantage in every phase of the process of publishing documents. An archivist has unrestricted access to his own archives. An archivist looking for sources or for information is on his home ground; he is not restricted to seeing only what he asks to see, or what someone suggests he ought to see. All archivists know what an immense advantage this is; all archivists know how much may be gained by the freedom to poke undisturbed into whatever corner seems promising. This freedom seems to me so important to the work of documentary publication, so necessary to ensure that nothing of value is overlooked and so necessary as well to the gathering of all the explanatory information needed for proper annotation, that I occasionally wonder whether really satisfactory work of this kind can be done on any other terms.