

## ARCHIVES IN BRITAIN AND CANADA - IMPRESSIONS OF AN IMMIGRANT

by

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As immigrants, we decided to enter Alberta by the traditional route from Europe, that is by sea and railway, and for us as for so many thousands of others, Quebec became the gateway to Canada. I think this is an important historical experience, for there is a danger that those who travel by air may feel that they are landing in some distant territory which is out of context with its surroundings, an island in a sea of land. We were conscious of Quebec as a most ancient and beautiful gateway to Canada, and we will not forget our very warm welcome on the threshold by the Immigration authorities. In our journey across Canada, we soon appreciated that there was an historical, as well as a physical distance to be covered, for after all, even English archivists are historians, at least to some extent!

For most immigrants there is always a problem of language, or at least terminology, and I soon found that I had to tread warily when using the archival terms to which I had grown accustomed. I soon found that Archives was usually descriptive of a repository of documents and not of the documents themselves. I would like to suggest that the English terminology is perhaps a little more logical in this respect, if only because we have introduced the term Record Office into general use, which enables us to reserve the word "Archives" for administrative documents of all kinds, and use the description "public", "semi-public", and "private" for the three principal sub-categories. The term "manuscript" can then be reserved for documents which are handwritten and not be forced to cover private collections as a whole. I note that Bernard Weilbrenner, in an article on the Public Archives of Canada, refers to a proposal by the Historical Commission for a Canadian Public Record Office in 1914 as an extension to the Public Archives, so you very narrowly missed the perfect solution to this thorny problem.

On reflection, this term "Record Office" perhaps lies at the heart of the difference of outlook on archives in England, and this country. Most of the public archives of England grew out of the courts of law which were also courts of record, where the evidence of public transactions, whether legal, financial, or testamentary, were filed and kept as a service to the community.

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Thus, the Public Record Office in London, which was established in 1838 was for many years mainly concerned with the preservation of the records of the medieval courts of England, and significantly enough was placed under the supervision of the Master of the Rolls who was the head of the Court of Chancery. It is important to remember that most public administration in England stems directly from the courts of law, and this is also true of local government. Parliament itself originated in the Court of the King (and here we have another interesting association with this word) and the full title of one of our most venerable institutions is the High Court of Parliament. Sometimes an office of administration turned itself into a purely legal court such as Chancery, which began as the principal executive arm of the Norman Kings.

Similarly the local record offices of England based on the counties and principal cities were set up primarily to preserve and arrange the records of the Courts of Quarter Sessions and their equivalents. All these offices had in origin one basic consideration; i.e. the preservation or keeping the public record for the service of the community.

The historical origin of his office has greatly influenced the preoccupations of archivists in England. Most of his energies have been devoted to those centuries before the nineteenth when the conduct of law and administration was not usually separately defined, and the early records were given first priority because there was this obligation to maintain their existence as public documents. I should hasten to add that soon after the creation of a local record office anywhere in England, collections of documents from private sources began to pour in and were given detailed attention according to their merits until now the bulk of private collections may surpass that from the public sector.

I would suggest that the cumulative affect of this tradition has been to make English archivists more record keepers than historians, and many would hold that this is the true role of the archivist. The records have in general been kept most faithfully in this sense, but there were times when I felt that we were a little too concerned with the minutiae of the records at the expense of their general historical implications. The interests of the users of record offices have changed radically over the years but to some extent the training and duties of archivists have not kept pace, for the historical reasons that I have suggested already. Yet I would maintain that no one can make much of the archives of England unless he is an historian. We are not just manipulators of dead medieval files.

Another factor which greatly influences the archivists' work

is that there are only four Land Registries in England covering a very small part of the area of the country. This means that much of the archivists' time and most of the records accumulated from private sources are concerned with land titles and the ancient forms of conveyancing, which are unbelievably involved. Imagine the situation in this country where all the Land Titles Offices were destroyed and the only evidence of occupation was to be found in copies of documents in the hands of the owners of property, or their attorneys. Most English record offices are bursting with the records of land titles, whose bulk is often out of all proportion to their value, besides being extremely laborious to catalogue.

The fact that land has not been registered by law has meant that much of the English archivist's skill, and because of his skill, his interest, has been directed to problems of land tenure and consumed a great amount of his time and energy. So, what with the records of the courts and the accumulation of title deeds constantly challenging him to set them in order and interpret them correctly for the public, the marvel is that so many English archivists have achieved such a richness and variety in historical scholarship and archival insight. Perhaps it is the historian in them. Again, the accounts and correspondence from the great landed estates which accompany the title deeds are rich and varied but they reflect only the hereditary, politically conservative governing body in England, throwing the total surviving evidence of society out of balance. This is not the fault of the archivist.

By contrast, Canadian archivists have, as I see it, a totally different background. The first accumulations of public records were made by the provinces in the conduct of their affairs, but the provincial archives which were subsequently formed were not set up primarily to "keep" these documents in the English tradition but to accumulate the raw material of history.

The Public Archives of Canada owes its creation to the Literary and Historical Society of Quebec and Douglas Brymner, a journalist, was appointed Archivist in 1872 with "three empty rooms and very vague instructions". You can see at once that here is a totally different point of departure which is both limiting and unfettered; limiting because the archivist of that time had no powers to restrain the destruction of many ancient series of documents by his being appointed specifically to keep them, and unfettered because his terms of reference were so broad that he could range into Europe in search of historical material relating to Canada. The great microfilm project which has resulted in the copying of so much material in the Public Record Office and Beaver House during recent years is in direct succession to the nineteenth century transcripts made in Paris and elsewhere. As

far as I know, this international concern for the sources of history is not echoed to the same extent in England, but perhaps it is because we believe all our history is made at home!

I can now see why there is an emphasis in some Canadian repositories for archivists to be primarily historians and I greatly respect this point of view, although not brought up in quite the same tradition. One of the basic assumptions of this doctrine appears to be that Canadian archivists shall seek out information on the records of their country wherever they may be, and inform the student accordingly. In England, I believe there is an over-emphasis placed on the self-contained nature of the record office and I have known many archivists with the very vaguest knowledge of the contents of record offices other than their own, even within the same city. The splendid work of the National Register of Archives in London is helping to change this but the process is a slow one. Yet the time may come when Canadian archivists will develop attitudes of mind similar to those bred in their colleagues in England as they come to receive more and more of the departmental records of government and the courts of law. An increasing amount of their time will be spent in "keeping" these records (and destroying them) and less and less of it will be occupied in the search for historical material wherever it may be, unless the staff can keep pace with the work involved. The appointment in Ontario of an Archives Liason Officer reveals an interesting development and a possible solution. This makes the Union List of Manuscripts prepared by the Public Archives of special importance at this time.

The paper which was read to our section by Professor Lewis H. Thomas five years ago, reviewed the machinery of archival legislation in Canada and some of the problems of its application. Since that date, several more statutes have been passed into law, and it is clear that most archives have now considerable responsibility for the records of government, and that their bulk and impersonal nature will mean that the researcher will have to be increasingly aware of administrative history and that the archivist will be unable to come up with information on persons and places which is more readily obtained from records in the private sector, or from the correspondence of public figures.

This shift of emphasis in holdings of records in Canadian archives may well have a profound effect on historiography in Canada, which has had its counterpart in England already. My impression is that Canadian historians are still deeply concerned with national politics, especially as it is reflected in the great series of correspondence of Prime Ministers and others in Public Archives of Canada. Local historians are at present concerned with the history of their own locality which tends to be generally biographical in nature, and this is particularly valuable

when impressions of founders of the communities are being recorded while they are still alive. But a time will come when more attention will be paid to administrative history as the point at which legislation and political policy became effective, or not, as the case may be. Much of the history of this country lies within the records of its administration, especially as this administration was quite highly developed even in the early years; I am thinking here of Western Canada in particular. The counterpart of this movement in England may be of some interest because it was during the latter part of the nineteenth century that a great deal of work on the constitutional and political history of England was accomplished, based on the publication of the Rolls Series of Public Documents and Chronicles, and the early calendars of the Public Record Office. These gave way around the period of the first World War to an intensive consideration of administrative history, both nationally and locally, which still continues partly due to the increasing sophistication of modern administration and appreciation of its problems, and partly to the fact that the records of administration are becoming more readily available in record offices.

There is, however, a danger of over-emphasizing the importance of administrative procedure, which is rather different. Professor T. F. Tout, who virtually founded these studies with his six volumes of Chapters in Medieval Administrative History has been criticized as tending in his later volumes to write a history of England through the standpoint of administration, which a critic has said "is rather like trying to command a warship from the stoke-hole". The records of administration are arranged in such a way that it is all too easy to write a history of the administration or administrative procedure, but this is not the same thing as writing a history of the administration as it affects individuals or extracting information from administrative records as raw material for other historical projects.

Because of his control over the preservation of administrative records, the archivist has immense influence on the writing of historians, especially through the suggestion of subjects for M.A. and Ph.D. theses. The tendency nowadays is for professors to inquire about suitable subjects available in the archives, rather than for students to ask initially whether there are papers relating to a subject in which they have a particular interest. We should, I think, ensure where possible, a balanced use of our collections in this way, although we all know the temptation to recommend neat, self-contained groups of papers on perhaps rather a limited subject which seems to suit everyone's convenience.

In England, the relationship between the Public Record Office in London, and local record offices, has for many years been rather difficult to assess. The Assistant Keepers of the Public Records

are the custodians of the records of central government, which far surpasses in completeness and span those accumulated locally; they are Civil Servants who become archivists through extensive in-service training but I think the difference lies more in the fact that the records of the central government differ radically in kind from those created locally, and the Public Record Office has rather different problems, or at least had until recent years. Individually, the staff have always been most kind and helpful, but in my own experience, our paths rarely crossed. I think it is worth recording that the Public Record Office has worked closely with London University on the Diploma Course for Archive Administration since about 1948, and that there has been a good deal of rivalry between the University of London and the University of Liverpool, which ran a similar course more specifically related to local records and the local archivist. Most of us who were at Liverpool, and many who were not, felt that this course was in many ways better suited to our needs. In brief, the attitude of the Public Record Office in general has been rather paternalistic towards the local offices, though this is now changing. By contrast, one of my earliest impressions on my arrival here was the close and friendly relationship between the Provincial and Public Archives. Dr. and Mrs. Lamb personally entertained me and my family during our short stay in Ottawa, and my only moments of apprehension were when my three small and boisterous daughters disappeared out of sight in the Lamb's lovely home. I feel that one of the basic reasons for this accord may lie in the fact that the older provinces antedate the federal government, and government departments were developed in a similar way at federal and provincial level. Besides this, as I indicated earlier, the Public Archives always had a more outward-looking view of its role than its English counterpart. I am sure this relationship will long continue, and will make possible the resolution of certain problems that might arise when a professional body such as the doctors or architects of Canada might decide that they would like to recommend that the Public Archives make collections of manuscripts in their respective fields. The provenance of these manuscripts may well be provincial in origin, and there would be an argument for retaining them in provincial archives, but at least the alternative could be placed clearly before any organization considering such a project. I have found this relationship with the Public Archives very helpful when it comes to considering federal records which have been passed for destruction as of no value from a federal point of view being retained in provincial archives where the provincial interest might well be greater and merit their retention. I have never so far heard of a similar approach to the Public Record Office in London on this matter by English archivists, although there has been a valuable arrangement by which the records of nationalized private industry may be retained at approved repositories locally; and Mr. Collingridge, the liaison officer of the Public

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Record Office has been appointed to deal with problems such as these, showing a distinct change of heart from attitudes of some years back.

The separatism of the Public Record Office is further emphasized by the fact that the care, arrangement and publication of manuscripts in the great private collections of national importance came within the terms of reference of the Historical Manuscripts Commission and not of the Office. The early years of the Commission's work was concerned mainly with publishing, correspondence, and other papers of a political nature, together with summaries of the contents of the Muniment Rooms of the major landed families of England, which have for so long been immersed in political life. In more recent years, the National Register Archives was set up under the Commission to gather information on the smaller collections covering every kind of archival activity. The fact that the Public Record Office was never involved in the work of searching out manuscripts in the tradition of local offices has further tended to isolate it from the main streams of archival development in England. I am very glad that the Union List of Manuscripts is being prepared within the Public Archives of Canada, thus further strengthening the links with repositories at the Provincial level. While I am on this subject, you should know that the Public Record Office in London closed daily at 4 p.m. and weekends, while the P.A.C. offers round the clock service. I know there are good reasons for this difference, but you will see how the amateur historian has been virtually excluded from the Round Room in the P.R.O. unless blessed with a private income. I would like to pay tribute to Roger Ellis, Secretary of the Historical Manuscript Commission and President of the Society of Archivists, as the man who more than any other has sought to make local and central archives an indivisible entity in terms of our profession. I am sure he will always be remembered for this.

I suppose the most obvious difference between the two countries we are considering lies in the time span of historical evidence, and you may feel this is so obvious as not worth dwelling upon. Many people have asked me how I can possibly find interesting the records of Alberta which, for the most part, date from the 1880's, which is a point at which most English archivists begin to feel that they are treading on the heels of modern records managers. The answer is that this time span is purely relative. There is just as much excitement in locating a cache of documents 80 years old in Alberta as there is of locating a box of medieval charters 800 years old in England; perhaps even more so since these charters are more common than most people imagine, and probably contain a good deal less information. But the most important difference occupationally is that the archivist of Western Canada cannot help being almost immediately involved in the problems of records management. The English archivist

enjoys an embarras de richesse, and finds it difficult to become enthusiastic about the records created during the last 80 years of an 800 year span. In Western Canada, however, the evidence of the earliest settlements still lie within the files of departments which may be lost by default if the Provincial Archivist is not active in securing them. In Alberta I am most conscious of the fact that what may seem a trivial set of records, taken individually, such as the series of chattel mortgages in court houses, may provide information on credit facilities and genealogy unavailable elsewhere, especially if the court house is in a rural area, which, by the nature of things, will not be heavily documented. One must also, I think, bear in mind that a complete run of trivial records may furnish information of value over and above the sum of their total, and that although too laborious to handle by present day methods, may be scanned and digested electronically in years to come. This is not a problem which faces the keepers of nineteenth century records in England where much more of a trivial nature can be safely destroyed.

It is stimulating and exhilarating to be forced to face squarely problems of record management and to make decisions on records disposal after considering the whole picture of documentary survival in a way which we English archivists are only beginning to do. One sees more and more clearly that the role of archivists and records managers is not simply an antiquarian, and the records manager understands that the explanation for administrative change lies always in the past, whether it is immediate or less immediate and that continuity of record should be maintained as it passes into the archives.

There is one point upon which my impressions are very hazy and that is what, in the Public Record Office, is called the Fifty Year Rule, by which documents are not generally made available to the public within 50 years of their creation. There has been a good deal of discussion about this in England and I am wondering what the rule generally applied in Canada should be. As a local archivist in England, I tended to use my own judgment and refer to the owners of the records when in doubt. Perhaps this is on the whole the best solution.

Because provincial and territorial government in Western Canada was closely associated with the early waves of European immigration, and settlement, the archivist is soon confronted with the importance and the problem of government publications. It would be interesting to know to what extent settlers relied on this kind of literature, but in any case, much of it forms a distillation of policy and statistics not easily located elsewhere. For the most part, government departments have not kept file copies of their publications and most sets in legislative libraries I suspect are defective in many ways. There is, therefore,



an important task before us to locate copies of this material and Alberta has a splendid example to follow in the case of Saskatchewan, where a most exhaustive hand-list has already been produced. While recognizing the value of printed annual reports, I do not think that English archivists pay the same kind of attention to the more ephemeral productions which may be a serious omission in the future since a lot of these brochures are produced to meet a specific demand and a specific problem.

I suppose one of the great glories of Canadian archives lies in their splendid and massive photographic collections. Very few repositories in Britain have accumulations of this magnitude despite the larger number of photographers. Perhaps it is that there was a genuine wide-spread urge to record the pioneer period since this was clearly one of the great epochs in North American history, and could be seen to be so at the time. One of the problems about history in England is its gradualness. Everything changes yet seems to remain the same, and it is gone before we realize it. It may be that these photographic collections will become the most prized and sought after resources in the archives of Canada.

The foundations laid by these great collections must be built upon, and I have the impression that most archives are busy doing this, but there is a further aspect to the problem of topographical record. Until quite recent times, there has been a strong tradition of topographical painting by artists, some of whom are extremely good - others of only fair ability, but who were producing works which were of great interest historically for what they contained. I believe that the artist can make as valid a statement about the buildings or people he sees as anyone setting down the description in words, and that this statement will in many cases enhance a purely photographic record. This is hard to define, but I am convinced that the artist can express a certain attitude of mind toward the subject he paints in the manner in which he paints it, which it is important to know. The tendency nowadays is for a great many art galleries to be pre-occupied with abstraction at the expense of much that is intrinsically interesting, if not of great artistic worth. I shall not quarrel with this point of view, but would like to emphasize that it may well be the role of the archives to continue this long tradition of topographical painting, and I am finding myself that I cannot ignore this field. I am well aware that many institutions, such as the Glenbow Foundation have done good work, but I am not sure how fully the new trends in the art galleries are appreciated by archives generally. This is a problem which has to be faced in England as well.

Finally, I would like to say a word or two about the Indian population who leave very little that can be classed strictly as

manuscripts apart from a few faded photographs and the remarkable Winter Counts which have in some cases been written up in Syllabics. For all the artifacts and ceremonial material that still survives, much of the Indian way of life may be permanently lost if the background and explanation to these objects is not recorded in time. I know that I am treading perilously near the edge of anthropology at this point, but with so few anthropologists available I feel that the archivist must urge and undertake some of this recording. In Britain we would dearly like to know the songs, religious ceremonial and the chronicles such as they were remembered by the Iron Age folk who inhabited Britain during the Roman occupation. I had the fortunate experience of being able to assist at a recording of a medicine pipe bundle transferral last year on the Blackfoot Reserve, and it is an experience that I shall not forget. With so much record of Indian affairs being generated by church and government, it is vital that the world of the Indian as it is buried in song and ceremony be preserved, for within a generation it may well become extinguished forever. I feel that the archivist has a responsibility to ensure that a proper balance is struck between the earlier settlement of the Indian and the later settlement of the European, if justice is to be done to the true history of Canada.

In conclusion, I believe that the role of the archivist, in both our countries, is likely to undergo a profound change which will iron out the differences between us. The electronic scanning of written records perhaps a generation away, will enable the archivist to control the personal side of government accumulations by the construction of detailed indexes to persons and places, which at present is impossibly laborious. This will redress the balance toward the personal aspect of modern records which is so far lost to view.

A time may come when there will be no more documents produced in the form we know them today, and even in Canada it will be hard to call a "manuscript" the magnetic tape generated by a private individual. More and more the hard record will come to be kept on tape and the paper print-out will be used mainly for answering questions. I am omitting consideration here of printed books and letter press produces by computer, which is not primarily our concern. May I conclude with an example of the way in which the new, gleaming electronic world is inching its way into at least one provincial repository?

The Attorney General's Department of Alberta has set up a Central Registry containing electronic microfilming equipment designed to handle more than 4,000 documents a month by Miracode, which stands for Microfilm Information Retrieval Access Code. The system will handle chattel mortgages, lien notes, and similar documents produced in vast quantities, but at the same time, the

earlier records in the Court House in Edmonton are being filmed and their retrieval built into this modern records process. Information can be exchanged on a telex network and copies of documents produces very rapidly as required. I believe one can see in this the beginning of the end of original paper documents, although it is extremely important to make sure that a proper sample is retained. A Provincial Statute was obtained to enable microfilm copy to be produced in courts of law as evidence, and this destroys one of the principal and ancient reasons for keeping legal records. I realize that none of these techniques are new, but the increase in automation and speed at which answers to questions may be obtained is a matter that we should ponder well. I can almost (but not quite) foresee a time when records and manuscripts which have survived in the form we know them today will have been electronically drained of their information to become mere artifacts of interest for their texture, form and colour. They may provide a valuable visual experience, but will no longer contain any new facts for the historian. **The problem of storage space will disappear** as the information distilled from a hundred years of administration is packed within the confines of one filing cabinet. Binary bits can now be etched on to tape by laser beam within a fraction of the space occupied by the magnetic method! **I expect** that several such bits would sit on the point of a needle but these latter day angels have the power to banish into limbo the steel shelf, the cardboard box, the files, bundles and packages, and even ourselves as a profession, unless we encourage our successors to master this new technology and continue to "keep the record" as we have always done.

May I turn from this Orwellian nightmare to glance at my favorite keeper of records - William Prynne (1600 - 1669), very much an archivist, although he flourished three hundred years before the word was coined, and a man who would be quite at home in our company. I introduce him as a witness to the antiquity of our profession since we have been so busy renewing ourselves of late that we have almost forgotten those predecessors who have been thinking archivally for centuries and fighting in the same kind of battles as ourselves.

William Prynne spent the greater part of his working life as a politician and was one of the most successful writers of pamphlets and tracts in his day. If he was alive now we would probably call him a journalist and I would like to remind you that the first Dominion Archivist of Canada practiced the same profession. As an indication of his success between 1634 and 1636, the Establishment marked its disapproval by fining him \$15,000, cropping his ears in the pillory and branding him with the letters S L (for seditious libeller) on both cheeks. We can only assume that he was somewhat mellowed by age since he was appointed Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London shortly

after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. John Aubrey tells us that, "his manner of study was this: he wore a long quilt cap which came two or three inches at least over his eyes which served him as an umbrella to defend his eyes from the light; about every three hours his man was to bring him a roll and a pot of ale to refocillate his wasted spirits; so he studied and drank and munched some bread; this maintained him till night and then he made a good supper."

After a while, like all good archivists, he submitted his report on the state of the records which he says "through negligence, nescience and sloathfulness had for many years then past layen buried together in one confused chaos under corroding putrifying cobwebs, dust and filth in the darkest corners of Caesar's Chapel in the White Tower...I employed some soldiers and women to remove and cleanse them from their filthiness; who soon growing weary of this noisome work left them almost as foul as they found them. Whereupon I and my clerks spent many whole days in cleansing and sorting them into distinct confused heaps in order to their future reducement into method, the old clerks of the office being unwilling to touch them for fear of endangering their eyesights and healths by the cankerous dust and evil scent." You can see that he was a man of unquenchable spirit and enthusiasm who had not lost his gift for the telling phrase at a time when the career of archivist was not as respectable as it is today. We may not have to cope with London grime of the seventeenth century but those "distinct confused heaps" are very familiar.<sup>1</sup>

#### FIREHAZARD

"Motion pictures made before the days of 'safety film' deteriorate at varying rates and can prove extremely hazardous to persons and property.

"Suspect motion pictures, film strips, etc., are those on 16 mm. film developed before 1927 and some Russian-produced 16 mm. films produced through 1930. Also suspect are those motion picture films developed on 35 mm. film through 1953."

- From a McGill University inter-departmental memorandum by John Andreassen.

<sup>1</sup> This paper was read before the Archives Section, Canadian Historical Association, meeting at Carleton University in 1967.