INFORMATION RETRIEVAL AND THE TRAINING OF THE ARCHIVIST

by

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A great era in archival development is drawing to a close in North America. The last state and provincial archives are being established; a vast network of archival repositories now covers the continent; the preservation of private manuscripts has been greatly accelerated; the preservation of public records has been undertaken as never before. A great battle for the surviving records and manuscripts of the past has been won in the sense that chaos and neglect has given way to professional care and the establishment of archival order. Records which now stand on the shelves of repositories are a massive paper monument to two or more generations of legislators, lobbyists, archivists and librarians who have fought the good fight. "Mopping up" operations will continue for some time, especially in the private sector and among the municipalities; many valuable records will still be lost, but not for want of a repository that would be willing to take them.

During the past thirty-five years in particular, archival principles have been challenged, modified, restated and, in some cases, created; much of this cerebration has been in contra-distinction to library principles, and we can now speak with confidence of a disciple called archival administration based on a loving (if perhaps a little overawed) respect for fonds. This is a great achievement and a whole new profession has emerged, still rather defensive towards librarians, but on the whole subtle, pragmatic, with the confident assurance of having arrived.

This great rescue operation has necessitated most of our efforts being concentrated upon the media of the record rather than the content. Physical problems of storage, archival order, the summary list and the inventory have been our main preoccupation. The calendar and the index have been used for only a very small fraction of our holdings. Appraisal in records management has required a careful consideration of content, but, generally speaking, has not involved a detailed record of that content. By the appraisal process, we preserve a series from destruction, and that is all. In all this, we have developed some fine skills and considerable insight, using our training as historians and archivists and our knowledge of the administrative and bureaucratic process. But we have been engaged essentially in grappling with problems of order, rather than content. We have established our profession upon preservation and arrangement, and such an emphasis has been absolutely essential. Our future campaigns may, however, be fought on different ground, and unless we equip ourselves with new weapons, we may find ourselves just 'paper tigers'.

We are entering the era in which records will be controlled by automation and miniaturization. Rooms full of unsorted paper are fast disappearing. Organic order will be imposed and maintained at the moment of creation. Chaos and overwhelming mass will cease to plague the archivist. His principal battle, and perhaps his survival as a member of a distinct

profession so hardly won, will depend on his control of a mass and chaos infinitely more complex; namely, the mass of data and the chaos of subject content.

Up to now, we have served our public tolerably well. Historians have been generally satisfied with (though not always too appreciative of) the order we have brought to primary sources and the nature of their contents, which has been essentially by-products of order. This is particularly true of administrative record where the content can be indicated in a general way within the body of the inventory. In some cases, the contents of inventories are then indexed, but for the most part, the historian must rely heavily on the personal knowledge and experience of the archivist - far more than he realizes, and at times, far more than we like to admit. Surely, it is at this point that frustration sets in. We view our neatly ordered series, arranged impeccably on hundreds of feet of shelving, each with its inventory. Here in these series is the grand sweep of our solid achievement constantly before our eyes, gathering dust (even in the best repositories) because the grasp of their subject content in all its richness and variety eludes us. And so we look for another collection to arrange and grumble about "rich mines" ignored by the historian, yet knowing in our hearts the reason for the neglect.

It is absolutely essential that we turn our professional attention now to this whole question of information retrieval (and I do not mean only through ADP) because otherwise, we shall end up as archival janitors without a profession or a raison d'être, knowing less and less about more and more records, series and collections, and mightily relieved that automated records are in order before we receive them. Now, I know this is an outrageous overstatement, compounded with self-condemnation, and I know that there are countless collections which are meticulously arranged, described and indexed by first-class scholar/archivists. But many of these sumptuous programs and editions are often a tribute to personal eminence funded by corporate wealth. We tend to know more and more about élites but what of the grass roots hidden in our intractable record groups?

Societies of archivists should bend the major part of their efforts towards encouraging study and research into content and information retrieval. The rules of order have been soundly established, and like all great principles, are relatively simple to spell out and to grasp. Junior archivists can be given the responsibility of ordering archives and preparing inventories; those with experience or special training should grapple with content; all too often in the past, it has been the other way around. A promising start has already been made. Many archivists, manuscript curators, librarians and records managers have become involved in this field, and there have been some good papers from them amongst the latest archival literature.

There is another aspect of recorded information which should also be considered; namely, that of records creation. Most provincial and state archivists have some responsibility for records management, a function which began with the controlled ad hoc destruction of valueless paper, and has progressed through scheduling to forms control at the point of creation. The archivist who has a thorough grasp of the pattern of statistical output and reporting by departments and can relate past series to present needs could well make crucial suggestions about the form in which information is prepared, so that as much as possible shall have on-going and perhaps interdepartmental value. This would be particularly applicable to

computer programmes where provision might have to be made for the preservation of records having permanent value on COM, CIM or other readable form. The archivist, by his training, may well detect the interdepartmental value of statistics since he is used, in his dealings with historians, to the fact that records have a value other than that for which they were created. It cannot be too strongly emphasized that this aspect of the archivist's work has an immediate bearing on the quality of records worthy of permanent preservation, and is, therefore, complementary to his classic role.

This creative approach to records should not be viewed purely within public and corporate administration as it is today, but in the light of organizational changes likely to occur during the next decades in the face of rapid technological change. The old structures are unlikely to survive. The new must be built on accurate data and analysis to be effective.

> "In almost every situation where change is desired, deviations to the standard patterns have to be resorted to. The vogue has been to the special committee, the team, the task force, the think tank, and other more exotic forms of 'ad hoc' relationships. These have one thing in common: to set new bearings of thought and action; and that is precisely the ingredient which is now lacking in the theory and practice of organization - the vector or direction of change. Because of this, some of the thinking on organization has become outmoded and meaningless. What is the significance of the old concepts of unit of command, span of control, or line and staff, if they can only explain or support static and traditional relationships? These notions still strongly influence most organizations because they are ingrained in the management culture and offer a convenient intellectual refuge when facts or logic are lacking. They are a framework to protect the forces of resistance and make each change in organization appear as a major rebuilding process which should not be attempted without due reverence and trepidation."[1]

Reluctance to change is partly built upon ignorance of the factors involved. It may be that the archivist, with his sense of historical perspective and his concern for the creation and preservation of meaningful information, may be able to limit the risk of change considerably. He could become the keeper of the best possible definitive record in an increasingly fluid situation and provide the essential element of permanence that would make flexibility viable.

> "The social structure in organizations of the future will have some unique characteristics. The key word will be 'temporary'; there will be adaptive, rapidly changing temporary systems. There will be organized around problems - to-be-solved. The problems will be solved by groups of relative strangers who represent a set of diverse professional

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[1] Jacques M. DesRoches, "The Developing Irrelevance of Formal Organization Patterns", Optimum, Winter 1970, p. 7.

skills. The groups will be conducted on organic rather than mechanical models; they will evolve in response to the problem rather than programmed role expectations. The function of the 'executive' thus becomes coordinator, or 'linking pin' between various project groups. He must be a man who can speak the diverse languages of research and who can relay information and mediate among the groups. People will be differentiated not vertically according to rank and role but flexibly according to skill and professional training.

> "Adaptive, temporary systems of diverse specialists, solving problems, linked together by coordinating and task-evaluative specialists, in organic flux, will gradually replace bureaucracy as we know it. As no catchy phrase comes to mind, let us call this an 'organic-adaptive-structure'."[2]

Within this new context of permanent change, it will be essential for a great deal more information to be available than there is at present. Departments will no longer be able to feed off their own facts and deny them to others. The local data bank, with its galaxy of primary source material correlated as required, will be an archive in every sense of the word, and the archivist should be there mingling with the planners and other experts to ensure that future historians and social scientists are not denied the use of this great source.

The archivist, then, has a unique opportunity in the future if he addresses himself to this vital task of information retrieval, in both the field of historical and modern records. His resources will span the present and the past, and he will hold the key to decision-making and research alike. His bank of interest will be far wider than that of the records manager, but he must learn the language of the computer like his native tongue if he is not to be relegated to the fringe of administration from which he came. We must not be seduced by a kind of academic dolce vita or we will surely die as archivists and will fail to ensure for the future the continuation of that record which has, by so much effort, been saved from the past.

This must seem to be an overlong introduction to a paper on the training of archivists, but it has been necessary to examine the future role and priorities of our profession if new entrants are to be adequately prepared. It is suggested that three main types of archival training will be needed:

A. A summer school course in elementary archival theory coupled with the practical techniques of archival arrangement and storage; preparation of the inventory and other simple finding aids. This course could be taken by archives support staff and those, as now, who have already entered the profession.

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[2] Warren G. Bennis, Changing Organizations, 1966, p. 12, quoted in Jacques M. DesRoches, "The Developing Irrelevance of Formal Organization Patterns", Optimum, Winter 1970, p. 8.

B. A post-graduate credit course in Archives Administration which covers the history and principles of archives administration at least in Europe and America; comparative administrative history; the archival administration of emerging nations; records management and the archivist; manuscripts - special collections; finding aids; the custodial function; some practical instruction and a period of in-service training.

The approach to this course should be essentially academic and philosophical since it will be necessary that an archivist of the future should be a graduate with a broad education in archives coupled with some practical experience; to enable him to be as flexible as possible in his thinking. This course might well be expanded to a full degree, perhaps M.A., and could well include statistics and some aspects of a librarian's training in the information field.

C. Special courses and seminars in information retrieval which should be thoroughly inter-disciplinary and ecumenical, and which would normally be attended by experienced professionals of some years' standing. The fruits of these seminars would then be passed down to the graduate school course and included in the curriculum.

The profession might well profit from the admission to the above courses of those who have graduated in degrees other than history, and might include business administration and the social sciences. Such graduates would have to complete the post-graduate course outlined above, but the entry of such persons from other disciplines would bring valuable insights to the profession. It is quite wrong to imagine that only historians make good archivists and reveals a limited view of the nature of a profession which is capable of great diversity and could profit greatly from such diversity.

Societies of archivists should be setting standards and suggesting curricula for the above three types of course. They could discourage type A from being too pretentious and type B from too much involvement in techniques. Type C would be their special concern as being crucial to the development of the profession in the next decade, and some pioneer work would have to be done here.

The accrediting of courses by societies would be a rather delicate and invidious matter, but if the acceptance of their curricula by institutions could be encouraged, then there would surely be an advantage to any institution to be able to append "This course covers the curriculum recommended" since it would give a student confidence that the course was worth taking.

As regards the standard of teaching, this would again be difficult to regulate directly. However, if an approved curriculum was being offered, it would be up to the student to assure himself that the director of the course and his staff had a high standing in the profession and this could easily be done.

The archivists of the next decade must begin to solve some of the more complex problems of retrieval and learn to talk and think with librarians engaged in similar fields of enquiry; they must increasingly be able to provide the data for problem solving in administration. As information specialists, they will have to look on occasion beyond the bounds of the record and the manuscript and move with more confidence amongst

those contemporary official sources which librarians call "documents", and then understand and perhaps adapt their methods of retrieval. The future is full of promise, but if this new battle for professional effectiveness is to be won, we cannot afford to stay in our archival foxholes.

One final point. There is evidence that the size and complexity of archival repositories handling a wide range of archival media may result in a basic division of responsibility between:

(1) acquisition, subject specialization and the production of subject guides to primary sources in all media, which may include related material (which is "extramural" in other repositories or elsewhere).
(2) accession, physical custody and the production of finding aids and indexes to each collection.

It is vital to the self-fulfillment of archivists that these major functions never become divorced from each other. The acquisition archivists must have a greater or less input into the finding aids according to the importance and complexity of the collections or their personal involvement with them. The media control staff must never be put in the position of Cinderellas serving "prima donna" acquisition and subject specialists. Granted that media control may involve a relatively larger proportion of junior archivists and archival support, nevertheless, for the senior archivists, the responsibility for producing finding aids and information systems of uniformly high quality (which may involve EDP information retrieval) should stretch the professional to his intellectual limit and be thoroughly rewarding for him. Ultimately, this area may offer the most challenge to the thoroughly mature and experienced archivist rather than the acquisition field which, at present, appears more "glamorous" to many.

However this may be, the archivist's understanding must be thoroughly versed in media control before moving into acquisition and subject specialization. As a senior archivist, he may later return to media control having gotten experience in a specialized field (and perhaps an M.A. for a scholarly and critical guide to sources!) which will give him the necessary sophistication for information retrieval problems as a whole.