

REVIEW:

PAPERS PREPARED FOR THE 1971 ARCHIVES SUMMER COURSE

Ottawa, 1971

by

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The introduction to the limited edition of papers prepared for the training course given in Ottawa in 1971 was written by Ian E. Wilson, University Archivist of Queen's University, Kingston. Mr. Wilson is also Chairman of the Archives Section, Canadian Historical Association. In his introduction, he makes it clear that the collection of papers, quite properly referred to as an "edition", is but a first step towards the publication of a manual of Canadian archival methodology and practice. This "first step" reveals an earnestness of purpose and a sophistication in performance that promises well for the next step.

The 1971 Archives Summer Course was not a first foray into this field. Many of the experienced and expert archivists who presented papers at this Course had contributed to one or more of three earlier training courses offered in Ottawa in 1964, 1968 and 1970. The papers prepared for the 1971 course were prepared as the bases for seminars. Audio-visual, cartographic and other aids were used in seminars. The edition of papers under review here does not include papers or presentations given on records retention and disposal, nor does it include papers on certain aspects of preservation and conservation of archival material. Three papers, distributed to students enrolled in the course, were not included in the edition of papers prepared for review.

The heart of the edition is comprised of papers which deal with the principles and practices of archival methodology and science as developed in the Public Archives of Canada. The majority of the authors are staff members of the P.A.C., the brief designation so well known to Canadian scholars. This is as it should be for the P.A.C. is the acknowledged leader in the Canadian archives world. The edition does go beyond the P.A.C. experience, nevertheless, and includes papers on aspects of museum work, on university, church and historical society archives, on provincial archives and on subjects of common interest to archivists wherever they may labour. It is fitting that occasionally echoes of the far world of the more local institution should be heard in Ottawa. Sometimes these echoes may misdirect, however, for I noted a fairly lengthy reference to Alberta Archives, a latecomer to the arena, whilst no reference was made to the British Columbia Archives, one of the longest established archival institutions in the country.

The first half of the training course is composed of a collection of papers covering the fundamentals of archival methodology and practice. There is a good bibliography set out as an introductory paper. Other papers cover such fundamental areas or operations as terminology, the

history of archives in Canada, the purposes of archives, organization and function, acquisitions, appraisal, classification, arrangement, description, inventorying and the preparation of finding aids. These papers were prepared by trained and experienced archivists who obviously know their respective fields. The student of archives, however, may have difficulty in isolating principle from practice in so short a span of time, and from so great a store of information. Not all of the papers are uniformly well organized, nor are they of uniform length. One could hope for a clearer rationale for map collecting, for example. The selection criteria for private manuscripts, too, should be set out in simpler form. I happen not to agree with the statement that the P.A.C. policy of collecting historical manuscripts came about by accident. My reading of the evidence convinces me that the collection of "Canadian records", a term used by the Quebec Literary and Historical Society, was given a high priority by the advocates for a public archives in Canada, and was a condition for the establishment of the institution. These are minor points and do not detract from the general excellence of the papers.

The last half of the course makes provision for the specifics of archives work. Papers here have to do with reference service, automation, publication programs, exhibitions, genealogy, heraldry, micrography, security and the general care and preservation of archival materials. Once again, the papers were written and presented by people familiar to the Ottawa scene. This situation is almost inevitable since the training course was organized and set in Ottawa, and since the preponderance of knowledgeable people in the areas covered, work in Ottawa. I do think it a legitimate question, however, to ask, if museums are to be discussed, why not libraries or art galleries? I think, too, that the fact of the resources being Ottawa based does lead to an under-emphasis on resources outside of the national capital. One example should suffice - the paper on genealogy stresses records in a government department in Ottawa. The homestead records in the Saskatchewan archives, organized, indexed and listed as they are, constitute a much more important regional resource. Again, this criticism in no way belittles the value of the papers given. It is simply a suggestion that if and when a Canadian manual is prepared, that it be more broadly based.

Two seminars did introduce the broader dimension to the course. The paper on provincial archives raises some very pertinent issues though it passes over other important points. The author writes from the position of a person who is well versed in the philosophy of archives and in the archival practice. He has had experience in the provincial field in Canada, but his longer experience and training lay elsewhere. It would not be possible for him to appreciate all the nuances of the Canadian constitution nor could he be versed in the history of archival development in the provinces. Not that what he writes is not correct - simply that he does not give sufficient background. On the other hand, his paper does give an overview from an outside vantage point and it draws comparisons which would not occur to a local practitioner. I doubt if there is a good basis of comparison of Canadian provinces and local government archives in Britain. On the other hand, the principles discussed should be universal in application and it is well that these be stressed rather than the parochial practices that develop in localized archival institutions. Because many topics discussed in this paper were general topics, there was a certain duplication of content. The paper was very well written and so relevant to the broad field of archives that I felt it should have found a place in the first half of the course. A second paper covering the problems of

acquisition, protection, publication and reference service at the provincial level and relative to all the provinces could have been given in the second half.

The paper on university, church and historical society archives introduced an important area of archival development outside of the federal and provincial governmental field. Probably the paper could have been expanded to cover city and business archives. The author sets out the broad skills needed in an archivist who must face the many-faceted challenges inherent in small institutions without sufficient resources of staff or money to provide more than the bare essentials of space and equipment. The paper does point out that the real test of the efficiency or performance quotient of any archival institution at any level is the quality of service given.

The Archives Summer Course was organized around a number of seminars given by practitioners well known, each in his field. Given the organization of the course, it is but natural that certain areas were stressed, certain areas left unexplored, certain developments left unrecorded. The course was not meant to be a history or a catalogue of archives. For the purposes for which the papers were prepared, the level was almost universally high. One can only conclude that there is an impressive body of knowledge on the "how" and the "why" of archival science. But papers prepared for seminars for a course do not in toto constitute of themselves a manual.

What is needed to convert the collection into a manual is an editor who will ensure that all essential subjects are covered and that the coverage is even and logically arranged. The editor will do more. The present "edition" is strong on the practical and the empirical, but less strong on the philosophical. It presupposes a considerable familiarity with archival routines. It gives little on the historical development of archives in the provinces though the early provincial archives were more interested in "history" than in public records until 1945. One can only understand the historical development of archives in Canada if he knows Canadian history. A competent editor will be able to put the development of principles and practices in a Canadian context while ensuring that the broad principles are not captured by a narrow nationalism.

A prepared manual covering the whole field of development and growth would be of inestimable value as a basic text in archives to the administrator, the staff member and the student entering the profession. Training courses would still be necessary, but the instructors could expect a higher level of familiarity of subject content and would be able to delve deeper into the more intricate problems facing the archivist. More time could be spent on the so-called specialties. More stress could be given to the philosophic "why" rather than the empirical "how". There would surely result a more rapid development of skills and a maturing of the professional spirit.