

AN OPEN LETTER TO CANADIAN ARCHIVISTS

BY

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For 25 years now I have been involved with the problems and varying aspects of the relationship between my profession and that of the archivists and librarians. While some of my best personal friends are librarians or archivists, I find my views absolutely and diametrically opposed to theirs on matters of principle and philosophy.

At our Montreal Book Auction of November 28, 1973, at the Ritz Carlton Hotel, we found it necessary to withdraw a collection of more than 50 autograph letters of the Molson family (of Molson Brewery fame) 1830-1843, completely unknown and unpublished, which, with our usual "understatement" we had catalogued as having "all the fascination of a Canadian Forsyte saga". Prior to the sale private interests had offered us a price which we considered unacceptable. It was far below our estimate of the value of the collection and it was less than the reserve price, or the minimum price we could have accepted. At the sale itself no bids whatsoever were received. In a Canadian context we believe that the Molsons rank with the Astors, the Vanderbilts or the Rockefellers, and we remain fascinated by the lack of interest shown by our clients. We surmise that our printed estimate of \$10,000 of the value of the collection was considered so exorbitant that interested parties resisted even the slightest attempt toward its acquisition.

My various experiences over a period of many years have shown me that Canadian collectors and institutions are reluctant to enter the field of historical manuscripts as serious buyers. They feel that it is the responsibility of national or provincial archives to acquire material of important national figures or that relating to national events. It is not the same with literary manuscripts and material. Since the early 1960's Canadian institutions have been eager to buy collections of writers like Layton, Cohen, Gustafson, Glassco, MacLennan, Atwood, Denison, etc. at relatively high prices. To come back to historical manuscripts and material, archives, national or provincial, are advancing the thesis that they lack funds essential for the acquisition of expensive manuscripts (important manuscripts are rather expensive)

and moreover, are not accustomed to paying a fair price for such material. What I consider a fair price archivists consider exorbitant and excessive, and this undoubtedly is the prime source of my difficulties with them. I have stated publicly that, in my opinion, Canadians, by and large, are not aware yet of the sort of cultural values embodied in manuscript material. The Canadian establishment does not care for "vieux papiers souvent scandaleux" and displays a lack of knowledgeable cultural sensibilities. (When I sold the Jacobs papers, the Jewish community of Montreal was almost up in arms over the fact that private papers were offered on the auction block; when I sold the Riel diary I was threatened with injunctions and received menacing phone calls; the same when I offered the Laurier love letters.) I do not blame the federal or provincial governments for their seeming cultural indifference. Politicians are responsible to their electors and they might have difficulties in explaining to them that they paid money for old papers.

The case of the Laurier-Lavergne correspondence attracted considerable attention in the Canadian press. It was offered at our auction sale in December 1971 and failed to find a buyer. Details of the history of the letters might be of interest. In 1897, according to Schull, Laurier returned to Madame Lavergne the letters she had written him, indicating that he considered the liaison ended, and apparently expecting to have his letters returned to him. Madame Lavergne did not concede to this reciprocal consideration however. She did not return Laurier's letters and these were the very letters offered at our auction. The fate of the letters written by Madame Lavergne to Laurier is unknown. May I conjecture that they have been destroyed. Between 1925-1930, Madame Lavergne, then an old lady living in a Montreal convent, gave Laurier's letters to her nephew Renaud Lavergne who in 1963 passed them on to the party who placed them in our hands for auction purposes in 1971. As the attempt to sell the correspondence at auction was unsuccessful, the owner agreed to dispose of the material by private treaty.

This apparent lack of concern for the Laurier-Lavergne correspondence occasioned considerable comment in the press. The editorial writer of The Montreal Star commented:

The romance of Canadian politics was dealt yet another grievous blow last week when Sir Wilfrid Laurier's "love letters" failed to arouse either financial or historical enthusiasm at public auction in Montreal and were consequently withdrawn from sale. This anticlimax, of course, was no fault of the dignified Sir Wilfrid nor of Mme, Emilie Lavergne, the woman to whom the letters were addressed, although some people persist in spying a connection between patriotic apathy and the fate of documents like these.

Mind you, it is not every day - nor, it seems, every century - that a Canadian PM's "billets doux" are put on the block. Therefore one would have quite legitimately expected a lively

curiosity value at least. In the event, bidding never surpassed the \$4,500 mark and that was considered too paltry a sum to justify parting with such amatory manuscripts. The letters were described as "intimate" but perhaps they were not intimate enough by today's heavy-breathing standards. ( 6 December, 1971)

Whether Armand Lavergne was the son of Laurier or not, is a question for the historian to solve and romancers. My fascination as a dealer in rare books and manuscripts is to search for and locate rare and interesting items, as for instance the Laurier correspondence, and my preoccupation is to find a buyer for such materials. And so it should be that collectors, librarians and archivists are equally adamant that such material is preserved. That no one, neither collector nor institution, nor archives was interested in the correspondence is a sore reflection on the cultural stance of all Canadians.

In the summer of 1971 I was instrumental in organizing a symposium sponsored by the Erasmus Circle of Montreal. The theme of the symposium was the Relationship between Antiquarian Book-sellers, Collectors, Librarians and Archivists. For the occasion I prepared a position paper entitled A welcome to the non-members of the Erasmus Circle.

Assuming the rôle of the devil's advocate my "attack" against archivists and librarians centered around the sale of the Louis Riel diary of 1885, which came up at auction in April 1971 and which had become, I believe, a "cause célèbre" in the annals of antiquarian book and manuscript dealing in Canada. The diary was bought at \$26,500 by private interests which are now trying to resell it, at cost, to a Canadian institution. The attitude of the Public Archives regarding the sale of the diary was puzzling. If it had not happened before, it must have been at this occasion that I became persona non grata with Ottawa. The Public Archives had to defend their position in the press and on television, and the Secretary of State might have wondered why the representative of the Public Archives ceased bidding at \$12,000.

In my position paper I also dealt at length with the purchase of the Lord Russell papers by McMaster University at a reported \$520,000 and the mental acrobatics of its librarian. The case of the Russell papers shows one thing very clearly: namely that money is available for worthwhile projects in Canada.

Money is available from the Government of Canada for the purchase of European paintings, some of which are in the million dollar range, and of the Coverdale collection of pictorial material at a reported purchase price of \$850,000 in 1970. I am indeed in favour of purchases of this nature. I believe they bring honour to Canada and advance its cultural potentialities. But how irreverent of me to mention in the same breath a Riel diary which the government did not think worth more than \$12,000, allowing it to fall to private interests, how absurd of me to mention 344 pages of intimate letters of a French Canadian from Arthabaska for which

the Government of Canada could not even find the slightest interest.

Since 1967 Montreal Book Auctions offered for sale about 900 lots of autograph letters, documents and manuscripts of historical interest. The prices of about 650 lots are recorded in Montreal Book Auction Records, 1967-1971, which I compiled in 1972. Generally prices received were satisfactory, some prices were excellent, some, we thought, were rather low, but on the whole, prices reflected the market situation.

I openly acknowledge the patronage we have received from private collectors, Canadian institutions and archives, including the Public Archives. We realize that we are pioneering a rather new field in Canada, selling autograph material at auction.

Obvious difficulties arose when we made available important and expensive material which was not exactly in the realm of private collectors or institutions, and for which only the Public Archives or provincial archives could be considered prospective buyers. This produced monopolistic situations, one institution declining to bid allowing the field free for the other. In industry or private business a situation like this comes within the terms of reference of the Combines Investigation Branch, it becomes collusion and is subject to legal investigation and pursuit.

Archivists and librarians term it "rationalization" and consider it quite intelligent and fair procedure. A classical example can be found in the Canadian Press release of April 24th 1971, where, in connection with the Riel diary, the Dominion Archivist was quoted:

...Dr. Smith said the federal archives had sounded out the feelings of various provinces - Manitoba, Saskatchewan and Quebec - as well as Canadian universities that might have bid on the diary before the auction. All agreed that they would not compete with an archives attempt to buy the historical document. When word was received that a Texas university might be at the auction, Dr. Smith said he phoned friends at the University of Texas and explained that an American attempt to buy the diary "would be the greatest disservice to Canada since the War of 1812." The purchase would be seen as a "symbol of American imperialism and the greatness of the almighty American dollar, "he told the university. The university sent Dr. Smith a telegram on Wednesday assuring him that there would be no Texas attempt to buy the diary..." (The further contents of the Canadian Press release consist in explanations by Dr. Smith why the Public Archives did not feel necessary to secure the diary for the Government of Canada. The text of the Canadian Press release as reported in the Toronto Globe and Mail of April 24th, 1971 has been reproduced in my position paper for the Erasmus Circle symposium.)

It is therefore not astonishing that some of the material

at auction did not sell, due above all to the absence of competition, and as well to our inability to reduce the prices protecting the seller, the reserve price, to suit the offer of a sole bidder.

In my view librarians and archivists are by definition custodians of the material in their possession and their professional trainings and qualifications do not exactly encompass the financial, or even historical, evaluation of material. The determining of financial values ought to rest with the experts, specialist antiquarian dealers in books and manuscripts, and with auctioneers. The historical appraisal of material must surely be the responsibility of historians. And the ultimate decision to purchase or not to purchase, and the evolving responsibility should be left with the executive branch of the department involved. Purchases of special material should not be made depending on available funds; special funds should be made available for special purchases. The sorry spectacle of Canadians pleading poverty when it comes to historical material should cease, and there might be other ways and means to defend our cultural heritage than by using a couple of muskets from the War of 1812.

The matter of monopolistic tendencies is not restricted to Ottawa alone. On the Quebec scene this question has been, of late, the topic of a fierce controversy which the editors of "Le Devoir" called "La querelle des manuscrits."

Contemporary archives have come a long way from their original purpose of being a place in which public records were kept. I have no quarrel with this historical evolution. Libraries also have evolved and changed since the early times of their foundation. However, their historical fact does not give the modern archivist the right to solicit a monopoly on manuscripts of any description.

The basic principle that any owner of manuscript material shall have the privilege and the right to dispose of it in any way he sees fit, by sale or donation, and to any depository he chooses, must be respected. Books or manuscripts should not be restricted to this or that library or archives, and no library or archives, national, provincial or otherwise, should have a monopoly. In the Canadian context, acquisition of important material by the Public Archives at Ottawa, The National Archives of Quebec, or any other archival centre should not be at the expense of other institutions. In my opinion the centralisation of manuscripts or source material in one place is rather dangerous. An argument for more decentralisation is that it would lead to more research, more study and more appreciation of our past and present. In all fairness I must say that my most recent observations indicate that the Public Archives generally withdraw from serious bidding for items after ascertaining that other Canadian institutions wish to secure them.

The quarrel between archivists and librarians is futile. Instead of inducing competition they must seek cooperation. The knowledge of the librarian can largely profit the archivist, and his knowledge should be used in the library.

As I said in my position paper given at the Erasmus Circle symposium: "for many years now in word and print I have been the chief exponent of the theory that since more than 200 years the Canadian librarian, the Canadian institutional buyer, has been enemy no. 1 of the Canadian booktrade. To these I must now add the Canadian archivist. I have never succeeded in establishing a dialogue between my profession and that of librarians and archivists. I have tried many times; the Erasmus Circle symposium was only one aspect of various attempts which died early deaths, regressing into fabled Canadian mediocrity and complacency.

The profession of dealer and auctioneer in the area of rare books and manuscripts competes easily with the antiquity of that of the librarian, and carries with it more history than that of the archivist. We travel through the dust of ancient attics and humid caverns, adventurers trading into the past, discoverers of that which was and is no longer, always astonished to come upon the variety of memories of things past. And it rests with us to evaluate this material in financial terms, whether librarians and archivists like it or not. We are not custodians, nor are we keepers. In an earlier era of munificence we sold our goods to princes and kings, to Bodleys and Pepys, but such great ones have all but vanished, leaving with us the legacy of a mere reflection of the magnitude of their pleasure and pride. With what immense contrast now we sell to institutions, some times well-funded, but concerned all too often with acquisition and accumulation, far distant from the kind of exalted excitement attributed to the collector who has found what he cannot resist. In our hands, the material is alive. It becomes a treasured reality, not simply another number on an all but inaccessible shelf. And we sell it, imparting in some measure the fascination of our discovery and the beauty of our adventure. It is not yet dead, but it loses its life in the institutional embrace. But, we remember the fragrance of what we have traded away.