

THE PROTOCOL OF S.N.A.P.

DEMARICATION OF ACQUISITION FIELDS

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Probably the greatest potential for unethical conduct in the field of acquisitions stems from hyper-active competition for manuscripts and other archival documents. The trend is of recent origin and reflects phenomenal proliferation, diversification and duplication of archival repositories all over the world, either as autonomous institutions or as adjuncts to existing libraries, museums or galleries. It appears that a library is no longer a library unless it collects manuscript materials. The head of a major national library once told me that his institution did not wish to become the only library of its stature that did not collect manuscripts. There is almost a psychotic preoccupation with historical papers. It is illustrated by a recent cartoon showing acquisition archivists with paper pick-up sticks. The archives have become the "in-thing" of our life. They are gradually replacing libraries as the status symbol of modern institutions. Government agencies, private organizations and commercial corporations are setting up archives and the number is increasing each year. In 1961 when we began compiling the Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories there were some 100 such repositories in our country. The second edition of the Union List, which is now in progress will cover twice as many institutions. The National Union Catalog of Manuscript Collections reports the existence of over 1,000 archival and manuscript repositories in the USA alone.

The sheer growth in size and number of archives and manuscript repositories has begun to affect the market for new source materials. With the establishment of additional faculties, colleges or universities, new, sometimes analogous, often overlapping acquisition programs were developed. Existing institutions broadened their scope by developing specialized collections: aeronautical, archaeological, architectural, - and the list is endless - including the records of business, labour, judiciary, ethnic groups,

This paper was presented at the Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists in St. Louis, Missouri, September, 1973.

film industry, music, medical science, sports, women's rights, etc. etc. The demand for manuscripts and other research documents reached unprecedented proportion. Prices for individual manuscripts and complete collections began to skyrocket. Book stores, antiquarian shops, stamp and coin dealers stocked their shelves with historical documents. Catalogue, counter and auction sales blossomed all over the continent. Leading European auction houses set up American and Canadian subsidiaries offering our repositories an opportunity to collect non-American research materials. Owners of papers became increasingly aware of the value of their collections. They are now unwilling to present them to repositories. They demand and receive impressive compensations in cash or tax credit. Diaries, letters and other papers of prominent individuals quickly rose in value, often reaching price levels that only wealthy collectors could afford. Letters of Louis Riel, the controversial fighter for the rights of the Metis in Canada's Northwest, which as recently as ten years ago were offered for \$50. per item, now command prices of \$500. or more. His incomplete diary for March-May, 1885, invoking divine intercession at the Battle of Batoche, sold in 1970 for \$26,500. Market prices of ALS's of George Washington, Abraham Lincoln and other eminent presidents are now quoted in thousands of dollars.

The increased demand for manuscripts, dwindling supply and rising prices have begun to affect acquisition programs. Less affluent institutions were virtually eliminated from competition. More ingenious repositories, however, began to stress the non-monetary benefits of their programs. They emphasized conservation, preparation of finding aids, microfilming, accessibility of papers for reference and research, protection of confidentiality of information, all of which cost a repository considerable expenditures of money and manpower. Some collectors offered potential donors other inducements: they would name collections, rooms or whole libraries after them; scholarships and prizes would be established, biographies written and donors appointed as patrons, honorary chancellors or governors. The other substitute for cash payment is tax credit. Abuses in this field are well known and relatively frequent.

In offering these inducements many repositories promised benefits that could not be realized. Facilities for handling papers are expensive, and so are professional services that are required for processing, conservation, restoration, microfilming and preparation of finding aids, all of which must be taken for granted in a modern repository. These services are often unavailable in small archives and libraries. Donors are short-changed when their papers are locked in storage because no facilities or staff are available to process the collections. The right of sub-standard repositories and private collectors to search for, solicit and acquire manuscripts and other historical papers is being seriously questioned. Equally questionable is unethical use of money resources, exaggerated promises and other aggressive inducements.

The greatest potential for unethical conduct, however, stems from a competition between two or more repositories collecting similar papers. Superficially no problems arise with respect to

national, state, provincial, and other official archives. The archives of a designated geographical area normally limit their acquisition program to territories from which they derive their authority. The Public Archives of Canada would not willingly collect records of the US federal agencies, should such be offered through commercial outlets; the State Archives of Minnesota would refrain from collecting records of its neighbour, the Province of Manitoba, nor those of the adjoining State of Wisconsin. But there are no such territorial limitations on the part of private archives and university manuscript collections. Frequently two or more libraries in close proximity compete with each other in the same field. Moreover, they often compete for collections that have no relevance to the geographical area they represent. Recently a university library in my country established a labour archives program. In its relentless search for sources the archives obtained possession of records of labour unions which were domiciled on the other side of the continent. More recently a university library which specialized in collecting literary manuscripts lost out to another library, even though the former already possessed the bulk of papers of the author whose manuscripts were auctioned.

The question of who collects what has become a question of ethics. Even more fundamental is the question of who collects where? Are there in fact logical repositories for certain types of collections? Furthermore, are there territorial areas which are their natural acquisition fields? Finally, should all repositories be properly identified, and their fields of acquisition clearly demarcated?

When, in 1967, I approached the Rt. Hon. John G. Diefenbaker, the former Prime Minister of Canada, with a request that he present his papers to the Public Archives, I was shown a bundle of letters and telegrams each offering special inducements for custody of his papers. "Some are even willing to build me a mausoleum while I am still alive", Mr. Diefenbaker told me. The requests came from all over the country, in direct competition to the interests of my own institution which already has the papers of all but one Prime Minister of Canada.

An even stronger case in point is the Bertrand Russell Papers. When the papers were offered for sale some years ago, a Canadian university was able to outbid several less affluent British repositories, with the result that researchers in his native country now have to travel to this continent to study his works.

Perhaps the answer to this problem lies in some system of control. Control is an ugly word, which smacks of authoritarianism, and I am using it only to indicate a need for bringing order to the confusion that now reigns over the acquisition field. What is needed in fact is some sort of a registry system that would record and recognize the existence of archival and manuscript repositories. Such a registry might record also, in addition, the territorial and thematic demarcation of acquisition programs. A registry of repositories is already in existence as part of the Union List of Manuscripts project and of the NUCMC. However, a registry of pro-

grams, demarcating the territorial and thematic jurisdictions, is an infinitely more complex task. How does one determine the limits of programs? One way not to do it is to set up some sort of central authority making arbitrary decisions. No, this question must be solved in a more circumspect manner. One could begin by setting up a clearing-house of information on existing programs. The clearing-house could develop into a registry system officially recording the existence and scope of such programs. Auxiliary to the registry, there should be a "court" of arbitration on conflicting and overlapping programs. Such a system might go a long way to eliminating many causes of unethical conduct.

Elements of such a system are already in existence. They surfaced almost as an accident, a corollary to the Systematic National Acquisition Program (SNAP for short) of the Public Archives of Canada. The program itself was a response to questionable practices that began to manifest themselves in our areas of acquisition. Lacking adequate funds some repositories developed aggressive collecting habits. They became obsessed with death notices and obituaries of prominent individuals. A race developed to get to the widow before any other collector would "steal the march". The bereaved person became a target of condolences, telegrams of sorrow and personal calls and visits. Archivists and other collectors became conspicuous at funerals, often broaching the subject of custodianship of papers before the deceased was interred. Trustees of estates, too, were approached: there were the usual searches of wills and tracings of descendants. Inevitably discussions would centre on financial benefits: cash payments or tax credits. Many a widow found very quickly that her late husband's accumulated letters and other papers had considerable value. She also learned that there was usually more than one interested party to pay for the papers.

Many archivists who are active in the acquisition field consider it unethical to contact bereaved persons soon after the death. They wait a decent interval before discussing the papers. Unfortunately this does not always work. Time and again important collections are given or sold to representatives of less inhibited institutions. We at the Public Archives lost many collections of federal political figures because we refused to join in the stampede of the more aggressive collectors. We also refused to build special rooms, libraries or other memorials to entice donations. No, we will not build "mausoleums" even if the papers are those of prominent politicians.

But something had to be done to put our house in order. Important collections should not end up in institutions or in private hands where they remain untended. Repositories without proper custodial facilities and trained staff should not be permitted to acquire historical documents. The sheer aggressiveness and monetary affluence of collectors must not determine the destiny of national heritage. Responsible archivists should not be punished by their reluctance to attend funerals and to pressure widows to donate papers.

The SNAP program was our answer. To forestall unprincipled

collectors we decided to institute systematic searches for papers with the view of determining their ultimate destination while their owners were still alive. We began by developing criteria of individual achievements, the records of which should be preserved for posterity. For each discipline, profession or occupation we determined a level which, when attained by an individual, would signify certain extraordinary achievement. It might be argued, for example, that to become an admiral, a bishop, a government executive, a successful inventor, an Olympic medalist, a labour leader and so on, is a mark of certain ability and achievement. While there are many exceptions on both sides of the designated level, the incumbents and their superiors have generally distinguished themselves in their respective positions. Acting on these assumptions we prepared nominal lists of designated positions. Systematic approaches were made, and are still continued, to incumbents of these positions with a view to obtaining custody of their papers. Negotiations are carried on by mail, telephone and personal visits. Owners of significant papers are urged to agree to place their collections in designated archives with the time and the terms of transfer arranged in advance. This method ensures an orderly, rational and equitable planning for the future destination of the papers. In its ideal form the SNAP program envisages donations, sales or transfers of papers to repositories when the papers become dormant or inactive, or at the time of death of the owner. In the latter case appropriate provisions are made in the will. Widows and trustees of estates are thus free from worrying about the papers of the departed. Chasing widows may now revert to its more traditional use.

As already indicated the SNAP created potential conflicts with acquisition programs of other Canadian repositories. Unlike other programs that stress limited acquisitions of designated papers the SNAP from its very inception had no such restrictions. It reflected the concept of Total Archives which is firmly rooted in the tradition of the Public Archives of Canada. It is in fact, enshrined in the Public Archives Act of 1912. Under this law, "The Dominion Archivist...may acquire for the Public Archives all such original records, documents or other historical material of any kind, nature or description...". Under this broad mandate Dominion Archivists, Sir Arthur Doughty through Gustave Lanctot, W. Kaye Lamb to the present incumbent, W.I. Smith, succeeded in assembling in Ottawa a vast array of historical source materials including all types, categories, forms and media of textual, cartographic, pictorial and audio-visual documents. It was only natural therefore that, when the SNAP program was constituted in 1967, the concept of Total Archives was built into it. Even at the very beginning the SNAP included in its acquisition field all public, corporate and private papers, and other documents of national significance relating to arts, business, cinema, education, ethnic communities, judiciary, labour and sports. This was in addition to the traditional fields of politics, warfare, religion, exploration and trade and commerce. The new fields that are now being developed are women's rights and protection of environment. The concept of Total Archives extended the boundaries of the acquisition program in another direction. Collecting the Labour Archives, for example, now covers, in addition to all relevant union records, also the records

of cognate institutions, associations and clubs. It also includes the papers of individuals who occupied offices or were otherwise active in the labour movement.

A broad program such as the SNAP could not but arouse suspicions on the part of other repositories having similar ambitions. The suspicions were voiced strongly and frankly and had immediate effect on our program. We recognized the right of other repositories to collect papers and, as consequence, began to review our own policy.

The first step was to establish a demarcation of the SNAP vis-a-vis similar programs of provincial archives. Because of statutory provisions no problems were encountered in the domain of public records. Similarly there was general agreement on papers of public officials, both elected and appointed. All federal Prime Ministers, Cabinet ministers, Senators, Members of Parliament, federal judges, diplomats, soldiers and federal public servants were included in the national SNAP program. Corresponding officials who derived their authority from provincial governments were reserved for provincial archives. The same principle was applied to corporate bodies. Institutions, organizations, associations as well as business enterprises were divided into three categories: those of national, those of provincial and those of local significance. National corporate bodies were easy to define. Their membership and activities usually span the country or at least several provinces. They became the mandate of the national Archives. Companies or societies based and active in single provinces were recognized as the responsibility of provincial archives. Consensus was also reached on the right of local repositories to collect papers of local significance.

The principle of demarcation of papers on the basis of national versus provincial or local significance was extended to all other areas of the SNAP program: arts, business, ethnicity, ethnology, to name a few examples. While the principle is clear, the definition of what constitutes national as opposed to provincial or local significance is difficult. We have not been able to arrive at a workable definition of the terms. So we began to talk about the "reputations" of the individuals whose papers we sought. We made an effort to categorize selected artists, businessmen, academics, clergymen, ethnic leaders, sports figures, scientists, doctors, jurists, labour leaders, women's rights protagonists and literary figures as having either national, provincial or local reputations. But there was no sliderule that ensured impartiality. Reputations by their very nature are subjective, and there was no unanimity even within our own team. The potential for conflicts between the national archives and the various provincial archives, while considerably reduced, was not eliminated. The demarcation of acquisition fields among the official archival repositories was nonetheless a step in the right direction and will, no doubt, lessen possible areas of conflicts.

Efforts were also made to recognize acquisition programs of private repositories and university-based manuscript collections.

Because of the work on the Union List of Manuscripts our staff was aware of the existence and thematic relevance of these programs. Nevertheless, libraries that collect papers of national or provincial significance found themselves in conflict with the government repositories. At first the situation appeared hopeless. There was no way that the national archives, for example, would concede to a private repository the right to collect papers of federal cabinet ministers. Collectors of literary manuscripts, on the other hand, have no intention to stop acquiring the papers of authors just because the latter enjoy national reputation. There are no broad categories of papers that could be readily and exclusively allocated to, say, university libraries. If one examines the existing collections that have been assembled by librarians one finds a great diversity of themes, subject-matter and media. Anything from Biblical scrolls, medieval parchments, Hebraic Manuscripts, Gaelic poetry, fur trade journals, Rudyard Kipling collection, papers of philosophers, to a great variety of literary, scholastic, scientific and theological collections. While many collections are highly specialized and reflect the interest and expertise of academic staff, the majority of manuscript groups are general accumulations of discrete and often unrelated items.

The SNAP has recognized the right of libraries and other private repositories to develop and augment specialized collections for which important segments are already in their custody. A library that possesses manuscripts relating to designated themes, subjects, persons or events must be given an opportunity to complete the collection. Libraries should also be free to start collecting research materials in the areas in which they decide to specialize. Prior right should be conceded to university archives or libraries to collect the papers of academics and administrators they employ, but the inclusion in this category of papers of the alumni is less defensible.

In spite of apparent difficulties to demarcate the acquisition fields of private repositories there are some areas where compromises are possible. The difficulties could be overcome if all manuscript collections were properly identified in terms of their scope, theme, subject-matter and other characteristics. With this information on hand the demarcation of acquisition fields could be extended to the university libraries and private collections. This would no doubt reduce the many areas of friction and competition.

I may have gone as far as I should in playing up the need for ethical, orderly and non-competitive acquisition program. I painted for you a world of respect for mutual interests, rational coexistence of acquisition programs and tranquility of guaranteed sources of manuscripts. But as Hugh Dempsey pointed out, "if each of us had our own protected empires, it could make us complacent or lazy Healthy competition can make us better capable of resisting the bombardment of private collectors, of status-seeking non-archival agencies.... Once a group is aware that there may be competition...it is probably going to act a little more quickly in the acquisition of papers that do become available".(1)

1 Hugh A. Dempsey, "Acquisition Policy: Competition or Cooperation?". The Canadian Archivist. Vol. 2, No. 1, 1970. p.32.