

CHAIRMAN'S MESSAGE

As my last official duty as Chairman of the Archives Section for 1973-1974, it is my pleasure to prepare this brief message for the members of the Section. The past year has been a reasonably good one for the Archives Section, and I think we can be pleased with the progress that has been made. The Section carried on its usual activities through the year with a number of committees working hard on tasks which were assigned to them, two training courses being held in Ottawa, a very full and interesting programme being presented at the annual meeting in Toronto and, perhaps most significant of all, the work which was carried on by the Committee of the Future. This Committee did a great deal of work and has paved the way for the formation of a separate association during the coming year. In addition, many members of the Section participated in preparations for the annual meeting of the Society of American Archivists, held in Toronto in October.

One of the sessions of the S.A.A. meeting in Toronto was of particular interest to me, and I have considered it to be significant enough to make it the principal subject of this message. The session in question dealt with the development of a strategy for documenting a national culture. The principal Canadian speaker on the panel, Hugh Taylor, presented an excellent paper on the development of archives in Canada which I hope many members of the Section will have an opportunity to read. We should be proud in Canada of the progress which we have made in developing an archival strategy and, for that reason, I think it is important that members of the profession, particularly the younger members, have an opportunity to read the paper which Hugh Taylor presented at that session.

My concern at the present time, however, is with the capacity of our present system to meet new challenges and to define other strategies for more systematic preservation of and access to archival materials. As a Provincial Archivist in Canada, this matter has become one of very great concern to me. I am particularly concerned about the nature and variety of research demands which are being placed on archives in this country, and about our ability to meet these demands. Our archival strategy in Canada has been very closely associated with

traditional patterns of historical research, but there are strong indications that this pattern is changing very rapidly. In this connection, I would like to refer to a statement made by Mr. Taylor in his paper. At one point, he referred to "the decline of national and truly political history, written with a centralist perspective, in favour of regional, urban and local studies".

Anyone who is familiar with the tenor of historical research, and indeed social science research, in Canada today is aware of this phenomenon. More and more, the social scientists, and in particular the historians, are turning away from the broad national subjects of research and are concentrating on in-depth local studies. This is true not only of students at the graduate level but also at the level of some of our more senior and respected historians. Very often these studies are of a quantitative kind, and even when they are not, they almost always rely on sources which are available only at the local level.

These sources include, among others, such things as assessment records, poll lists, tax records of various kinds, hospital and health care records, all varieties of social welfare records, land registration and land use records, bills of sale and chattel mortgages, and on and on the examples can be cited. As almost anyone who is at all familiar with public administration in Canada is aware, virtually all of these records fall outside the Federal jurisdiction. They are almost exclusively records which fall under the purview of provincial and municipal administrations.

No one can deny the marvellous job which has been done by the Public Archives of Canada during the past century in developing an archival strategy within its sphere of operation. A great tragedy of the present situation is that the provinces and municipalities have not developed at an equal pace. Given the fact that research in the social sciences will undoubtedly continue to develop in this area in the future, it is indeed sad to consider that only two of Canada's provinces have conducted an adequate records management program for any length of time in the past.

Lest I sound too pessimistic, I should hasten to admit that progress is being made in developing records management techniques and programs in the provinces and major cities of Canada. The Province of Alberta has made a good beginning in this direction, Saskatchewan and Ontario have been operating effective programs for some time, the Province of Quebec is beginning to make progress in this area, and the framework has been established for an adequate program in the Province of New Brunswick. There are other jurisdictions, however, where very little has been done.

As far as municipal records are concerned, the picture is not so bright. The fact of the matter is that fewer than half a dozen cities in this country have been operating anything approaching an adequate records management program. The cities of Toronto, Vancouver, Montreal and Quebec are operating programs, and possibly one or two others. As far as the vast majority of municipal records in this country are concerned, however, very little is being done in any systematic way to preserve the large bulk of records that relate so closely to activities of people in their day-to-day lives.

In spite of the commendable job which has been done at the national level in developing an archival strategy in Canada, I am very much afraid that the academic community in this country is soon going to become very disenchanted with the archival profession unless something is done soon to preserve the type and the quantity of records at the local level which researchers are beginning to demand.

In making these comments, it is certainly not my intention to negate in any way the good progress which has been made. The development of the Diffusion Program by the Public Archives of Canada in cooperation with provincial archives is indeed a step in the right direction and an attempt to find a solution to the problem of making records of national importance accessible in all parts of the country. The point I wish to emphasize here is that there are vast quantities of records at the provincial and municipal levels in this country which have not been cared for in the past and which are not being cared for in the present. As I see it, this is the great challenge that faces the archival profession in Canada today. There is no doubt that members of the profession have the knowledge and expertise to solve this problem, and I am optimistic enough to think that the necessary financial resources can be found. What we seem to lack at the present time is the will to attack the problem.

I do not feel that this is the proper forum to discuss the details of how this problem might be solved. It is probably sufficient to say that, through the agency of the new archival association which is being established, with the help of regional groups in various parts of the country and, hopefully, with the assistance of the expertise that has been developed at the Public Archives of Canada, the archival profession must make some effort to identify the problem and to develop a strategy for preserving and making accessible provincial and municipal records in this country. Pressure must be brought to bear on the jurisdictions which have failed in their obligation to preserve their records systematically and, distasteful as it may appear to be, the members of the archival profession must take the lead in this kind of

activity.

If we do not rise to meet this challenge, we can be assured that other people in other professions will come along to fill the gap. If archivists do not attack and attempt to solve this records management problem, it is almost certain that the systems people and management analysts will step in to do it for us. If this should happen, I feel that it would be to the great detriment of historical research in this country and that it would be a serious blow to the growth and development of the archival profession.

We have here an opportunity to demonstrate that archivists are not keepers of records merely in the passive sense that we will preserve only what is given to us. On the contrary, I feel that we are keepers of records in the sense that we have an obligation to go out and identify what must be preserved for the benefit of historical research. If archivists in Canada do not demonstrate that ability as it relates to the preservation of provincial and municipal records, I feel that we will have missed a golden opportunity and that we will have done so to our own great detriment as a profession.

Michael Swift
Chairman of the Archives Section
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