

CONTINUING EDUCATION FOR ARCHIVISTS

BY

EDWIN WELCH

CITY OF OTTAWA ARCHIVES

A quarter of a century ago when I trained to become an archivist the year's course which I took contained no mention of machine readable archives or audio-visual records or even archival photographs. So far as I can remember we had a few words of advice on the administration of record offices which was chiefly memorable for the suggestion that women archivists should not wear nail polish. In the subsequent examination our knowledge of administrative problems was tested by being asked to write a letter to an owner of private papers seeking their deposit in our record office. Despite these deficiencies, it was still a good training course for archivists at that time. I still believe that it was the best available then because it was relevant to the type of work we were likely to enter and it told us about the archives we would encounter there.

There were other similar courses in England at that time for those who could get grants, but the only alternative training available both then, and now, was that usually described as "sitting next to Nelly". This was not an internship as we know it in North America, but a job which provided some training and a low salary. The amount of training depended on the competence of the chief archivist and the time which he or she could spare for teaching. Both the training courses and the internal training produced some very good archivists, but neither method can be considered adequate twenty-five years later. It was adequate then because computers, cameras and tape recorders were hardly thought of as possible sources of archives. Few English record offices then had archives later in date than about 1880, and I still remember the mental shock after a long apprenticeship to medieval episcopal records, of actually handling and cataloguing twentieth century documents.

If archival science has changed so much in so short a time, there are two questions which must inevitably

be asked:

- (1) Has training kept pace with these changes?
- (2) Can we be sure that equally great changes will not be seen before the end of the century?

I believe that the answer to the first question is that it has not done so, and to the second that we shall probably see even greater changes. So it is most important that training shall be improved at once. For various reasons, often beyond our control, training has continued to follow the patterns established in Europe and North America more than twenty-five years ago. Such changes as have occurred in the curricula have followed rather than preceded the problems which arose. Therefore the archivist has normally been in a position of weakness. He is suddenly faced with a pile of archives of unusual format and purpose which have been abandoned on his doorstep by an administrator, rather than knowing what he will receive for years ahead and being able to influence their format and value to future historians.

Most archivists are only at the beginning of changes which they often did not initiate or even anticipate. We are just realizing the implications of the new kinds of materials which began to replace paper and ink about thirty years ago. We do not yet know what results information retrieval systems may have on future archives, or whether the use of lasers will once again alter methods of communication. We can be sure that there will be increasing demands by users of archives over widening areas of information, but we have yet to see a computer printout come between a genealogist and his favourite records. We can also be sure that there will be changes in the methods of conservation and storage of archives. Lamination and mobile shelving are probably only temporary solutions to a problem which grows more acute each year.

The time which is devoted to basic training for archivists varies widely from country to country. While North America, on the whole, prefers eight weeks or less, Britain requires at least one academic year, West Germany at least two years and France four years. While the last is probably excessive even for the most senior post, the first is lamentably short for the most junior. But the great difficulty about training syllabuses is not the time span so much as the way in which they acquire subjects which have little relevance to the day to day work of an archivist. If it is given in a library school then courses such as bibliography or sources for local history are generally included. If it is given in a history department then one can expect to find too much on medieval palaeography and medieval administration. While I believe that these subjects are all of some value, it is

tragic to see that very relevant subjects have been excluded from the syllabus. The only excuse seems to be that the institution already has teachers in bibliography or palaeography, but would have to recruit others to teach the more relevant subjects.

If we are to train archivists for the future rather than the past of our profession then I suggested that we should get away from the conventional pattern of lectures in an academic environment alternating with practical work in a repository, which is the best that we can offer at the moment. Too often the lecturer is either a professor with no practical knowledge of archives or an archivist whose professional experience is confined solely to one institution. There is usually too much didacticism and too little discussion. Excellent as Schellenberg and Jenkinson are for the practising archivist, their words are not a substitute for thought to be offered to our trainees. Too often the practical training (such as it is) is at the mercy of conflicting claims on the archivist's time. As an archivist in England I never felt that I had sufficient time to explain in depth to a trainee what I was trying to do and why. Other archivists must have had the same problem and there are stories in circulation of trainees abandoned in a corner by overworked staff.

There are new techniques in higher education which we should consider when trying to reform methods of training. Some are expensive and require careful planning, but others are so simple and cheap that they could be employed widely already. In the audio-visual field there is very little available at present. The Public Archives has a good general film on its work and there are two films on conservation work in England (neither of which is now available). Yet if several repositories of different sizes and purpose produced thirty minute films about their operation, students could get a better insight into their work than they could from several lectures or the usual half-day visit. There is probably even less in the way of slides and tape recordings even though these can be produced much more cheaply than films. They have the additional merit of being much easier to replace when wear and tear or changed circumstances make it necessary. Tape recordings are used for internal staff training in the Worcestershire Record Office in England, but nowhere else to my knowledge. Training slides are only obtainable for teaching records management, and I can find none designed for young archivists. Even slides of typical documents are hard to obtain, although their use by students would save wear and tear on the original. The Bodleian Library at Oxford and the University of Durham's Department of Palaeography and Diplomacy are noteworthy exceptions to this, but their fine reproductions of medieval manuscripts have little relevance for North American archivists. Some

Archives make it difficult to use ordinary photocopies for teaching by imposing absurd copyright restrictions on the reproduction of their material.

It should be possible to build up a collection of other teaching aids at no expense at all. Archivists in many parts of the world were most generous in sending plans of their buildings, specimens of finding aids, forms and labels and details of equipment to the University of Ottawa course, but this has had to be done on the basis of personal friendships. It would be useful, for example, to have for sale a portfolio of large scale plans of recent archive buildings with a brief account from each archivist of their advantages and problems. The plans printed by Michel Duchemin and Victor Gondos in their books on the subject are too small for effective criticism even if the comments were available. Their books suffer too from a certain dogmatism which, I fear, is a failing of all archivists.

These and other aids are not a substitute for teaching, but they are a means of breaking away from the formal lecture pattern. By offering students a selection of material from different sources and by inviting their comments in a seminar, it is much easier to discover if they have thought about the problem rather than reproduced in parrot fashion the lecturer's own opinions. If catalogues and finding aids are available in considerable numbers it is possible to replace that overrated exercise whereby each student is given the same box of papers and asked for his comments on it. Instead they can be given to take home a set of cards, of which each card represents an item in the record group, and asked to prepare a finding aid. In this way the techniques of arrangement and listing can be mastered separately from the physical labour of sorting records and from attendance at the nearest Archives. If it is possible to arrange access to the university computer, then students could be encouraged, after a basic training in programming, to experiment with computerized indexes and finding aids in the same way.

This kind of training assumes that each student already has some experience in an Archives before taking the course. Even a few weeks are sufficient to help the student, and probably a year is the longest period which should expire before attending a training course. Since most post-graduate training courses are normally no more than a single academic year, it is probable that no longer course would be attractive to students in North America. Thirty weeks is all too short a time to provide basic training, and even this period can be eaten into by examinations. On the whole I prefer continuous assessment and assignments to examinations. Assignments can be of a more practical nature than examinations. They can lead the students into areas which the teacher has only touched on. They can be arranged to draw on the student's

own experience, by asking him to consider a particular archival problem in a context which he already knows. It is one way of providing that basic expertise which every archivist must have whether he is dealing with political papers or municipal archives or scientific reports or audio-visual records.

If we provide this kind of basic training then it becomes much clearer that an archivist's training does not end when he leaves the university for his first permanent post. This is another serious defect in training at the present time. For the first twenty years after I qualified as an archivist I cannot remember any formal training which was offered to practising archivists. All new recruits should be offered a sound basic training. Those archivists who have had no formal training should be given the opportunity of taking extension courses. These could include correspondence courses, tape recordings and summer schools on a similar basis to the British Open University or the University of the Air. Finally there should be specialized training sessions for more experienced archivists. These would normally fall into two main categories - training for increased responsibility in administration, and the extension of expertise to the new problems facing the archivist.

Administration is a difficult subject to teach, but new problems cannot be approached through traditional methods of teaching at all. Instead I suggest that we should return to that pillar of the Victorian education system - education by mutual discussion. If it is properly organized a discussion group of twenty or thirty archivists can achieve far more than a larger group listening to a formal lecture which is followed by a question and answer session. Experienced archivists have a great potential ability for the improvement of the profession, but they are usually frustrated by the urgency of their immediate tasks. There is always another visitor to see when he should be writing his acquisitions policy. There is always another funding aid to be prepared when he should be planning a new archives building. To get archivists away from their immediate tasks and put them in a stimulating environment is very rewarding. Even in a two-day symposium the results should be excellent, but if we can also arrange for selected senior archivists to spend a sabbatical term in suitable academic surroundings they should be even better. Two brief experiments in England have convinced me of the merits of both plans.

In conclusion I would like to make three points about education for archivists. The first is non-controversial. Very few archivists would consider that formal training is unnecessary and most would readily admit that it is still inadequate on both sides of the Atlantic. My second point is more controversial. We fail most in not persuading young archivists to think about their job.

Teaching tends to be far too concerned with how and hardly interested in why. We need to know the underlying principles of what we do, rather than the standard practice in a particular Archives. Finally, education for archivists is something which should never end. Since the world of the archivist is changing, we must be ready to anticipate those changes. We need continuing education.

WORTH REMEMBERING

Letter from A.G. Doughty, Dominion Archivist to the Archives' agent in the Maritime provinces, W.C. Milner
16 May, 1917.

Confidential and non-official

When I was in England, I heard someone who had come from Nova Scotia say that there was a fight for the papers and that you were threatened with all sorts of proceedings. I stated that I did not care anything about the proceedings so long as he gets the papers. To be prosecuted in the course of getting hold of papers so long as you get them is a matter for rejoicing and if you did advertise your triumph I am not going to blame you. You must remember the mysterious manner in which you have gathered papers has aroused a great deal of animosity, not because your opponents have any particular love or regard for the papers but simply because you have been able to do what they could not do....

The only time that I have been inclined to find fault with you was for not sending the things to Ottawa quicker. Because if you once get them out of the reach of your opponents they would never get them back again without armed force.

(P.A.C., R.G. 37, vol. 18).