

Archives In Canada

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IT IS a very great delight for me to be able to attend this meeting of American archivists and historians and I esteem it a special honour to represent Canada, in so far as the gathering is international in character. Canadians have never been able to regard the Americans as foreigners. We usually refer to them as "our cousins." This easy relationship enables us to offer them greetings of special affection, criticisms of unusual warmth, or other exchanges of particular intimacy. Since Canada has in part, a strong Latin tradition we have also a kindly neighborly interest in Mexico and the other great states of the south.

We have met here to discuss problems which have a common or universal significance as well as national and local importance. You have asked me to make my contribution by describing briefly the Archives situation in Canada.

Although Archives to most people represent an obscure and remote institution which is narrowly specialized in its organization and serves a relatively few people, actually they reflect faithfully the life, spirit and history of a people. The dynamic which creates archives and maintains their vitality springs from three primary sources: a sense of tidiness, a sense of tradition and a sense of crisis.

The most obvious source is a sense of tidiness and efficiency which carried into government business means insistence on proper classification and filing of all documents, their maintenance under good physical conditions so long as they are needed for current reference, and the permanent preservation of all important ones. Some people are born tidy; some achieve tidiness though not without bitter experience; and some have tidiness forcibly thrust upon them. So important is this element of tidiness that some archivists look upon themselves mainly as ministering or avenging angels to glorified filing clerks. Their paradise has concrete walls, steely gates, and descending stairs. Over the portals might well be the text from Herodotus, "My duty is to report all that is said, though I am not obliged to believe it all alike."

The second source of dynamic creative power is the sense of tradition. When a people begin to feel the spiritual emptiness of a

present which is unassociated with a past, when they begin to realize the sum total of past achievement as compared with present gain, or when they begin to take a pride in the fact that their present striving is in line with what already has been done then they begin to look around for some documentation which will unite the generations, total up the score, and provide a pattern of life in its time perspective. When this sense of tradition becomes intensified the development of archives receives a fresh impetus from outside the circles of officialdom and beyond technical and professional groups. At its worst the sense of tradition serves supercilious snobbery; at its best it re-enforces and invigorates the whole of the body politic. This impetus may indeed threaten to carry the archivist beyond the range of documents into the field of museum display. All sorts of momentous trifles which visibly recall the past, which embody in a special sense some event, or which symbolize a spirit and an age, may establish claims for preservation. They have an immediate appeal to the visual sense. They share with documents the common dust of the past so it is not surprising that a tradition-conscious public should regard both with equal esteem and archivists get them mixed up in their collections.

The third source of dynamic in the development of archives is the sense of crisis. If an institution, a community or a country feels itself in an advanced or exposed situation having to justify or defend its position it is more likely to ensure the careful preservation of all those precious documents which contain the basis of its faith, the story of its survival, the framework of its government and the arguments against its enemies. Out of the records of the past are distilled the essences — and the brews — which stimulate the group to new efforts, new conquests or new heroisms. The first task of every resurgent national group in the nineteenth century, for example, was to assemble its literary remains and organize its historical records. In the records were to be found the greatest weapons in the social armoury, so powerful indeed that it is dangerous to allow the ignorant and the malicious to play around with them.

If I am correct in my assumption, how can these be applied to illustrate the history of Archives development in Canada? To begin with, the sense of tidiness has not been a very marked feature of Canadian life. Until very recently Canada has been predominantly an agricultural and pioneer community, a state of affairs which as a rule is not conducive to habits of tidy bookkeeping or indeed to tidiness in general. The best kept records of our early days were

probably those of great merchant companies like the Hudson's Bay Company to whom records were a necessity, or to institutions like the Catholic Church, whose bookkeeping of souls contain many items of an earthy and contemporary flavor. With the industrialization of the country and the continuous prod of the income tax forms the Canadian people are probably become more conscious of the value of systematic record preservation. The vast extension of governmental activity in federal, provincial and municipal fields is creating now problems of recording and preservation so that governments are being faced with a situation which will eventually require the application and elaboration of archive techniques. While the pressure is rising it has not yet created a sense of emergency but I feel free to predict that on the basis of efficiency and tidiness alone in a few years' time the problem of archives will be placed on the list marked "urgent."

The sense of tradition in Canada, with the exception of certain regions, is not highly developed. For the greater part of our history these traditions had their roots in European memories particularly in Great Britain. In the province where I grew up British history, for example, was more popular in our secondary education than was Canadian history. In studying it we never regarded it as anything but our own history. This extension of an traditional interest beyond the seas undoubtedly divided and weakened our interest in things purely Canadian.

With respect to crisis no state on the Western hemisphere has had a more unruffled history. Since 1763 there have been no forcible transfers of territory. On only two occasions have our neighbors to the south marched in and out again. We have had two double internal skirmishes which our historians glorify by the name of "rebellion" but which caused only small and equal amounts of blood and ink to flow. Only in the case of the French speaking population of Quebec has there been a continuing sense of defensive alertness and sensitivity to their historical position as an ethnic group. Elsewhere up to 1914 the Canadians felt profoundly secure, flanked by the British navy and the Monroe Doctrine. To win complete latitude of self-government they were content to use constitutional arguments which in the hands of lawyers were effective enough but which left the ordinary people somewhat bored. Since 1914 and particularly since the events of 1940 and 1945 the situation has changed and Canadians are now beginning to realize that they must take upon themselves grave responsibility and make serious decisions.

The sense of crisis is beginning to emerge and if I am not mistaken this will mean that they will begin seriously to take stock of themselves, re-examine and reassess all aspects of their national life including their history. This must inevitably lead to a fresh and more intensive interest in Archive organization.

While the larger hopes lie in the future let me review briefly what has been done in the past. In the Canadian situation we must keep in mind that prior to 1867 there were various areas and colonies subject to the British Crown each of which had its own distinctive history. After 1867 we have the Dominion of Canada and the dependent territory of the Dominion, the Dominion itself is composed of provinces, now nine in number. The six older provinces were former separate colonies, the three newer provinces were carved out of the territory.

The colonial governments were not particularly careful in the preservation of their records — Fire, carelessness and indefinite borrowing were responsible for irreparable losses. Since the focal point of colonial government was in England, some of the most complete and valuable records of the Colonial period are to be found in the Public Records office in London.

The oldest colony now included in Canada is Nova Scotia. Since its occupation by the British was closely associated with the other Atlantic colonies it has sometimes been referred to as the "Fourteenth Colony." The fact that it did not join the other thirteen colonies in revolt against the motherland has been the subject of considerable enquiry — the opinion now generally held is that there were too many "neutral yankees" there! In any case there has always been close social relationship between Nova Scotia and New England. The New Englanders have always been acutely aware of their historic position and incidentally they have acquired through individual effort a great many family documents from Nova Scotia.

Nova Scotia was the first area to set up an archival organization. It may be that the unique position of Halifax as naval base, capital, and trading centre stimulated the sense of tradition. In 1857 the House of Assembly appointed Thomas B. Akins as commissioner to collect and classify documents. His reports were published in the Journals of the Assembly. In addition a valuable volume entitled *Nova Scotia Archives* was published in 1869. When he died his collection was maintained by the curator of the Provincial Museum. Two additional volumes of *Archives* were published in 1900 and 1918 by the Nova Scotia Historical Society. Finally in

1929 a well thought-out Public Archives Act was passed providing for a non-political administration by a Board of Trustees. A proper Archives building was opened in 1931 and the same year a very competent Canadian historian, Professor D. C. Harvey was placed in charge. The First Archives Report was published in 1932. Since then the work has progressed in a most satisfactory manner. The collection includes not only public documents, but also private records, and there is even an historical museum within the Archives Building to which the Archivist extends a kindly tolerance.

The neighbouring province of New Brunswick has not fared as well. At one time it was part of the colony of Nova Scotia. Its separation was due largely to the influx of loyalists fleeing from the wrath of the successful American rebels. Its sense of tradition found institutional expression in the establishment of the New Brunswick Museum of St. John which is the oldest Museum Foundation in Canada, having been opened to the public in 1842. A great deal of archival material found its way there. This however is not an adequate substitute for a proper Public Archives System. The present Legislative Building is not fireproof. New Buildings are now being planned and it is hoped that provision will soon be made for the organization and permanent preservation in fireproof vaults.

The third maritime province is the tiny, complacent Prince Edward Island. It has preserved a considerable quantity of public records in the Provincial Building in Charlottetown but in this garden of green there is no developed sense of speed, urgency or crisis and they have not yet got around to establishing a snug, little Archives office to match their snug, little island.

In Quebec the situation is different. Here the French speaking population has a lively sense of its unique historical tradition. The people never cease to marvel how a conquered dispirited group of 60,000 in 1760 has now come to be a strong self-conscious folk numbering more than three million souls. They feel that the way of life, more Latin than Anglo Saxon, which they have preserved, and the political liberties which they have been granted are in constant danger of attack. Thus they value their records of the past and from them generate a powerful will to survive. The records themselves are abundant both public and private. Among the latter the records of church foundations are particularly valuable.

Soon after Confederation there was appointed a deputy regis-

trar who was responsible for the care of provincial records. In 1920 an Archives Act was passed and an assiduous scholar of provincial history, Pierre Georges Roy, was made Archivist. Since then there has been printed a vast amount of information regarding the Quebec Archives. This has appeared in the *Rapports de l'archiviste*; the *Inventaires*; and the *Bulletins des recherches historiques*.

In the neighbouring province of Ontario there was considerable local historical interest here and there but the government was slow to realize the importance of the systematic care of its historical resources. In 1903 however there was established a Bureau of Archives authorized to acquire records from various departments of government as well as private collections through gifts and purchase. Under the direction of Col. Alex. Fraser there was considerable activity and annual *Reports* began to appear containing documents and historical studies. In 1921 the Bureau was changed into a Department of Archives and in 1928 it became a Department of Public Records and Archives. A very considerable amount of material was assembled and catalogued. In 1934 due to one of those unfortunate political indispositions which sometimes occur more than half the Archives staff was dismissed and the Department has not yet fully recovered from the loss of continuity and technical help.

The Province of British Columbia had its beginnings far removed from the other colonies which entered the Dominion. As a comparatively isolated British outpost in the Pacific ocean it had a strong sense of its own importance and placed great emphasis on its English connection. In 1863 a parliamentary library was established and the librarian was active in the collecting of historical material. In 1908 the office of Archivist was added to Librarian. After 1910 Reports began to be issued. In 1915 a library and office building was opened. A special feature of its collection is the possession of the large number of printed books and pamphlets dealing not only with the Province but with north-west America generally. It is possibly the most complete provincial collection in Canada. In 1914 the publication of a series was begun under its auspices known as *Memoirs*. These are documentary and historical studies.

The prairie and wooded areas between British Columbia and Ontario is the last portion of Canada to be developed. Indeed the northern section is still under territorial government. Manitoba

was the first province to be organized while Saskatchewan and Alberta came into being as late as 1905.

In Manitoba the Legislative Library has become the collecting center for the historical records of the Province. In the Legislative Library Act of 1940 provision was made for the establishment of a division of Public Records and Archives. This division has not yet been fully developed.

A somewhat similar situation exists in Alberta as in Manitoba. There is a good deal of material in the Legislative library but no adequate provision has been made for its care, and in particular no systematic arrangements have been worked out for the transfer and preservation of inactive governmental files.

In Saskatchewan the situation was somewhat unique. The capital of the Province is Regina. The provincial university is in Saskatoon about two hundred miles to the north-west. The chief source of public records is at the seat of government, the chief interest in their permanent preservation and study was at the seat of learning. It was decided therefore in 1945 when a comprehensive Archives Act was passed to set up an Archives Board which would be composed of representatives of the Government and representatives of the University. The Provincial Archivist was to be appointed by the University with the approval of the Archives Board. An office of the Archives was to be established at the University. The first concern of the Archives Board is to ensure the preservation of all important public records. They also hope to add to this private collections. An important feature of the programme is the use of a microfilming camera. Attention is first of all to be paid to the old newspaper files of the province.

So much for the Provinces. The Dominion itself became mildly interested in archives soon after Confederation. In 1872 an Archives branch was established. It is interesting to recall that at first it was placed under the minister of Agriculture. The Archivist then appointed Douglas Brymner, who held the office for thirty years. His successor, Arthur S. Doughty, appointed in 1904 held office for thirty-one years. These two men established the character of the Canadian Archives. In 1906 the Archives building was erected in Ottawa. It contained a division of manuscripts in which there are some 25,000 volumes. A great many of these are transcripts of public and private collections in France and Great Britain. For a considerable time a Canadian representative was established in the Public Records Office in London. The Archives has also a division of maps and charts including some 22,000 items. There

is also a historical library containing some 35,000 books and 10,000 pamphlets. There is an interesting division of Canadian prints and engravings. There is also a bindery and a department for the reproduction of documents.

An important feature of the Archives activity was its publications which are familiar to all students of Canadian history. These contain documents, calendars, catalogues and other guides. It is a reflection of the Canadian atmosphere mildly resistant to Downing street that several volumes were devoted to documents relating to the Constitutional history of Canada.

After 1935 archives interest in Ottawa became centered in the departmental records of the Federal government. The disposal of non-active files was becoming a matter of considerable concern. In June 1936 authority was given by the Treasury Board for the automatic destruction of certain scheduled classes of records which had been retained for a definite time. Certain departments did not submit schedules for this purpose and proceeded with destruction under some general regulation or sought authority intermittently from the Governor-General-in-Council. The Great War tremendously increased the pressure on the space required by the Government in Ottawa as well as adding a huge bulk of war records. Thus the question of procedure for destruction, the problem of permanent preservation of important files, and the matter of recording the war effort all became more acute and urgent. In June 1944, an informal advisory committee was set up at the request of the Prime Minister. Finally on September 20, 1945 a standing Committee on Public Records was established by Order in Council. This committee meets at intervals of about two months. It is composed of nine members representing various departments of the government to which is added two professional historians recommended by the Canadian Historical Association. It has concerned itself with the question of procedures for disposal of records, procedures for microfilming, co-ordination of the preparation of narratives of war activities, and the problem of the eventual integration of the Public Archives, which already exists, with a Public Records system which will ensure the continuous and orderly transfer of all important non-current departmental files into the custody of a technically trained staff who will ensure their preservation and availability for historical research. The Committee has considered some situations which required immediate attention. In a series of circulars issued to Departments it has attempted to clarify procedures. It has investigated the possibilities of microfilming. In this as in other mat-

ters, it has received valuable help and advice from Dr. Buck and other officials in Washington. The problem of integration still remains a difficult one. The need for more building space is part of this problem and because construction facilities are in such urgent demand elsewhere it seems unlikely that the emergent situation will be overcome for a few years at least.

To sum up this over-all and necessarily sketchy picture of archives development in Canada I may say that there is an increasing awareness of the importance of archives. Prof. George Brown in particular, through the Canadian Historical Association and the *Canadian Historical Review* has done much to stimulate interest. The contemporary development in the United States has been of very great value to us. There is still considerable arrears to be made up and a vast amount of current work to be done. We need more building space. We need more technically trained help. We need more emphasis on the documentary and public records aspect of archives work.

If archives reflect the spirit of a people the future development will depend on how far Canadians are aware of the value of their natural resources in records as well as in gold. A proper respect for the past is a sure foundation for confidence in the future. But this, I am told, is a scientific age. Lord Bacon is sometimes credited with having placed science on a practical and progressive level so I will conclude with one of his pronouncements, "Antiquity deserveth that reverence, that men should make a stand thereupon, and discover what is the best way; but when the discovery is well taken then to make progression."