

# Provincial Archives in Canada

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**S**EVEN years have elapsed since a general review of the Canadian archival scene appeared in the pages of the *American Archivist*.<sup>2</sup> During this period there have been significant developments in the national archives and in a number of the provinces. The purpose of this article is to summarize the progress to date, with particular reference to the provincial scene.

For the nation's central repository, the Public Archives of Canada in Ottawa, these have been years of notable progress in terms of increased holdings, improved facilities, and greater service to government departments and to scholars. The institution has now become, for the first time, a full-fledged public record office, thus realizing the hopes long entertained by members of the staff and friends of the Archives throughout the country. This development has been made possible by the adoption of improved disposal procedures for public records, by the provision of a new records building, and by the addition of carefully selected and well-trained archives personnel. As a result there have been very large and significant accessions of departmental records, and this is but the beginning. "The new Records Building," the Dominion Archivist reports, "should enable the Archives to acquire and screen all post-Confederation [1867] departmental records which are no longer required for day-to-day office use."<sup>3</sup>

Associated with this development has been the rearrangement of both official records and other collections, based on an adaptation of the principle of the "record group" developed by the National Archives of the United States. A series of preliminary inventories for all the record groups is now being published, with the object

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<sup>2</sup> George Simpson, "Archives in Canada," in *American Archivist*, 11:358-366 (Oct. 1948).

<sup>3</sup> See W. Kaye Lamb, "The Federal Archival Scene," in Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1953, pp. 61-68; and W. E. D. Halliday, "The Public Records of Canada: Recent Developments in Control and Management," in *American Archivist*, 13:102-108 (Apr. 1950).

of providing a concise, consistent description of everything in the Manuscript Division. These will enable a historian anywhere in the country to obtain an overall view of resources for research.

The ease with which large masses of records may be copied on microfilm is of particular significance for the Public Archives of Canada, since so much pre-Confederation Canadian history must be written from sources in the United Kingdom and France. In the period under review a vast amount of important new material from public and private collections has been made available in this way to Canadian scholars.

This progress by Canada's central archives is important not only for its own sake but also because it provides a standard for measuring the adequacy of provincial establishments. In addition to this, sound archival practice at the national level will in the long run have a salutary influence throughout the country. Meanwhile there have been some encouraging developments on the provincial scene.<sup>4</sup>

In two provinces improved quarters have been secured. In Toronto a new building for the Ontario Archives has been provided through the cooperation of a philanthropist and the provincial government. Though the Archives shares this building with an art gallery, the facilities are much better than the former ones, and new microfilm, photostating, and laminating equipment has been installed. In Saskatchewan, the Saskatoon branch of the Archives, on the campus of the provincial university, will be housed in a new library building now under construction. Minor improvements are also projected in the quarters at the capital city, Regina.

There is also encouraging evidence of an increased awareness of the importance of public records administration. Four of the 10 provinces have recently passed legislation dealing with this matter. Newfoundland, once Britain's oldest colony and now Canada's newest province, has a Public Records Act.<sup>5</sup> This legislation establishes a Board of Trustees as a body corporate with wide powers to acquire historical records both public and private and with wide regulatory powers for the performance of its duties. The definition of public records is broad, covering "all books, papers, records, documents, structures, erections, monuments, objects, materials, articles or things of historic, artistic, scientific, or traditional interest." The law makes no specific reference to

<sup>4</sup> Willard E. Ireland, "The Provincial Archival Scene," in Canadian Historical Association, *Annual Report*, 1953, pp. 69-76.

<sup>5</sup> Statutes, 1951, no. 68. Newfoundland became a province in 1949.

government records disposal procedures other than the grant of power to the Lieutenant-Governor in Council to transfer such records to the board, but the board's regulatory powers would seem to be general enough to enable it to institute an effective program.

Across the continent, in British Columbia, the legislature in 1953 amended the Public Documents Disposal Act to permit the establishment of a flexible and comprehensive system for managing government records.<sup>6</sup> Provision is made for a public documents committee consisting of the provincial archivist and three other persons, who are empowered to recommend retention and disposal measures to the cabinet or to the legislature; this will permit the adoption of a schedule or continuing authorization covering all the records in each department. The act also regulates the disposal of court records and provides for the transfer of non-current municipal and school-district records to the archives.

Saskatchewan legislation has been notable for its emphasis on public records management since the passage of its Archives Act in 1945. Various improvements have been introduced in the intervening years, and these are now embodied in a new consolidated act passed at the last session of the legislature.<sup>7</sup> The main change introduced this year is the establishment of the Archives Board as a body corporate. During the period under review, comprehensive records retention and disposal authorizations have been adopted for most of the departments and crown corporations, as well as for some of the courthouses.

Two important bills relating to public records were passed by the Manitoba legislature during its 1955 session. The first, the Public Records Act,<sup>8</sup> establishes a system for the protection of important records and the orderly disposal of valueless material. The scheduling of the records of a particular department for retention, destruction, or microfilming and destruction, is controlled by a documents committee. The committee consists of the head of the department or his representative, and representatives of the Legislative Library (which administers the archives), the Treasury Department, the Comptrolling and Audit Branch, and the Attorney General's Department. Schedules or recommendations adopted by the documents committee must be approved by the premier and the leaders of all parties in the legislature before being given the

<sup>6</sup> Statutes, 1953, 2d sess., chap. 27.

<sup>7</sup> Statutes, 1955, chap. 84.

<sup>8</sup> Statutes, 1955, chap. 57.

force of law by an order in council. The act envisages the extensive use of microfilm to conserve storage space and contains a section relating to the admissibility of photographs of documents as evidence in court cases.

In the field of municipal government records, Manitoba has pioneered by the passage of an amendment to the Municipal Act.<sup>9</sup> This contains a comprehensive schedule of the various classes of records produced by municipalities and establishes retention periods varying from "permanent" to 1 year. Any municipal corporation may institute a records control program by adopting a bylaw bringing the schedule into force. This legislation, unique in Canada, will be welcomed by archivists, who have become increasingly concerned with encouraging good records practices in cities, towns, villages, and rural municipal units.

In general, British Columbia, Saskatchewan, Manitoba, and Ontario are the only provinces where the Archives is fully committed to the objective of functioning as a public records office and where the provincial archivist participates in records control procedures. And in British Columbia since 1951 the provincial archivist has administered the government's central microfilm bureau, which is in charge of the microphotography of all departmental records. In each of these provinces, however, the Archives preserves historical material other than public records. Indeed it would be impossible for any provincial establishment to confine its collections to public records and still retain the interest and support of the legislature and the public.

Five of the 10 provincial archives now have microfilming equipment. British Columbia leads in this field with its central microfilm bureau, servicing all government departments, under the direction of the provincial archivist. In Saskatchewan, as in British Columbia, microfilm facilities are used to copy all weekly newspapers, and in the former province the earliest rural and urban local government records have been filmed. To date, Manitoba, Ontario, and Nova Scotia have confined their efforts chiefly to microfilming newspaper files. This is no indication, however, of the extent to which microfilm is being used for reducing the bulk of provincial government records. Except in British Columbia, microfilming programs of varying extent are being undertaken independently by different departments, in some instances without the official knowledge of the provincial archivist.

This survey of progress during the past 7 years indicates that

<sup>9</sup> Statutes, 1955, chap. 46, s. 15.

the provincial archives are at various levels of advancement. Several of them are functioning at a high level of performance and this, reinforced by the standards set by the Public Archives of Canada, cannot but have a salutary influence on the weaker institutions. The establishment of an archives committee of the Canadian Historical Association in 1953 may further this development. The committee has promoted the exchange of information and the discussion of common problems. Composed of archivists who are members of the association, it provides the only practicable meeting place for most of the members of the archival profession in Canada.