

Archives of Newfoundland

By HARVEY MITCHELL¹

Memorial University of Newfoundland

ANYONE who has been entertained by Shaw's *Caesar and Cleopatra* will recall the scene in Act 2 when, onto a stage seething with excitement, there enters Theodotus, librarian and tutor to the young Ptolemy. He has come to beg Caesar to save the library of Alexandria, the first of the seven wonders of the world, threatened by the fire that is spreading from the burning ships in the harbor. Caesar challenges the presumption of this bibliophile, who a moment ago has shown little concern for human life. The dictator's response is that of the weary conqueror of worlds, the man who has seen much and who now, even while preparing for battle, pauses to give us his views of the past — thanks to the conventions of the drama. In this exchange between the sedentary man and the man of action we are treated to characteristic Shavian provocativeness. Shaw tells us that books that do not flatter mankind are burned by the common executioner; that the memory of mankind is shameful and it is better that it should burn; and that it is foolish to plead for a few sheepskins scrawled with errors, for the future is built on the ruins of the past. For Shaw the past is primarily the record of man's mistakes, and man's recognition of this is the first step towards his emancipation and a sense of his potential dignity. Shaw's is the voice of the reformer and the iconoclast, each of these roles being, for him, opposite sides of the same coin.

While the archivist would surely question Shaw's utter contempt for the past, he must have something of the reformer in his makeup if he is to be true to his vocation. The object of his reforms, however, is only indirectly human society. The archivist's reason for being is to preserve the records of the state's activities, records that perpetuate the memory of mankind, replete with its follies, foibles, and fallacies; for man's mistakes are inevitably recorded alongside his achievements. Shaw was really aiming his barbs at the false images of the past. But rather than dismiss them, he would have been wiser to recognize that a proper evaluation of the past is not possible without seriously considering their origins and their

¹ Mr. Mitchell is Archivist-Historian of the Memorial University of Newfoundland.

tenacious hold over men. The uses of the past lie outside the archivist's immediate province; his first aim is to see that the records of the past are not destroyed, and his hope is that historians, using them as touchstones, will be able to ascertain the truth, to test their hypotheses, to check the validity of their abstractions against the facts of history. And the power of past truth depends on its usefulness to men in organizing their experience so that they can understand the present and think effectively for the future.

That is why the initiation of an archival institution in Newfoundland is so important, for at last it will be possible to test some of our favorite theories. A refrain commonly heard on the lips of Newfoundlanders when the subject of their long history is mentioned is that Newfoundland has always been ignominiously sacrificed to the imperial and foreign policy of Great Britain. Every literate Newfoundlander has a nodding acquaintance with the parliamentary statutes that gave the west-country merchants a stranglehold over our fisheries, the reluctance of the Imperial Government to sanction colonization, the struggle for responsible government, our unwilling submission to Canada's objections to our desire for independent trade agreements with the United States, and, not least, Britain's refusal or inability until 1904 to remove the thorn in Newfoundland's side—the contentious French shore question. On all these matters the Newfoundlander has but one observation to make: the British Government pursued a selfish and mistaken policy. The issues lie in the past, but they illustrate how important are the documents of the past in providing students with the materials for a frank and long look at Newfoundland's history. Thanks to the scrupulous care of Britain's administrators, confident in the course they steered, students have long had at their disposal in London many of the raw materials of Newfoundland's history. Now for the first time Newfoundland is on the way to providing for her own records, which, despite the exigencies and alleged errors of the past and the countless fires that have swept St. John's and smaller settlements, have for the most part come down to us in their original form.

In the eyes of the home authorities Newfoundland was only a fishing station, the preserve of the fishing merchants of England, whose aims were in conformity with the mercantilist doctrines of the 17th and 18th centuries. The island was, during those centuries, always subject to special regulations, and the state of the fisheries attracted the careful and continuous attention of the government. All our existing early records deal with the returns of the fisheries

and the enforcement of statutes designed to promote the interests of the fisheries. These are to be found in various series of documents in the Public Record Office. It was not until 1749 that the relative stability of our settlement permitted the keeping of records in Newfoundland. Even then, the governors, all naval men, remained only during a short summer season; and the records we possess usually begin in May and end in October. Records for those months, however, were kept; and they tell us mainly of litigations, prohibitions, orders and instructions, and relations between the governors and the military establishments at Placentia, St. John's, and elsewhere. From that time onward, and as the home government gradually began to revise its attitude towards the colony — permitting permanent settlement in the 1820's, representative government in 1832, and responsible government in 1855, — the records of the colony grew; and, as in the experience of governments everywhere, they began to constitute a problem.

It was the recognition of this problem, but even more the conviction that Newfoundland's records deserved to be rescued from oblivion, that prompted the Memorial University of Newfoundland to devise means for their preservation. To its assistance, in 1955, came the Carnegie Corporation, whose generosity has made the project possible. At the outset the chief objective was to acquire materials for historical research; a modern archival program was not contemplated at that early stage, though always in the background was the hope of creating a collection of manuscripts that would ultimately form the basis of a permanent Archives for Newfoundland. The immediate problems were to find space and to locate documentary material. While the solution of the first problem had to wait upon more favorable circumstances, it was thought that there was no reason to delay a survey of existing manuscripts in Great Britain, Canada, and the United States. Accordingly two members of the faculty visited a number of depositories in England, and one member, while making a detour to Toronto, concentrated his efforts on tracking down materials in various American institutions. The travels of these men brought to light the places where Newfoundland materials were to be found and demonstrated dramatically that the Public Record Office and the manuscript room of the British Museum house a vast amount of material.

The Government of Newfoundland itself had carried out some earlier explorations. Although it has not been possible thus far to verify the exact dates, the Government some time in the twenties commissioned Leonora de Alberti to make transcripts of a number

of the volumes in the Public Record Office, with the result that the Archives has copies of a large part of the most important series of documents housed in Chancery Lane. Miss de Alberti's fine calligraphy is represented in the transcription of 85 volumes of the Colonial Office's correspondence relating to Newfoundland — the C. O. 194 series. She also copied appropriate selections from 14 Entry Books of Instructions, Commissions, Petitions, Correspondence, and so forth — the C. O. 195 series — and parts of the C. O. 43 series, another collection of Entry Books; of the C. O. 5 series, covering America and the West Indies; of the C. O. 342 series, which is described as "Plantations General"; and of volume 17 in the C. O. 199 series, which is an account of the Fishery during 1772-73. Miss de Alberti's enormous labors thus produced one of the finest legacies acquired by the Archives — full copies of 86 volumes and voluminous extracts from an additional 479 volumes. The transcripts cover a long span of Newfoundland's history, from the late 17th century to 1850. Miss de Alberti was apparently vexed with the officials of the Public Record Office, who, as she indicates in several places, censored the post-1830 transcripts and were not careful to return them in the order in which they were received. It might be of interest to note that the Government of Newfoundland based much of its case in the Labrador Boundary dispute on an examination of these transcripts — another illustration of the importance of archives to government.

Microfilm now makes the acquisition of the most important Colonial Office records far simpler, and of course copies thus obtained are free from error. Fortunately the Public Archives of Canada, having planned to procure these, in conformity with its policy of obtaining copies of manuscripts relating to the history of Canada, was able to assist us, so that we now have the complete C. O. 194 series. The Admirals' despatches for the years 1766-1824 have also been acquired in this way, as well as a microfilm of volume 9283 of the Margry Collection from the Bibliothèque Nationale. The accumulation of microfilm copies of documentary materials will necessarily extend over a long period. The number of other depositories in which Newfoundland materials are to be found may be appreciated if I name a few microfilm purchases from such depositories: the American consular despatches from the National Archives; extracts from the Shelburne papers in the William L. Clements Library; selections from the Sir Joseph Banks papers in the Sutro Library in San Francisco; miscellaneous Newfoundland items from the Massachusetts State Archives; the letter books of

Governor Duckworth from the Yale University Library; general Newfoundland documents from the New-York Historical Society; the letter books of Governor Edwards from the Toronto Public Library; the Cochrane papers from the National Library of Scotland; excerpts from the Rockingham papers in the Sheffield City Library; a volume of the Blathwayt papers from the Institute of Early American History; and the Calvert papers from the Maryland Historical Society.

Microfilm will continue to play a large and important role in Newfoundland's acquisition of documents pertaining to its history. As an illustration of the places that must still be explored and raided, mention of the Archives Nationales, the Archives des Affaires Étrangères, and the Bibliothèque Nationale, as well as the two main British depositories and a number of smaller ones, is enough to indicate the great amount of work that still must be done; and for the acquisition of microfilm copies our Archives feels a deep sense of obligation to the Public Archives of Canada, which is showing a notable spirit of cooperation. Fortunately, too, the availability of inventories of varying detail, issued not only by the depositories themselves but also by such organizations as the Carnegie Institution of Washington and the British Records Association, to name but two, has immensely facilitated searches. Before long, it is hoped, the program initiated by a Committee of the Cultural Experts of the Council of Europe will put into the hands of archivists the catalogs and inventories of the chief European archives.

We come now to a consideration of the public records available in Newfoundland. Almost half a century ago, D. W. Prowse, whose rusty *History of Newfoundland* is still read and unfortunately still quoted by people who should know better, contributed a chapter on the condition of Newfoundland's records to Parker's *Guide to the Materials for U. S. History in Canadian Archives*. The great fire of 1892, which devastated St. John's, proved to be the funeral-pyre of a mass of government records. Those of the Departments of Finance and Customs, Agriculture and Mines, and Marine and Fisheries were, according to Judge Prowse, completely destroyed. A few records of the period around 1840 were all that remained in the Post Office Department. Happily the records of the Supreme Court, the Office of the Colonial Secretary, and the Office of the Governor survived the conflagration. The great bulk of the Archives' collections is derived from the two last-named agencies. Both Government House and the Department of Provincial Affairs, the successor to the Colonial Secretary's Office, enthusiastically wel-

came the project of removing from their care all documents dated before 1903, the year chosen by the authorities in charge and the Archives because of lack of space and assistance to accommodate and sort the great accumulation of the last 55 years.

The earliest records, dating from 1749, are letter books, which contain not only all the admiral-governor's correspondence but all his administrative acts, commissions, licenses, reports on judicial, military, naval, and civil acts, and financial records. This heterogeneous mass of information perfectly reflects the policy of the mother country, especially evident during Governor Palliser's vigorous enforcement of imperial legislation with regard to the holding of property and the discouragement of a permanent population. Interesting also are numerous entries dealing with the unchecked and seemingly inexorable movement to the New England colonies of fishermen lured by the promises of greater material comfort, to the great detriment of the nurture of seamen in England's greatest nursery. Indeed one may find in the letter books references to a great number of subjects: the work of the Moravians in Labrador, the result of subscriptions among the merchants towards the erection of an improved place of worship in St. John's, the returns of the fishery, the building of fortifications, excessive drunkenness, numerous disputes arising out of the use or misuse of shore space, and the constant complaints of fishermen whose wages had not been paid.

We are fortunate in having among our collections typewritten transcripts of the earliest of the letter books; from 1749 to 1825, with gaps, however, for the periods 1752-79 and 1785-88. The person responsible for these transcripts is to be praised also for segregating the governors' correspondence with the secretary of state, beginning with the year 1800 and continuing to 1826. Obviously there was once someone in the civil service who was concerned with the state of the records and who, mindful of past experience, at least ensured that copies of Newfoundland's oldest records would be preserved. Indeed there is evidence that, notwithstanding the alleged brutality of life in the 18th century, the governors had also paid attention to the maintenance and safekeeping of records. It was customary for the governors, in appointing justices of the peace, to entrust them, as keepers of the rolls of the peace, with the records of the courts' business. Governor Milbanke in 1789 requested the advice of the judge of the vice admiralty court in dealing with Mr. Haye, the register of the court, who had neglected to keep "any proceedings of the said Court." One of the

fullest references to the care of records occurs in a letter from Governor Duckworth to Thomas Coote, Chief Magistrate, dated October 24, 1811:

I have placed in your hands the Records of the Government and do charge you to adhere in the most scrupulous manner to the following directions.

They are not to be looked at by any Person except by yourself on any account whatever; nor are you to give Extracts from any part of them to any persons.

You are entrusted with the charge of them, and on your delivering them up to the Governor on his return, you will be required to assure him that no one has had access to them but yourself.

You are to lodge the case in which they are contained in the Court House, and as the Government House, in its present state is a very unsafe and improper situation for them you will remove them immediately.

The Case containing the Plan of the Town of St. John's has also been delivered into your charge, and you are required to place it also in safety in the Court House, and on no account suffer it to be opened.

Until 1825, when imperial legislation set up an appointed council to assist the governor, the letter books record much the same business except that, beginning in 1791 with the formation of the supreme court, judicial cases are no longer entered. But it was not until 1828 that the governors' correspondence was separated from this hitherto undifferentiated group of records, and what remained became the preserve of the Colonial Secretary's Office. The year 1825 is also important as the year in which the original correspondence of both the Governor's Office and the Colonial Secretary's Office began to be preserved; original letters before that date presumably were destroyed in the numerous fires that periodically swept the capital or were bundled up and stored in the sea chests of the governors every autumn on their return to England. The governors' correspondence consists, in the main, of despatches received from the Secretary of State for the Colonies, extending in a relatively unbroken series from 1825 to 1902. Copies of despatches to Whitehall have not fared so well, but surviving letter books and the originals in the Colonial Office series 194 fill the gaps. There are in addition the governors' miscellaneous papers and despatches, which begin in 1850. The original correspondence of the Colonial Secretary's Office, preserved by the successor Department of Provincial Affairs, is made up of letters, petitions, and reports, extending with few interruptions from 1825 to 1902. These, then, are the main classes of records now in the Archives' collections.

The Archives has, of course, the Blue Books of the colony, the

proclamations, and other records of the same nature. Remnants of other groups of records have also been acquired. Four letter books of the Royal Engineers, two from the 18th and two from the early 19th century, have been miraculously preserved. One letter book recording the colonial secretary's correspondence with the speaker and other officials of the legislature covers four years, 1837-41. There is a quarantine letter book, 1835-36, containing instructions to the various officials in charge of supervising the quarantine. And there are other isolated volumes, which cannot be easily placed in a neat classification scheme.

As suggested above, the other government departments will be approached for the purpose of transferring their records, and schedules for record destruction or transfer and preservation will have to be devised. Of course the rate of intake will be governed by the amount of space available in the Archives. At the outset the Archives had at its disposal 900 square feet, which will be doubled this autumn.² There will, it is hoped, be other demands on our space. A search for local records in the outports is to be undertaken this autumn. Such towns as Placentia, Ferryland, and Trinity, to name only a few of the formerly flourishing settlements, are said to possess records of many descriptions. Since the traveling season is short and lack of staff would prevent an on-the-spot survey of such materials, the most practicable course will be to make wholesale transfers to St. John's, where this work can be done. Time and neglect will undoubtedly have taken their toll of many records; yet, as workers in other provinces have found to their satisfaction, a great deal does turn up.

Other great sources of archival material are the collections in private hands. Perhaps the greatest single addition from these sources is 40 rolls of microfilm of the archives of Newman, Hunt & Co., London; Hunt, Roope & Co., London and Oporto; and Newman & Co., Newfoundland — all acquired with the kind assistance of the Public Archives of Canada and Sir Ralph Newman. Although the available records of these firms date from 1775, the Dartmouth Port Books in the Public Record Office tell us that John Newman, a merchant of Dartmouth, in 1602 landed a load of Newfoundland fish. The history of the firms, consequently, can be written on the basis of the microfilms of the Newman archives, the microfilms of government records, and the Archives' normally acquired holdings, in which there are numerous references to their dealings. The Newfoundland Board of Trade has donated five of the surviving

² 1957.

minute books of its predecessor, the Chamber of Commerce, which cover the period 1834-75, the three earlier books having been destroyed. In addition a large mass of correspondence and notes of the Chamber has been sorted and stored in 14 cartons. Two account books of Thomas Slade, a Poole merchant stationed at Battle Harbour, Labrador, in the last decade of the 18th century; three account books of Goodridge and Co. for the years 1836-41 and one for the year 1892; two letter books of C. Edmonds, the agent at Fogo and Twillingate in the 1850's and 1860's for the Poole firm, Cox and Co.; a statistical volume of the Job Co.'s business dealings from 1850-75, remarkable for its detail: these provide a partial but not insignificant picture of the transactions of a few of the more outstanding commercial firms in Newfoundland. Negotiations are now under way for the acquisition of more materials of this nature. It is important that they should be acquired, for, while the documentation of the fishing industry is rich — indeed, the vagaries of this industry have probably prompted more specialized analyses than in any other country — there is a singular lack of information regarding the history of the railway, the iron ore industry, and the great paper mills. Similarly an investigation into the rise of co-operatives, protective associations, and trade unionism is hampered by the absence of materials.

It is regrettable that the most obvious lacuna in the Archives has arisen from the utter failure of former ministers to see that their papers, a mingling of personal manuscripts and archives, were preserved or made available. One has to know Newfoundland's stormy political history to understand the unwillingness of its politicians to leave a full record. Controversies linger long after their causes have lost all immediate political significance. Apart from papers that have been deliberately destroyed, the legacies of others have permitted them to gather dust and mold rather than bring them out to form a part of the province's heritage. The situation is not entirely gloomy; a microfilm of the political papers of Newfoundland's first Prime Minister, P. F. Little, has been received through the courtesy of his son, now living in Ireland. It is also likely that the papers of another Premier will be acquired before long. The difficulties that always beset the unwary investigator into what is often but mistakenly assumed to be the sacrosanct privacy of the past are multiplied many times in a community that for so long has guarded its right to do things in its own way, however strange it may appear to the outsider. Surely the 1933 Royal Commission's indictment of Newfoundland's political system must be sufficiently

provocative to elicit from former politicians or their heirs a chorus of rebuttals; and what more effective response is there than access to the facts? In the long run a favorable climate of opinion must be developed before resistance to the transfer of private manuscripts is overcome; and much will depend on assuring donors that the Archives is aware of the confidential nature of this type of material, upon which certain restrictions may be put, if desired, though there is no reason to countenance artificial barriers between the past and the scholar.

Church archives present certain difficulties. Each of the three major religious denominations — the Catholic, Anglican, and United churches — has its own records; but only the last has made an attempt to list and publish the items in its collection. The archives of the other two denominations have not yet reached this stage in their organization, but it is hoped that the Catholic and Anglican churches will follow the course of the Archives of the United Church, which encourages and assists its regional divisions. It will be our concern to persuade them to put their records in order and make them available. On the other hand it is likely that Moravian missions in Labrador will agree to transfer their records, now housed in Nain, Labrador, the earliest dating from the 18th century.

The Newfoundland Archives has not overlooked one of its most important services — facilitating the work of researchers. While physical surroundings will require improvement, they have been made as attractive as possible. Aids to research, such as a consistent scheme of classification, inventories, guides to collections, and abbreviated calendars will engage the constant attention of the staff. The student can also be assisted in other ways. Easy access will be provided to such documents as the journals of the Legislature, the provincial Hansards, yearbooks, statutes, census volumes, printed reports of government departments, law reports, and theses. And there are the great documentary compilations, rich in sources, such as the 12 volumes of the *North Atlantic Fisheries Arbitration*, the 12 volumes of the *Labrador Boundary Dispute*, Stock's *Proceedings and Debates of the British Parliaments*, the numerous publications of the Historical Manuscripts Commission, the record publications of the Public Record Office, and the *Calendars* of the Public Archives of Canada. Put within easy reach of the student, these indispensable works serve to round out the resources of the Archives. Perhaps the most important aid to students will be a bibliography of all printed Newfoundland sources, now in preparation. It will be the first comprehensive and annotated listing of printed materials,

at least three locations being indicated, so that the researcher, in quest of works not available in St. John's, will be able to use them by means of an interlibrary loan.

Much work remains to be done in other areas. The Department of Provincial Affairs has a valuable collection of newspapers that the Archives will acquire as soon as additional shelving is purchased for the more capacious quarters promised. The microfilming of contemporary newspapers will have to be considered; otherwise their sheer bulk will aggravate a chronic state of indigestion. Our 19th-century collection of pamphlets, small as it is, has been painstakingly acquired by exploring most sources, public and private; perhaps more than we expect have survived and will turn up, as some have, to our delight. Our photograph collection is minute and will have to be expanded. We have no collection of maps, unfortunately; and short of purchase, this deficiency cannot be remedied. This leads me to state the absolute necessity of stable and constant financial support to enable us to carry on and expand the Archives.

It was with this in mind that the Carnegie Historical Research Committee, of which I am a member, drafted an Archives Act for Newfoundland, using as its model the legislation that established the Saskatchewan Archives. There is sufficient reason for emulating the Saskatchewan experience: the setting up of an archival project in Newfoundland, as in Saskatchewan, was initiated by the provincial university, and it was therefore deemed desirable to benefit from that experience. For this reason we are suggesting the repeal of the 1951 Public Records Act, which has remained a dead letter these 6 years. The suggested Archives Act contains, in addition, one clause that looks to the recovery of public documents, wherever found, that have once been or should properly be part of the government records — a replevin clause, which we hope will aid us in recovering records that have been dispersed or improperly removed from government offices. Should the Government accept the act, now in its hands, and devote funds to the Archives, there is a prospect of establishing a proper archival institution that will take its place alongside other provincial archives.