

# A Brave Man—or a Foolish One

By JOHN A. MUNROE\*

University of Delaware

COUPLED with my invitation to speak at your luncheon came the suggestion that as a professional historian I should reply to the address made to this group in Washington a year ago by W. Kaye Lamb, the Dominion Archivist of Canada. His address, entitled "The Archivist and the Historian," is to be published shortly in the *American Historical Review*.<sup>1</sup> My immediate reaction was that the historian who responded before the assembled archivists would be a brave man—or a foolish one—thus to take a chance of biting the hands that feed him. I hope that if I play the part of a contrary Mary and follow Lamb I am not being led to the slaughter.

My safety is not endangered by any wholesale disagreement with the Dominion Archivist. He picks three quarrels with historians—"the academic promotion treadmill" that leads to "a flood of mediocre writing"; "the narrowness of the research interests of many historians" that results in articles "of real interest to no more than a couple of dozen people"; and "the dullness that characterizes much historical writing" and "seems to have become associated . . . with soundness." To all these criticisms I cry *Amen*. A dull style does characterize the work of most historians; their interests are so specialized that they are little read; they are often driven to write in order to win promotion.

But, possibly from a sense of my own guilt, I temper my criticism with sympathy. The average historian does not write very well because he does not know how to. He is trained to do research and, by a system of apprenticeship, to teach. He gets little training in good writing. He would do better if he could do better, and in many cases he knows he should do better. But it is not necessary for him to write with any flair; an attempt to develop

\*The author is H. Rodney Sharp Professor of History and chairman of the department of history at the University of Delaware. He has made many contributions to the historical literature of Delaware and has actively participated in the museum training programs conducted jointly by his university with the Henry Francis du Pont Winterthur Museum and the Eleutherian Mills-Hagley Foundation. His paper was read before a joint luncheon session of the Society of American Archivists and the American Historical Association on December 28, 1962, in Chicago.

<sup>1</sup>The paper referred to has subsequently been published. See W. Kaye Lamb, "The Archivist and the Historian," in *American Historical Review*, 68:385-391 (Jan. 1963).—ED.

a good style would not certainly repay him for his efforts. Catherine Drinker Bowen has complained of this, saying she often sees writers at historians' conferences but she never sees historians at writers' conferences. "Don't you worry about how to retain the interest of your reader," she asked, "so he will stay with you through the blank space at the end of one chapter to the point on the next page where you can have a go at him again with the beginning of your new chapter?" The historian rarely does worry about such a matter as this.

As to the narrowness of his research interests, this does not necessarily indicate any narrowness in his general intellectual interests. Specialization is the way of the world, and the average historian must specialize in a limited field in his research precisely because he needs to spread his interests over a wide field, perhaps all of Western civilization, in his teaching; and he dare not ignore art, economics, psychology, or sociology as his predecessors might have done.

As to the academic promotion treadmill, whatever its errors it does not reward the writer alone. Men are promoted for teaching ability or for counseling and for distinctions other than their productivity as writers. But in universities where men are given low teaching loads in expectation that they will write it is not strange that administrators want some evidence that they are using the time given them. Have some pity for the man who has to judge the scholar's work and raise money for him to continue at it! In view of the specialization of academic life, even historians cannot always judge the work of their colleagues with any certainty—I note they are generally most severely critical of men in their own exact field of specialization—and so judgments are apt to be made on unsatisfactory grounds, as for instance on a quantitative rather than a qualitative basis. Then comes the ridiculous situation typified by an overheard conversation involving two historians discussing the promotion of a third man: "He has published two books, hasn't he?" said one. "Yes," the other answered, "but his second book was not very thick."

Not in these details, however, nor in his explanation of the reasons why archivists must sometimes close collections or limit their use—when, for instance, a conditional gift is made to an archives—not on such details do I find myself in any significant difference with the *Dominion Archivist*. But I do find it difficult to accept the suggestion implied by Dr. Lamb's talk that there is a complete division between historians and archivists.

I am under the impression that some archivists are historians

and that some historians are archivists, that "the umbilical cord [connecting archivists] . . . with the mother body of the historical profession," in Ernst Posner's words, has not been cut.<sup>2</sup> Inter-linked—not concentric—circles represent the relationship. Not all archivists are historians, and not all historians are archivists, but the Society of American Archivists, "child of the American Historical Association through its Public Archives Commission,"<sup>3</sup> by this annual luncheon acknowledges the continuance of a close relationship.

I am aware that there are those who say the gulf between the archivist and the historian must be deep and wide. "The Archivist is not and ought not be an Historian," declared Hilary Jenkinson, with emphasis.<sup>4</sup> And Albert Newsome echoed him by averring that "A deep interest in a particular field of knowledge creates a prepossession for that field which may make of the archivist an inappropriate, partial, or even dangerous custodian." According to Newsome, however, it is perfectly all right for a historian to become an archivist as long as he then ceases to be a historian. "The historian who becomes an archivist and thus an ex-historian," he wrote, "will not subordinate archival to historical interests."<sup>5</sup>

How the Newsomite historian could become a Jenkinsonian archivist by taking an archival job I do not know; perhaps he would resign membership immediately in the American Historical Association. I am heartened to find another English archivist a quarter century after Jenkinson expressing the belief "that the distinction between historians and archivists is being obliterated, for nobody can be fully competent in either capacity without some training in the other."<sup>6</sup>

I suspect that the insistence of Jenkinson and others on the archivist's profession as an independent discipline is an example of a youthful profession relishing its existence and independence, like a new country exultant in its independent nationalism.<sup>7</sup> Perhaps Hilary Jenkinson was the Emerson or Turner of the archival profession.

Historians find practitioners of allied studies—political scien-

<sup>2</sup> "What, Then, Is the American Archivist, This New Man?" in *American Archivist*, 20:7 (Jan. 1957).

<sup>3</sup> Lester J. Cappon, "Tardy Scholars Among the Archivists," in *American Archivist*, 21:4 (Jan. 1958).

<sup>4</sup> *A Manual of Archive Administration*, p. 106 (Oxford, 1922).

<sup>5</sup> "The Archivist in American Scholarship," in *American Archivist*, 2:218, 220 (Oct. 1939).

<sup>6</sup> C. T. Flower, "Local Archives," in *Archives*, no. 2, p. 7 (Michaelmas, 1949).

<sup>7</sup> Philip C. Brooks, "Archivists and Their Colleagues: Common Denominators," in *American Archivist*, 14:40 (Jan. 1951).

tists, sociologists, etc.—similarly insistent on their uniqueness. It is quite understandable. Historians are often old hat, unwilling to learn, smug and complacent, satisfied with their craft. It is not, however, archivists and historians who should be put in separate and parallel categories, but archivists and professors. Let historians be separated into classes on the basis of the job they do. Besides the historians who are professors, and the historians who are archivists, there are historians who are editors, historians who are museologists, historians who are full-time researchers and writers. This is not to say that all archivists are historians, any more than all professors, all editors, or all museum personnel are historians.

In our time the academic or teaching historian has so dominated the craft that he personifies the historian even to members of his guild. The activities of the academic historians so dominate the conventions of the American Historical Association that a few years ago a friend of mine who devotes himself to writing and has no academic post determined to play a trick on the profession. He was annoyed by the overwhelming concern at the convention with problems of recruitment of teachers. Several conversations he might have found interesting were interrupted when professors were called aside for a conference about a man to be hired or a graduate student to be recommended. There was no longer a place at this convention, he decided, for the historian who was an independent writer and had no need to buy or sell personnel.

In his exasperation he let it be known that he had just accepted appointment at Southeast Iowa State University, a new institution where he was to be chairman of the history department. Conditions of employment were very, very good. Tenure was offered all men of professorial rank, a regular sabbatical system was to be introduced, the salary schedule was a good one with regular increments and provision for promotion, and generous fringe benefits included insurance and pension plans, help with housing, etc. And nine other positions were yet to be filled in his department.

The minute the news got about he was surrounded by old friends and some not so old. "From that moment on," he said, "I was a popular man. My counsel was sought. My opinions were heeded. I never was permitted to pass for another drink."

Though the need for academic, teaching historians is growing rapidly today, so is the demand for historians in other fields. I hope that America's archives will continue to recruit a fair share of them, so that there will always be archivists available who will sense the needs of wandering historians and be able to supply them.

As another Canadian archivist said a score of years ago, "Research scholars are sometimes weak in knowledge of how to find their way about, and the archivist must be a scholar, a practiced psychologist, and be filled with the milk of human patience."<sup>8</sup>

The second most important need of a historian who comes for the first time to do research in an archival depository is personal help. (It goes without saying that his first need is collections of value.) He needs immediately to meet someone to whom he can explain his quest and who can offer him scholarly understanding and aid. This archivist ought to be a scholarly person; he should be someone who has read widely in the collections and thought about them, someone who has some knowledge both of history and of the collections at hand. He need not be a writer—indeed, if he is, he might be tempted to hog some of the collections for his own work. It should be remembered that academic historians consider all archivists to be pirates anyway, constantly on the lookout for booty, racing each other to it, and stealing from each other with abandon. They develop elaborate definitions of archival materials only to expand their definitions to permit seizure of any papers of value they can get. By a process of ordination, a laying on of hands, they can and do convert into an archive anything they choose.<sup>9</sup>

The archivist who first meets the historian need not be a writer, nor need he be a director. The director of an archives may well be distinguished for his managerial ability. He may be too busy to keep up with details of the source material constantly flowing into the archives; he may be relatively new to this particular depository. It is important that the visiting historian meet a veteran of the staff, the person who knows the contents of these archives best.

But personal help is not enough. It cannot always be available. The helping archivist goes to lunch, becomes ill, is busy with other historians and other chores, disappears behind the scenes. There must be some finding aids that the historian may consult and ponder over on his own. An index or a catalog, a guide, something is needed that the historian can go to himself and use as a base of exploration. "I cannot emphasise too strongly," writes Francis

<sup>8</sup> James F. Kenney, as paraphrased by William D. Overman in his report on "The Third Annual Meeting of the Society of American Archivists," in *American Archivist*, 3:12 (Jan. 1940).

<sup>9</sup> The references to pirates and to the laying on of hands are scriptural, coming respectively from G. R. C. Davis, "Some Home Thoughts for the English Archivist From Abroad?" in *Archives*, 4:176 (Lady Day, 1960); and Curtis W. Garrison, "The Relation of Historical Manuscripts to Archival Materials," in *American Archivist*, 2:97 (Apr. 1939).

W. Steer of Chichester, the archivist of West Sussex, "the necessity for simple means of reference." And he adds a plea for cross-references which "save much time and often help a visiting student . . . [not] familiar with . . . local material." Cross-references are "as much a part of the archivist's work as the cataloguing of the documents themselves."<sup>10</sup>

The historian realizes, or should realize, that lack of time and lack of staff always prevent archivists from furnishing all the finding aids that are desired. A simple list or a simple guide can, however, be very helpful—just so there is something a scholar may look at when he finishes the documents that have been handed him and can find no one available at the moment to give him further help.

The historian knows too that physical facilities in archives are rarely as good as the archivist would like them to be. He does hope, however, for a quiet place to work where there will be a minimum of movement and confusion and talking, particularly telephone conversations, around him. Anyone as lame as I am hopes that index drawers, shelves containing catalogs, and all other reference material will be not only clearly labeled but also placed at a convenient height.<sup>11</sup> He needs good light, too, whether natural or artificial. A good reference library, even if quite small, should also be provided with volumes like the *Dictionary of American Biography*, for instance, so that a scholar may check biographical facts that may help him to understand documents. It is desirable, though obviously not always possible, to have available in an archives transcripts from related series housed elsewhere.

Since most scholars need to save money and make their visits as short as possible, facilities for inexpensive reproduction should be provided. I was happy several years ago to hear of the retirement of the director of a large city historical society who had told me I could get material microfilmed only if I would pay a member of his staff by the hour to take the material downtown, stand by it while it was being filmed, and return it to the society. This would be expensive, he agreed, but even this was not at all possible in the next few weeks because he could not permit any member of his staff to take time off to go downtown. As soon as this director retired, his successor had the desired material microfilmed at a very modest charge.

<sup>10</sup> "The Historian and Local Record Repositories," in *Archives*, 2:382 (Lady Day, 1956).

<sup>11</sup> *Ibid.*, 2:383, 384.



When the historical scholar cannot come to an archives, he appreciates such help as can be given through correspondence. Certainly this is a service that can be abused by those who wish to have archivists do research for them. I suspect, however, that a comparatively few people are responsible for the worst abuses and that they may be men of little scholarly training and not very serious purpose. Any decent scholar should be satisfied with a form response. I have never had any occasion to complain of ill treatment in correspondence. In fact, I am of the opinion that archivists are more apt to err in giving too much time to answering postal queries than to err in giving them too little attention.

Scholars are also appreciative of assistance given to their students by archivists. They know that these students sometimes make mistakes through inexperience and ignorance, but a young student—an undergraduate senior, for instance, working on an honors thesis—may be better prepared, thanks to the expertness of his professor, to make serious use of the documents he wishes to examine than much more mature persons who have wandered beyond their field of competence. It is annoying to a professor to see one of his graduate students denied use of materials he is qualified to use and understand—perhaps even, with the direction he is getting, the very best qualified person to use them—it is annoying to a professor to see his student in this case denied access to manuscripts that are opened freely to the use of a less well qualified though more mature person. It has been known that journalists and novelists have been given access to materials when properly qualified graduate students have been turned away. On the other hand, there are undoubtedly graduate students who have made nuisances of themselves and have brought both disrepute to their kind and also blame, often without just reason, upon the unknowing director of their work. I dislike blanket rules barring certain classes of people from the use of documents on any ground except their lack of serious purpose and their inability to make use of what they examine. With most public archives, there is no fault to be found whatever on this score. I have no complaint whatever to restricted access on grounds of the donor's demand or national security.

The historian also appreciates being informed of the availability of archival material that might be of interest to him or his students. Lists of current acquisitions, occasional articles on collections, and suggestions of subjects for study are very helpful. So is news of the publication, including micropublication, of source materials. The more publications the better, from the historian's

point of view, because they save him time and expense in visiting archival repositories. It is worth noting here, however, that a great deal of shoddy microfilm has been produced, sometimes from excellent repositories where the personnel would be greatly embarrassed to know how bad the reproductions are. I have tried to read microfilmed newspapers and letters that were almost totally illegible. Apparently faults in microfilm are not observed as easily in the cataloging departments of libraries as are faults in books. The book with pages illegible or missing is discovered and returned sooner than the microfilm with pages illegible or missing. Apparently also the conditions of work with microfilm—off in some secluded room—lead a student to give up quietly when he cannot read, or to crank the film along till he comes to a readable portion. At any rate, in several different libraries I have discovered illegible microfilm that had been on hand for several years. On each occasion I wondered how many students before me had given up quietly without reporting their difficulties with the film.

All the encouragement the historian may offer to the publication of archival material can be extended with at least equal fervor to its indexing and to the publication of indexes. If the material is central to a scholar's work, he probably must go through it, index or no index. But many collections are too large or too peripheral to a scholar's interest to warrant his paging through them. In such a case an index may make all the difference between their being useful and useless.

So much for positive ways in which archives may serve the visiting historian. Perhaps I may properly list here some suggestions of things to be avoided. It is an instance of how well archives are conducted that I can think of only three items to mention.

First is the long conversation with the visiting historian who has limited time at his disposal. If he has but one day to spend in the county archives of Plainville, U.S.A., he cannot afford to use half or three-fourths of the time in conversation. He appreciates a friendly greeting, he appreciates a conversation about his subject and suggestions of what he should examine. But eventually he must be allowed to get to work. In this regard the practice followed at some archives of having someone go with a visitor or a group of visitors to lunch is a splendid idea. It permits the pleasure of conversation on subjects of mutual interest without frightening the historian with the fear that his whole day will be spent in chitchat. The danger is far greater for the historian who is a friendly, sociable soul and enjoys the conversation—that is,



the average historian—than for the occasional morose misanthrope who cuts off the friendliest greeting with a snarl.

Second is the danger of overserving the historian by interrupting him every 15 minutes with a new item that may interest him. This is a fault that arises from the best intentions. If an archivist shows up every 15 minutes with a new group of documents, the historian becomes so distracted that he never has time to finish with anything. It would be better to keep a list of other things that might be of use and tell the historian about them when he stops for lunch or completes his work with what he already has.

As bad as or worse than constant interruptions is the predicament of the historian who finishes with a group of manuscripts and cannot find anyone free to bring him another batch. He cannot complain of waiting his turn to be served if the staff of the archives is overworked, but he is likely to be quite annoyed if he has to wait while a young attendant in the archives completes a telephone conversation with a friend about the play he saw last night or is to see tonight. Generally an experienced historian tries to call for a little more material than he can get through, to avoid even the minimum necessary wait for further service, but sometimes he finds his material far less rewarding than he expected and consequently decides to try something else.

If it seems that the historian is an impatient customer who completely lacks understanding of the archivist's responsibilities, please remember that this view exaggerates the existing difference. Rare is the historian of any experience who has not at some time learned to appreciate the archivist's problems. Often the historian has been an important intermediary in seeing that manuscript collections have been accessioned by the archives. By long and close association over the years the historian and archivist are likely to become friends, each supporting the needs of the other. In many cases the historian and the archivist are former colleagues; as the historian gets older it becomes increasingly likely that the archivist may be his former student.

But these developments, these relationships, take time to develop. A young historian, an apprentice historian, led to the profession, most probably, by his admiration for some notable teacher who has inspired him, is likely to be impatient and ignorant of the archivist's skills and of his problems. He it is who, like the Dominion Archivist's young apprentice, is likely to think of the archivist—indeed of all men—as something greatly inferior to the role he as a historian is to play.

Even the veteran historian may be a problem. As he grows older he may grow bolder, as Ved Mehta has made clear in his study of "The Flight of the Crook-Taloned Birds." Essentially the problem is that a man in any scholarly profession is likely to believe fervently in its dignity and importance. The historian of any sort—writer, teacher, archivist, editor—says that it is the glory of his craft that it is all embracing, that it comprehends all that is significant that has happened to man. But what less does the geographer claim: all that occurs on the face of the earth, or even under the earth, is in his domain. And then the chemist states his case—all change, he says, is a chemical matter and is therefore his province. The physicist, biologist, sociologist, philosopher claim no less.

A professor or a dean—particularly a dean—with experience on a college curriculum committee realizes in time that scholars who devote their life to a subject not essentially for the monetary return but for the thrill of the work itself must almost of necessity believe passionately in the importance of their work. In another age these men would have been theologians, and like theologians of another age they are prepared at the drop of a hat to wage their religious wars.

Within the historical profession, there is of necessity a similar pride in one's craft. Archivist, professor, editor, writer—each must believe in the importance of his work and, being human, each is likely to see particularly clearly the mote in his brother's eye.

### ***Exponential Curve***

. . . readers want to turn to the *New Cambridge Modern History* as they still do to the "Old", confident that it will at least give them information. But there is . . . a danger in the encyclopedic ideal. General history can be dissolved not only by excessive abstraction but by the tyranny of evidence, above all in the modern age. From the seventeenth century onwards the mere mass of record is appalling and it swells significantly after 1871. Growing literacy, the typewriter, and the acceptance of new duties by governments have all steepened the exponential curve into unreadability. Worse still, this has happened just when an unprecedented and obsessive concern with the past has made a religion of the preservation of documents.

— Review of *Material Progress and World-Wide Problems, 1870-1898* (*The New Cambridge Modern History*, vol. 11), in *The Times Literary Supplement*, Dec. 7, 1962.