

The Changing Role of the Archivist

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ALL professions involve occupational hazards of one kind or another, and some of those that the archivist faces are well known to us. We have all encountered—and probably encountered many times—the visitor who assumes that we are familiar with all past events since creation, down to the last detail of local or family history. If we do not know who took up the land next great-great-grandfather's holding in the 5th Concession of Toonerville Township, we are poor things indeed.

An example comes to mind. Some years ago, when Viscount Alexander was Governor General of Canada, Lady Alexander's secretary telephoned from Government House one morning. Lady Alexander, she told me, would like very much to know who owned the farm, a few miles from Ottawa, on which her great-grandfather, the Duke of Richmond, had died in 1819. I replied that I did not know offhand, but that I was sure I could find out. To which the secretary replied, "Shall I hold the line?"

Another hazard is the widespread impression that archivists have no concern with the present—or at least that they are not troubled with matters of any very immediate or pressing concern. Perhaps our surroundings tend sometimes to give such an impression. I happen to have a very pleasant office in the old Public Archives Building in Ottawa, which I shall be sorry to leave when we vacate the building late next year. The pictures on the walls include a reduced version of Gainsborough's portrait of General Amherst, painted originally for Lady Amherst; a fine portrait of Lord Durham, by Sir Thomas Lawrence; the family portraits of Simon McTavish and William McGillivray, the two leading figures in the history of the North West Fur Company, and Orpen's striking portrait of Sir Robert Borden, Prime Minister of Canada during the First World War. Visitors look at them and say, "My, but you have an interesting job!" (which of course is perfectly true); and they settle down comfortably under the impression that a person with such surroundings cannot possibly have very much to do.

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But it is not hazards of this kind that concern me at the moment. I think a much more serious danger arises from the fact that we are all so busy with our own particular jobs that we have not realized fully the way in which our profession as a whole has both expanded and developed, particularly in the last 20 or 30 years. In many ways it has become virtually a new profession. It is with this in mind that I am venturing to make a few remarks about the changing role of the archivist, both as I have observed it and as I have experienced it.

The basic change, of course, is that the archivist has ceased to be primarily a custodian—a caretaker—and has become a gatherer of records and manuscripts. His role has ceased to be largely passive and has become dynamic and active.

This change is not yet fully reflected in the public image of the archivist. We are still identified all too frequently with the elderly antiquarian who was given his job in order to provide for his old age. It still does not occur to many people that an archivist needs any particular training or qualifications. There is still very real danger that governing authorities will not always be aware of the need for such qualifications and take it properly into account. I recall an instance a few years ago when an investigating committee in an overseas country recommended that record officers should be appointed in all departments of government. Someone remarked gloomily to me that he presumed the positions would be filled with “top-ranking departmental misfits”—in this instance a prophecy happily not fulfilled by the event.

The role of the archivist has indeed become active rather than passive; he has become a collector of material instead of being primarily a custodian. This change is reflected in the great growth of manuscript collections that has taken place, particularly since the war. True, there are vast, old-established collections that have been brought together over a much longer period, but the number of new repositories is striking. In part this is a fad or fashion: even the humblest college or university now seems to be uneasy unless it has in its library some leaves of manuscript with which to cover its nakedness. But mostly it has been due to the realization that a great amount of valuable material was not being properly cared for and that the collections now being assembled will be of great value in the future. The personal papers of public figures, literary manuscripts, business records, and the records of societies and associations of all sorts are flowing into libraries and archives at an unprecedented rate. The volume and variety of the material available never ceases to amaze me. In my own institution, which

is concerned with unofficial as well as official papers, I have felt occasionally that we must be nearing the end of the search. This feeling last came upon me a couple of years ago, but it has long since vanished. A new collection of papers of one of the Fathers of Confederation; the papers of a prominent political leader of 20 and more years ago; the earlier archives of the Canadian National Railways (which already occupy half a mile of shelving, with much more to come); the business papers of a concern that traces its history in the Gaspé country back to 1766; and a collection of diaries and letters extending as far back as 1746: these are a few of the items that have come to us relatively recently and have made us aware that the vein is still far from exhausted.

The second major change that has taken place in the role of the archivist is his deep involvement in records management. This involvement springs, of course, from the great volume of records that are produced by the multifarious activities of a modern government. The problems that result are twofold. There is first the necessity to curb the creation of unnecessary records and to see that the great number that must come into existence are managed efficiently and economically. The second problem is the matter of records disposal. It is no longer practicable to follow the old and easy policy of avoiding decisions on what should be kept by keeping virtually everything; costs are so high that the records manager is compelled to make his objective the destruction of as much material as possible as soon as possible. This practice is sound business management, but it frequently conflicts with sound archival policy and gives rise to difficulties that are worth examining in some detail.

Attitudes toward the destruction of records can vary greatly. I am reminded of a friend who acquired a copy of a well-known Currier and Ives print of the sinking of the Collins liner *Arctic*. When the "daily help" first saw it on the wall of his study she was horrified and distressed by the graphic depiction of the listing steamer, the despairing crowds on her deck, and the victims already struggling in the water.

"Isn't that dreadful!" she said—"all those poor people drowning!" Then she asked, "When did all that happen?"

"In 1854," my friend replied.

A pause followed, and then the maid cheerfully resumed her work, and said, "Oh, well, they'd all be dead by now anyway!"

If some records have been destroyed that should have been preserved, the problem has at least been settled, if not solved.

I would be the last person to dispute that, from the point of view of a department of government, the persons best qualified to decide

which records should be kept and which may be discarded are the officials of that department and the records managers who work with them. But from the historical or long-range point of view, their judgment may or may not be sound.

Disposal—to my mind the most difficult problem relating to records management—is indeed far from being a simple matter. It involves nothing less than an attempt to judge the future needs of scholars. Nor is the historian the only person concerned. Government operations and controls now extend into so many fields that official records are a major source of information for research workers in innumerable disciplines. No change in the role of the archivist is more significant than the way in which circumstances are forcing him into a position in which he has a life and death control over much of this material. And the decisions involved can rarely be postponed. The volume of records is frequently so great that delays may be costly or even impracticable. The archivist must select—and select promptly—or lose all.

Selecting what is to be retained is a complicated matter. Adequate information about the department and its operations is essential; this information departmental officials and records managers will have and can supply. But equally essential is experience in working with scholars, for this experience provides some indication of what kinds of records are likely to be useful and the way in which they may be used by scholars. There is the interesting point, well known to anyone who serves readers in a searchroom, that the purpose for which a record is consulted frequently has little or nothing to do with the purpose for which it was originally made. I could cite many instances of this. Early petitions for land grants are one case in point. Administratively, they had served their purpose a century and a half ago, when the petition was either granted or rejected. Historically, they are now a happy hunting ground for historians, genealogists, economists, sociologists, and many others.

Every fragment of knowledge he possesses, every faint indication of what may be of interest and importance in the years to come, must be mustered by the conscientious archivist who is required to pass this life and death sentence on a collection of records. His role in this respect is crucial. Sources can wait years or decades for the scholar who will make use of them, but if they are to be there when the scholar wants them, someone else—usually the archivist—must have perceived their potential value and ensured their preservation far in advance of his coming.

It is significant that governments are becoming more aware of the importance of taking the long-term view into adequate account. A

comprehensive directive on records management issued a few months ago by the Treasury Board of Canada is an instance of this. It ranks the production of "more complete and more accessible records for future generations" as one of the basic aims of better records management. With this end in view, departments and agencies are directed "to document their activities in an adequate fashion," and the Dominion Archivist, in his role as records watchdog, is required "to assess . . . the extent to which the important policies and programmes of the department are documented for future research" and—it might well have been added—for the possible future use of the Government itself.

The final decision on disposal must rest with the archivist. At this point friction can arise, and it is easy to understand why. In effect the archivist claims to know best, and this attitude is never a good way in which to win friends and influence people. The situation calls for tact and understanding, and these are not always forthcoming. Relations between the archivist and the records manager are frequently complicated by the fact that the senior staff who establish a records management service have served previously in the archives proper. This was the case, for example, in my own institution. The rule that final decisions regarding disposal must rest with the archivist must nevertheless be applied, even though this procedure may have the appearance of implying that your chiefs of records management have somehow lost the competence they possessed previously when they functioned as archivists in the manuscript division. A system must be built upon principles and not upon the unusual qualifications of individuals who happen to occupy specific positions at any given time. The passing years will soon bring into senior records positions people who have not had archival experience; indeed, this has already happened in Ottawa.

I am well aware that I am treading on delicate ground, but the only thing that can reduce or prevent friction is a frank appreciation of the points involved. There is a mystique at issue here, and a problem of communication. Sometimes I feel that it has some kinship with the lack of communication amongst those working in the fields of the sciences and the humanities, about which C. P. Snow has written so eloquently.

To my mind the key point is that we must recognize that the profession of archivist has now become so broad and varied that no one person can any longer claim to have a detailed knowledge of all its aspects. The competent records man has an expertise that the archivist whose work is concerned chiefly with a manuscript collection will not have. Conversely, the archivist will have his

own expertise, and in particular he will have to have an appreciation of long-term values that the records manager need not possess. Other specialized segments of our profession will certainly arise in the future, as collections grow and the materials which they contain become more varied in character—as they undoubtedly will.

Our debt to the records managers is very great, in at least two respects. In the first place, it is they who are bringing order out of chaos in the handling of official papers and who have made possible the systematic retirement of files from which archival collections have benefited immensely. If we look about us and note the archival institutions in which the collections of official records are sparse or almost nonexistent, we find almost invariably that those institutions are in States or Provinces where there is no adequate records management program. Adequate selection and preservation are by-products of good records management. Appendix D in Dr. Posner's survey report, *American State Archives*, is relevant in this connection. In the second place, the records managers have been of great assistance in establishing the vital point that adequate archival and records services have practical value and can make it possible for a government to function both more efficiently and more cheaply. The old conception of the archives as being nothing more than a haven for antiquarians is passing. Officials and scholars alike are becoming accustomed to the fact that people in our searchrooms are as likely to be using records and papers only a few years—or even a few months—old as those dating back a century or more. A better appreciation of what the archives can offer has resulted in more generous financial support—a change we owe, in many instances, to the work of the records managers.

So much for some of the changes that have already taken place in the role of the archivist. What of the future?

In his new study, *The Management of Archives*, Dr. Schellenberg devotes an interesting chapter to "The Development of the Archival Profession." He points out quite rightly that a profession should represent systematized and widely accepted principles and techniques in its field of activity. These we have not formulated as yet in any final form, and some difficulties stand in the way of our doing so. Old established institutions with large collections were not able to postpone the classification and description of those collections until practices that could be regarded as standard became established. When principles and techniques have finally been agreed upon, the cost of applying them to large collections already dealt with on other lines may make their adoption difficult. But it is clearly essential that we should proceed at once with discussions

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and experiments that will help establish standards. I hope that the series of manuals that the Society plans to sponsor in collaboration with the American Association for State and Local History will furnish an opportunity to make suggestions and elicit ideas.

There are many matters to be settled, not the least of them being that of terminology. A proper understanding of terms can be highly important. I noted the other day that in the course of an investigation into the sexual habits of teenagers in Great Britain a girl had been asked the inevitable question: "Are you a virgin?" To which she replied: "Not yet."

I am sorry to say that before I passed the preliminary pages of *The Management of Archives* I found myself in serious disagreement with Dr. Schellenberg on this matter of terminology. "Records," he tells us, is "a generic term, used synonymously with the term *material*, that includes both *archives*, a term customarily used to refer to material of public origin, and *historical records*, customarily used to refer to material of private origin." In the Public Archives of Canada every one of these terms has been used for years with a quite different meaning. We confine the term *records* to the official records of the Government of Canada or of some other corporate body. Such things as the personal papers of political leaders, literary manuscripts, and private letters and diaries seem to us to be improperly described as records; our omnibus word for all such material is *manuscripts*, and it serves us very well. Amongst other things it has enabled us to organize a vast mass of miscellaneous papers into manuscript groups, each of which brings together collections that are alike in kind or in period or, occasionally, in subject matter. This stratagem has worked admirably and I commend it to anyone who has a problem similar to ours.

Some uniformity in terminology and techniques is obviously desirable, even though this random example shows that it may be difficult to achieve. But if we begin with principles, I think we can accomplish much, and I hope that we may be able to contribute something from across the border. Our hope lies, as Dr. Schellenberg points out, in the fact that "the reverse of Gresham's law applies to methodology." If we can establish good principles and sound techniques they will gradually drive out the bad.

One last point. If we have become a profession, the day should be approaching when two things will follow. It should be recognized that work with records and manuscripts can be done well and expertly only by a trained archivist. By and large the amateur should keep out. This remark is prompted by the way in which a large

number of institutions—especially colleges and universities—are embarking enthusiastically upon the collection of manuscripts without any real conception of what their proper care and servicing will involve. I could name institutions in which papers of some importance have never been unpacked, let alone shelved or cataloged, and others in which it has been found impossible to examine collections in any detail or to service them. Records and manuscripts—no matter whose definition may be used—require skilled and expensive attention, but this truth is less widely known and appreciated than it should be.

We are rapidly leaving far behind the peaceful but passive days of the antiquarian archivist. We belong to a dynamic and developing profession that, amongst other things, is charged with the critical responsibility of determining, to a great extent, the documentation relating to the present and the past that will be available to scholars in the future. Surely this is a charge and a challenge that should rouse all of us to our best efforts.

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