

Business Records: The Canadian Scene

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IN speaking of historical manuscripts I have used the term to include business records and the private papers of businessmen. Canada has not any great number of business records, though the importance of this type of material was recognized early by archivists. Historians in Canada, especially in the 19th century, were preoccupied with political history. The reason, no doubt, stems from the fact that few business records were available in 19th-century Canada. Not that there weren't businesses, for there were. But Canada's basic large businesses were shipping, shipbuilding, lumbering, milling, distilling, fishing, and banking. These firms were still growing, taking over small fry and in no mood to make public all the details of their business. At the local level were the blacksmith, the miller, the brickmaker, the shoemaker, the country store, the innkeeper. The records of such small trades were generally ignored by the historian and by the local historical society. Not until after the turn of the century was there rapid industrialization, and then it was concentrated in Ontario and Quebec.

We get some inkling of an awakened interest in business records from the first report issued by the Bureau of Archives of Ontario for 1903. The Archivist writes:

The importance of the early collecting of data concerning the business development of the Province has been urged by several correspondents, and in consequence of the representations made to me I have begun a collection of papers, maps, pamphlets, reports, surveys, etc. in connection with the promotion and construction of railways and canals in Ontario, and the hearty co-operation promised by those with whom I am in communication shows a keen interest in this line of research.¹

The Public Archives of Canada also gathered business records, although chiefly because the papers of important industrialists included their business records; these were thought to be secondary in importance to the records of the individual's public life. The Provincial Archives of British Columbia gathered in business records because fur trading, lumbering, mining, and transportation were so much a part of the early history of the Province. In any event every public archival institution at one time or another collected or was given the records of businessmen and the records of business firms. But at no time was there any extra effort made

The author, University Archivist and professor of history, Queen's University, Kingston, Ont., read this paper on Sept. 30, 1968, at a business archives workshop during the Society's 32d annual meeting in Ottawa, Canada.

¹ Ontario, *First Report of the Bureau of Archives for the Province of Ontario, 1903*, p. 11 (Queen's Printer, 1904).

to get more. Business records did not fit easily into the pattern of archival institutions developed in Canada.

One great problem in the handling of business records is their bulk, which is usually out of all proportion to their historical value. In the absence of a company archivist or records manager the burden of weeding, stripping, and selecting for permanent preservation falls on the archivist in the depository invited to house the collection. Few archival institutions have the space and other resources needed to tackle large collections of unsifted material if these come in any number.

A second problem with business records is the matter of access. There are legal and financial requirements demanded of businesses, and corporate bodies must keep records to satisfy these even though the records are private or business records and not public records. Because these records have been earmarked by the company they have generally been treated as restricted items not open to outside researchers. There is about company offices still a suspicion of enquirers and a suspicion of governments. Unless this is offset by a realization of the potential research value of the collection, the records generally remain closed.

I think that a strong case can be made for the argument that a corporation not only is responsible for living within the law of the host country but should contribute to the country's general welfare. John Andreassen calls this the factor of "historical accountability" in his paper entitled "Canadian National Railway Records" written in 1963. This is a good term; translated into active citizenship, it means either the opening of a company's records to accredited researchers or the deposit of records in an archival depository, where they become available to responsible scholars under whatever terms of access the company sets.

If archivists emphasize "historical accountability," which I suppose is another term for a sense of history and tradition, then surely company officers will emphasize security and confidentiality. This is understandable. There are trade secrets, there are competitors, there are muck-rakers. Fortunately the days of excess seem to be of the past, and archivists can offer safekeeping. Company officers today recognize a changing climate of opinion.

Many companies have come to terms with the present in the matter of giving access to records. Private enterprise cannot keep enterprise "private" by closing its records. A developing sense of maturity permits company presidents today to admit that excesses took place and that mistakes were made. Dark areas have occurred in business history, but the historian is not seeking evidences of a shocker for the sake of shocking. He is interested in the whole story, in the whole context.

Some businesses have financed the writing of their histories. Merrill Denison's *History of the Bank of Montreal* is a prime example of a carefully researched and well documented history of an institution. It proves to the historian at least that the institution's records still exist. The historian respects the history as a reference tool but he is not likely

to be completely satisfied with it as the definitive work on the subject. He will want to go over the same records that Dennison worked through, and for an equally legitimate purpose. A business concern should not expect a history to be a satisfactory substitute for access to the original records. Nor should the company administrators feel free to throw out records once the history of the firm is published. A history, no matter how complete, is yet but one man's view. No historian will be satisfied to rely on memory or on a second-hand source.

If we are to understand and appraise the historical role of private enterprise in Canadian society, we simply must have access to business records. Business leaders may justly complain that Canadian history texts accent politics, wars, and dates and pay little attention to economic history save perhaps for beaver skins and wheat. No one, however, can adequately describe the role of business in Canada's history without access to business records. The only certain way to ensure that business records are preserved and administered for research purposes is to establish business archives.

This is a good note on which to approach the disposition of records in the crown corporations, which are public businesses. It comes as something of a shock to learn that the Public Archives of Canada does not have control over the records of crown corporations set up by the Canadian Parliament. The corporations in this respect are treated as private business concerns. It is to the credit of the officials of some of these corporations that they have voluntarily requested advice and assistance from the Public Archives and have made arrangements for the deposit of records in that institution. It is very much to the credit of the Dominion Archivist that he should command such implicit trust. One corporation does deserve special mention. This is the Canadian National Railways, which signed a formal agreement with the Public Archives of Canada on January 28, 1963, making provision for the corporation to deposit all archival materials with the Public Archives of Canada. One man who deserves much credit for this arrangement is John C. L. Andreassen, who was engaged as Systems Archivist of the CNR in 1962. He is now University Archivist at McGill.

I heartily approve of voluntary agreements voluntarily arrived at! But I wonder whether voluntary arrangements with Federal crown or public corporations are good enough. Crown corporations' records are every whit as "public" as are the records of a department of Government. Should the safekeeping of these records, then, depend on the interest evinced by executive officers and the tactful diplomacy of the Dominion Archivist? If there is any validity to the proposition that a private business making its "living" in Canada owes to its host the safekeeping of its records for scholarly research, then surely there is the strongest case for ensuring that the public records of public or crown corporations come under adequate controls to prevent wanton destruction.

Provincial governments in Canada have been much more forthright in

this respect than has the Federal Government. Perhaps this is because the common type of crown corporation at the Provincial level, the public utility, affects the lives of most citizens. In most instances there is but an indistinct line of demarcation between department and corporation. The majority of Canadian Provinces have passed legislation bringing crown corporations within the compass of established public records programs.

The development of public records programs at the Provincial level, however, has been uneven. Many public utilities were set up before there was any thought of public records programs or records storage centres. Since these bodies were accountable to legislative committees for moneys spent, essential records were kept and records programs installed.

The Atlantic Provinces of Canada show a mixture of public and private ownership in the utilities field. The Nova Scotia Power Commission was set up in 1919 as a publicly owned utility. The Nova Scotia Light and Power Co. functioned as a private concern. The New Brunswick Electric Power Commission is a public corporation. Both Nova Scotia and New Brunswick are served by privately owned telephone companies. The records of crown corporations in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, Newfoundland, and Prince Edward Island come under legislation dealing with public records.

Quebec has passed no legislation dealing with public records. The Quebec Hydro-Electric Commission, a crown corporation, has contracted with the Records Management Co. of Canada for the management of its records. In Ontario the records of crown corporations, except for the Hydro-Electric Power Commission of Ontario, come under the legislation covering departmental public records. Ontario Hydro was excepted because it had developed a comprehensive and efficient internal records program, with the records open to scholarship.

In Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and Alberta crown corporations are specifically included in legislation covering public records. The Saskatchewan Power Corp. has developed a satisfactory records program internally and this is fully integrated with the general public records program of the Province. When British Columbia Electric Co. was taken over by the Provincial government, the company's records became the property of the Provincial Archives. British Columbia Telephone, a private company, has a records program administered by a records management institute in New York.

The *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* came out after I had done considerable research to ascertain the holdings of business records in Canadian repositories. I have confirmed my own research from the Union List with allowances made for late accessions and a difference in interpretation where private papers appear to be business records. I have judged the importance of a collection primarily on the basis of physical size. We agree that that is a very unscientific approach but at least I have treated all alike.

According to my findings there are some 55 significant collections of business papers in Canadian archival institutions. I am not dealing with crown corporations here. The Public Archives of Canada has 30 of these. The Provincial institutions of Nova Scotia, Ontario, Manitoba, Saskatchewan, and British Columbia have 14 in all. There are 11 collections in such places as Queen's University Archives, the University of Western Ontario, the University of Waterloo, Glenbow Archives, McCord Museum, New Brunswick Museum, and the Lennox and Addington Historical Society.

The collections cover such basic businesses as fishing, lumbering, general merchandising, banking, fur-trading, railway building, shipping, mining, distilling, iron-foundries, and brewing. Eighteen of the businesses were of the pre-Confederation era. The great majority were of the 1890-1925 period. There was only one firm that had been active after 1929. It is significant that there are very few records of later manufacturing companies or food processing companies or clothing firms. But before the too earnest researcher begins to compute the percentage of firms whose records have been saved, he should remember that many, many early firms were absorbed by larger firms. The Bank of Montreal, for example, absorbed numerous smaller banking concerns. Canada Steamship Lines, founded in 1913, took over 26 constituent companies, some going back to the 1850's. These records have survived, but they are not in archival institutions.

Though the picture set out above is somewhat austere, the present holds some promise of better things. There is a noticeable increase in the interest shown by business concerns in business archives. I do not refer to records programs here, but rather to archives such as the T. Eaton Company Archives, the Molson Brewing Company Archives, the Walker Museum and Archives in Windsor. In these last few years other concerns, including banks and other financial institutions, have followed this lead. Usually the business archives begins as an archives cum museum agency. None would qualify as thoroughgoing archival institutions. They may become such, but it will be some years yet before company officials step up from records programs to company archives. Economic factors justify records programs. There must be present in the company, in addition, a strong sense of history and tradition before the officers will set up a company archives and, through it, make the firm's records available for research. I do not think that there will be any rush in this direction. A much more probable development will see universities clamouring for the records either as lone wolves or in more orderly fashion, under the umbrella of some national organization. For the sake of convenience to scholars I hope it is the latter.

In turning to the university sector I speak with a different emphasis though not with a different, or forked, tongue. I am not pleading a cause here for I was in charge of a Provincial archives office for some years. I am simply putting forward my opinion on the probable future relation-

ship of business to universities. Universities have a strong case to plead in asking business concerns to deposit records. University archives are thrice blest for as learned institutions they can offer security, disinterested professionalism, and a select user clientele. A university archivist can promise a company that only bona fide scholars will be granted access to records. It is, I find, easier to negotiate terms with business officials as a university officer than it was as a Provincial Archivist. The archivist in a public archival institution may disagree with me.

Archival methodology as developed in public archival institutions is now generally applicable to university archives. The leadership shown by the Public Archives of Canada in extending the group principle to nongovernment material has made it comparatively easy for an archival institution to set up manuscript groups. Business records fit readily into such an arrangement. The nature of business records, however, precludes any compulsory transfer to official centres. Universities can apply moral suasion. They can offer many of the services a public agency can offer but without the shadow of government in the background. University archives can point to reasonable costs, for a great deal of work can be done by graduate students, under proper direction.

No doubt some of you will have read Richard H. Lytle's article entitled "The Relationship Between Archives and Records Management: an Archivist's View,"² which appeared in April 1968. He raises the important matter of a widening isolation between the two professions as apparent in the United States. As a Canadian archivist who has been the chairman of a Public Documents Committee and a university archivist, I read the article with deep interest, but not with the same concern evidenced by some university archivists in the United States. Because of the tradition of public archives in Canada most archivists in the public service, whether at the Provincial or Federal level, are involved in records programs and in archival programs. Every public archival institution in Canada, save one, acts as a public records office and as an archival repository for historical manuscripts. At the higher levels at least, every archivist in the public service in Canada, Provincial or Federal, is betimes both records manager and archivist.

This tradition has not carried over completely into the university field in Canada, but it is still strong. Again, the reasons are to be found in our history. The older universities in Canada—McGill, Queen's, Laval, Dalhousie, the University of Toronto, and the University of Western Ontario—were established and had established libraries and graduate schools before most Provinces had established public archival institutions. These university libraries acquired manuscripts and the librarians worried these treasures, and worried themselves, in their efforts to manage them. Only at Queen's and at Laval was a conscious decision made to establish a University Archives which would be both a records office for

² Lytle, in *Records Management Quarterly*, p. 5-8.

the institution and a repository for research materials in manuscript form. McGill and the University of Toronto each established an archival institution but circumscribed the role to that of a records office for the university served. Only at McGill was the University Archivist made a ranking officer of the university, reporting directly to the Principal. We do bear the marks of our past!

Lytle, in his article, writes of the preoccupation of university archivists with the needs of scholarship. Quite frankly, though I am a professor of history and also University Archivist, I do not hold such a preoccupation. Certainly I regard the Queen's University Archives as a rich resource for graduate research in the humanities, and I am concerned that the holdings in the Archives be processed for users. But I consider my primary task as Archivist to be the establishment of the Archives as the records office for the university, and I will not be content until a thoroughgoing records management program has been inaugurated, covering all offices in the university. I do not expect any serious arguments from my colleagues in history, nor do I expect any unsurmountable resistance from the administration. I just need more staff, more space, and more time.

No single Canadian archival depository has strong collections of business records, sufficient to support a broad graduate program of research. The *Union List of Manuscripts in Canadian Repositories* is a most valuable research tool in this connection, for it lists business papers from all depositories in Canada; and, where family papers have a business connection, this aspect is mentioned. Still, the total is disappointingly small, and the rate of intake very slow. There are not sufficient business archives established to give any assurance that business records will be preserved for research purposes without further effort on someone's part.³ We must do better than sit in contemplation of this scene.

Records programs there are in the business world, and even the most skeptical archivist will welcome these. But, if a records program means that the essential records of a company are to be preserved and locked away from scholars, then one's joy can be restrained. Even here, if it is a matter of a records program operated by a records management concern—or no program—archivists will of course opt for the program. As a matter of fact a records program operative in a company makes the ordering of the records of the company, should these come to an archival institution, a simple matter. Indeed, the mass quantity of business records will not be so great a problem in the future as records programs become the rule rather than the exception.

There are scores of businesses, however, which hold old records,

³ A compilation made privately in 1968 showed 11 business archives, including T. Eaton Co., the Canadian Pacific Railway Co., the Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce, Molsons, and the Bank of Montreal.

unused, stashed away in second-grade storage. Some of these businesses have changed hands and the old records have been forgotten. Some old records have been deliberately forgotten. In some instances family businesses have been discontinued, and the mute evidence of the history of such enterprises moulders in attic and warehouse. Fire, mildew, vermin, and souvenir hunters will eventually erase the last evidence of such remnants of Canada's economic history.

Even when old records in bulk have been rescued by some enterprising sleuth and deposited in an archival institution, the struggle is not over. The staff of that Archives is faced with the long, dirty, expensive task of sorting, cleaning, and arranging the collection. Few archival institutions have the staff or budget or space to cope with many large deposits of old records. The problem will be less pressing in the future if records managers have their way. It seems to me reasonable that the archival institution taking in old records in bulk, and making them available for research, should receive outside financial assistance. Whether such assistance comes from a foundation or in the form of a special grant from a corporation makes little difference. True, the institution receiving the records, if it is a university institution, thereby acquires unique resources that may be a factor in attracting faculty and researchers. That increment, it seems to me, might balance off the costs of servicing and housing a collection that had been acquired through a records program. But a large collection of old unsorted records is another matter.

This still does not make good a noticeable lack in Canada's archival resources. No haphazard program is likely to result in a concentration of similar resources in one or more places where researchers may do comparative studies or research in depth. Perhaps this lack may be made good through the work of a council representing the national interests of business and scholarship. Perhaps this will be the role of the Business Archives Council of Canada. It would seem that such a council would be acceptable to the business community and to the community of archivists. In any event the formation of the council is a sign of vigour and good intentions in an area that has lain fallow for many years.

The Business Archives Council of Canada seeks to apply the American idea of specialized repositories for business records. For various reasons the council has chosen to establish a pilot project at a University Archives.⁴ One can envisage regional depositories elsewhere—in the Atlantic Provinces, in Quebec, in Northern Ontario, in the Prairie Provinces, and in British Columbia. To the American idea of specialized repositories the council would apply the British device of a voluntary self-supporting organization with a head office, to act as a coordinating body. The head office will carry on correspondence and negotiations at the

⁴ Queen's University Archives was designated the depository for the St. Lawrence region in 1968. Queen's has a strong archival tradition, a nucleus of professionally trained staff, and an interested administration to back up the responsibility accepted.

national level; the regional depositories will carry on the more practical arrangements for deposit and use. The council would be concerned with general policy; it would not control the policies of the regional depository.

The role of the council as outlined above should have an appeal to researchers. When fully operative it would concentrate resources of business records in regions, bringing together records from business concerns operating in each region. I cannot see such a concern as the Saskatchewan Wheat Pool agreeing to send its records to a depository in the Atlantic Provinces, but there would be a good argument for depositing these records in the prairie region. If this were done, and if other business concerns cooperated, the records of the Wheat Pool would be held along with the records of farm implement companies, milling concerns, meatpacking businesses, and a number of service industry records. Of course the council would encourage companies to establish internal archives.

It is a great Canadian pastime to lay the blame for sins of omission on our ancestors, while outlining grandiose plans for our progeny. Well may we ask with a former distinguished Canadian historian, George W. Brown: "What would we not give for the early records of the Cunard Company or of the Canada Company, burned as junk?" And we can agree with him when, on learning that the early records of an important Canadian industry were cut up for toilet paper for the company's employees, he remonstrated that "such a measure is hard to justify even as a war-time economy." But are we any less guilty than our predecessors? We have resources of money, staff, and techniques never dreamed of by the men of old. Our capacity to pay lipservice to the importance of history seems unlimited. But, if it had not been for the work of public archival institutions in housing some business records, our cupboards would be bare indeed. We must now do more.

What will be the verdict of future archivists? It may not be quite so bleak as we fear. I went through a comprehensive list of present-day Canadian businesses, choosing 30 that would give a good coverage by product, by region, and by corporate structure. Having made the selection I investigated the general state of their recordkeeping. Seven concerns had archives each staffed with at least one full-time person. Thirteen others had instituted some system of records management. Ten had made no special effort to preserve vital records or to maintain older, dormant records. Not altogether black! If this trend toward records managers and archivists continues and if we can provide the vehicle to get business records into the mainstream of research, we shall have accomplished much. Whether that research then takes place in a business archives or some other archival institution won't matter. If we instill an appreciation of and a need for archives, then we can leave to the next generation, with more than the usual aplomb, the problems of record storage centres for industry and the concentration of research resources.