

# The Discipline of History and The Education of the Archivist

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YOU MAY WONDER WHY, at such a time as this when you are once more celebrating the solemn festival of *Clio Americana Invicta* I should presume such a thoroughly domestic subject as what may appear to you as the care and feeding of handmaidens (or should I say handpersons?).

However, I make no apologies, for I believe that you should consider where the profession of archivist may be leading us and how best we should be equipping ourselves to serve our clientele, in particular scholars of American history. The opinions expressed are my own, and if I sound too dogmatic I intend to probe rather than preach and do not offer proof for all my assertions.

For archivists as for historians, these are troubled times. For over five millennia the archivist, in one guise or another, has shown a remarkable instinct for survival. Society has always tolerated, usually respected, and sometimes honored the faithful keepers of its memory. We can boast a lineage back to the households of priest-kings where the scribes made the entry, kept the record, and presumably devised and designed the format on the physical base, the "medium of record." These media have not only carried messages but, by their physical nature, have transformed society. Cheap, durable clay when soft allowed the stylus to make its rapid indelible uniform impressions well suited to the inventory and the stock in trade of Sumerian commerce; papyrus accepted the sophisticated brush strokes which could extend over long continuous rolls the *volumina* of libraries for a literate elite or the registers of the Mediterranean armies; parchment, rough and durable, could survive the climates of Europe and the attentions of public servants and ecclesiastics over long periods, but its cost and texture predicated the set hands, abbreviations, and formal entries of the registers, rolls, accounts, and charters. Paper, on the other hand, was much cheaper and could take the hard-driving pens of secretaries chasing depositions like modern tape recorders and amassing correspondence in the state papers of nationalism. All these developments overlapped and had their counterparts in what we are pleased to call "the private sector."

Today we are back to an earlier format of rolls for film and magnetic tape, and we as archivists are the heirs of all these media and communication systems. Meanwhile our mandate has come to extend over every facet of society and over the very recent past. We can no longer be content with the old and the arcane. For one medium alone we have gathered in a paper mountain, itself only a fragment of the total output of public or private bureaucracy generated during the industrial age in which the repetitive format of ledger, letter book, and box file parodies the mass production and fragmentation of the assembly line. We also collect pictures, photographs, maps, and film; and our traditional record keeping role has been shaped both by the media of the records described above and by the media of communica-

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tion, (pictogram, ideogram, phonetic alphabet, manuscript, or printed page with all their attendant iconography). Add to all this the output of radio, TV, the computer, and the satellite, which can be recorded more or less permanently; no wonder that appraisal and selection pose tremendous problems! At present the sheer cost of preservation imposes its own constraints and prevents us being drowned in a sea of record. But more and more is being generated and preserved at relatively less cost, and we are fast approaching an age when information becomes the principal staple and we will perhaps achieve our professional apotheosis.

Our predecessors kept the memory of literate societies usually for the purposes of law, rights, customs, personal identity, and resources. For most of that time their training was an apprenticeship within the bureaucracies large and small that supported them, they became specialists in a rather narrow clerical sense, and they even wrote in hands that visibly distinguished them from their fellow civil servants in other departments. Their *raison d'être* was largely administrative and they were a part of the organism of which their records were the secretions. There was a comfortable security and identity in that.

The modern archivist, and to some extent the manuscript curator (although this latter activity has origins in ancient and famous libraries), is coterminous with "scientific" history. As the study of history became self-consciously fragmented and professional, so the archivist accumulated around him the records of bureaucracies whether public or private (and large families were often petty bureaucracies) together with the papers of individuals. The ties of the *creators* of the material became tenuous, brief, and sometimes nonexistent; the modern counterparts of the keepers of the records, or guardians of vellum-filled libraries, floated free upon uncharted seas with only administrative history and a few basic principles as guides. The *contents* of archival repositories were brought together in an entirely artificial way (unless they contained the records of the parent body). This is not to say that the collections themselves were artificial; in most cases they were not, and archival principles preserved or re-created their original order. However, the specialization in industrial society has required that if records and papers are to survive they must be wrenched out of their environments and placed in the care of a person who is not a historian, not a librarian, or not a museum curator; we were reduced to defining what we were *not* and that is not helpful to a sense of identity. Many people became archivists because they did *not* wish to do other things. We are museum curators in that we deal with documents as hand crafted artifacts removed from their environment, we are almost librarians when we handle the printed ephemera that comes our way, and some of us divide our hearts with the historians in that our unique, organically created material has a relevance to specific instances in time (and, we are increasingly aware, to time series) and place which we describe as "historical." We have tended to make common cause with other professions—librarians, curators, others—only in the field of conservation. Mould is a great leveller. In parts of North America where the tradition of institutional record keeping is not so strong, the historians have often taken the initiative and archivists have, in a sense, become their handmaids. However, we are learning to serve a wider public, and what seemed a comfortable "upstairs-downstairs" situation is changing. We are once more adrift, and here may lie our strength as we cultivate a kind of creative nonalignment.

Ironically, it is just at a time when the old fragmentation and specialization of "jobs" is collapsing in our post-industrial society that the archivist, having remained free so long, is seeking the right of other professionals to a recognized and

recognizable pigeon hole. We may be the last to do so but, for a number of reasons, it seems that, in self-defense, we must. Society deserves professional value for its money, and requires from us a recognizable badge.

However, one of the dilemmas which faces modern society is how to reconcile the specialized "professional" with the interdisciplinary "implosion" of knowledge that Marshall McLuhan seems to have identified correctly. In a world where information is becoming the universal staple, we who move it must contend with the old, historically valid, fragmented professions, buttressed by professional associations, examinations, and standards which are often by nature intensely conservative in outlook. Creativity is often won in spite of professionalism; many of the great inventors had a minimal education, and artists in particular are aware of the problem.

This will, I believe, be only a transient phase in the long run. A generation from now will probably see initial training in the basics and groundwork of library/information/archives science leading to specialization in archives during the second year. There is a new, universal information grammar to be devised and learned. We are dealing here less with techniques than with language and communication circuitry and it is in this context that the craft of the archivist will be practiced. We should thrive in this new environment for we have always worked within a field theory of information derived from the organic nature of archival originals.

In the light of this future and because, essentially, we practice a craft, we must seek to preserve our oral tradition of instruction, our empiricism and flexibility, and our holistic approach to the archival scene, so that we enter the whole information field from a position of strength and not as a desperate leap onto the bandwagon of information science.

First, we should recognize that preparation for the role of archivist in society may be much more varied than we are usually prepared to accept. There is an archivist in Canada who holds a Ph.D. in chemistry and gave up a career in that field. He thrives. One of the pioneer archivists in England who established the first county record office was a biologist who devised an organic taxonomy of quarter sessions records which is still in general use. One of the first to receive the archives diploma with distinction at the University of Liverpool was a non-graduate. An experience of, and reverence for, life and knowledge relating to the organic nature of society, in whatever way this is obtained, will be of great value. It may take the form of a university degree, and in the present state of society it probably will. There is likely to be a preponderance of history degrees, and the whole study of history is itself undergoing responsive change; but we should never exclude those who show excellence in the craft of archivist and do not have a degree. Again, higher degrees do not necessarily make for better archivists; but they often do, and this should be recognized. There is even a danger that specialization arising from excessively specialized historical research may blind the prospective archivist to potentials in archives which those with a broader educational base may perceive. But there will, of course, always be a need for specialists having custody of specialized collections. Next, since the journeyman archivist needs a badge, we should hasten to pin one on him as soon as possible.

The Council of the SAA is at present considering a draft scheme for the voluntary certification of archivists and institutions offering archival education by which the certified archivist may be recognized as having reached a basic standard of competence according to an approved set of educational guidelines which cover very briefly the following ground:

1. The nature of archives, including principles, methodology, terminology, legislation, administrative history, palaeography, and diplomatic.
2. The acquisition of archives in the public and private sectors including techniques, strategies, appraisal, and acquisition strategies within various "universes."
3. The processing of archives including arrangement and description, finding aids and indexes, conservation, workflow, and building design.
4. The use of archives including reference and extension services, access, security, and public relations.
5. The administration of archival repositories, including program planning, budgeting, and staff management.

To which must be added substantial laboratory *practicum*.

This should, however, be seen only as a beginning which will recognize the better archives course offerings as they exist at present in whatever department or faculty they are to be found. As Frank Burke has said, we have concentrated too much on techniques, too little on philosophical perception. We should, I believe, be working now toward the establishment of an institute for advanced archival studies where research up to the Ph.D. level may be carried out and where ultimately there may emerge a postgraduate degree in archival science which will become the norm for entry into the profession. I would like to suggest the following as some of the areas for advanced research: we need to develop our pioneer but rudimentary archival networks so that they become responsive to pattern recognition and the demands of regional history in all its forms; we who are now senior archivists will have to learn to supplement our "mental sets" derived from our own historical training and learn from those now entering our profession with more recent perceptions.

The historians have already helped us a great deal in our task, and we must learn to respond to their insights. We now see time less as a continuum than as an influence constantly reshaping our present in subtle ways that often escape us; as archivists we are constantly trying to discern patterns rather than impose them, and we are desperately trying not to mistake the parts for the whole. We have come a long way from the viewpoint of the New Brunswick historian who confidently wrote a "definitive" history of the province from the transactions of its legislative assembly, to the definition of "historical social research" as perceived by Samuel Hays, which underpins so much regional history. He identifies two main elements:

One is a concern for the broad structural characteristics of society and the long-term changes in those characteristics . . . a discontent with the narrow range of vision of limited segments of space and time, and a desire that the frame of reference be a set of articulated concepts of social change. The other is the accompanying desire to bring into the study of the past the whole range of society . . . the nonpeople and the non-events, not simply the mass of people as a mass but all segments of the social order, from top to bottom, as an interacting whole."<sup>1</sup>

Kenneth Thibodeau has posed more specifically the question of whether this is an age of profound or superficial change. To answer this we will need: "Masses of data, first, coherently and appropriately organized. Secondly, objective and unambiguous measures of change. Thirdly, the ability to extract from the data the

<sup>1</sup> Samuel P. Hays, "The Use of Archives for Historical Statistical Inquiry," in Meyer H. Fishbein, ed., *The National Archives and Statistical Research* (Athens: Ohio University Press, 1973), p. 60.

information needed to apply the measures of change and perform the associated tests."<sup>2</sup>

We should be much more conversant with the technique of quantitative research and pattern recognition which help to overcome the problem that the fragmentary survival of the papers of elites (let alone the rest) color our view, especially if the writer is more voluminous than typical—cases in which you might say the squeaky quill gets the space!

What is attempted in quantitative research is not full knowledge of reality but an increasingly closer approximation to it: what has been described in a mathematical metaphor that is entirely appropriate, as the asymptotic approach to truth.<sup>3</sup>

We must learn to respond to historical social research which is systematic rather than intuitive, whereby the historian no longer gets the feel by immersion in the evidence but tests historical descriptions and hypotheses, probing in a tactile way through the computer. However, the technical aspect of the numbers game should not overshadow concept and method. A preponderance of quantitative studies in political and urban history in the United States are a direct response to the appropriate records being available, mostly through the computer; but unrealistic expectations of what can be achieved through quantification should be avoided. The archivist, like the historian, has learned to become wary of the computer.

These techniques employed should be studied by the archivist because in the drive for greater objectivity the records become central, the historian's gloss more peripheral. It is becoming increasingly unacceptable to speak of a "typical" entrepreneur or politician in a particular field; dichotomies and homogeneities ("blacks and whites", "national character") become less prominent, as in the archives themselves, suggesting that in our cataloging techniques we should be very careful how we classify and categorize information out of context. We recognize the need for a rich variety of disaggregate descriptions and records from all levels of society.

It is within this context that the uniform but individually insignificant pieces of data in central and local records become so important, especially at the level of the record series (specific operational activities of departments of government), case papers, and legal papers. These are precisely the series which archivists in the past have found to be so intractable, partly because they defy retrieval by subject, partly because of their bulk, and partly because of their insignificance at the item level, given manual retrieval only. We have sometimes taken comfort in aggregates and sampling, but neither route is giving much comfort to our clients. Most of us are sensitive enough to have a bad conscience about this destruction, but in the face of space shortages and hitherto little indication of a user demand, we had no choice. Even archives have to be reasonably cost-effective or, more correctly, use-effective. Sampling is no help to block-face analysis when relating the census returns to tax records, for instance.

We need to reexamine constantly our philosophy of appraisal and selection. In public records, do we keep too much that is evidentiary, too little that is informational? A great deal may be just bureaucrats talking to each other to very

<sup>2</sup> Kenneth Thibodeau, "Machine Readable Archives and Future History," in *Computers and Humanities*, vol. 10 (1976), p. 91.

<sup>3</sup> W. C. Aydelotte, A. G. Bogue, and R. W. Fogel, *The Dimensions of Quantitative Research in History* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1972), p. 11.



little purpose. We become what we behold, and we must learn to shape the administration and management of our media of record accordingly. Regional and thematic history, for instance, is essentially interdisciplinary and multimedia in the documentary sense. The nonlinear, spatial nature of urban and geographical studies draws on maps and photography, including the time-series of topographical maps and aerial photographs. Alterations to dwellings, as revealed in photographs, can also be linked to changing family fortunes and life styles. "The rhetoric of a geographer is the rhetoric of the map," and the photographic aggregate provides a gestalt which is hard to perceive in any other way. A further development which the archivist should study is record linkage as a kind of microbiography. Just as the antiquary has passed down to us a love of the document as an artifact to be appreciated for its own sake, so the genealogist has kept alive the notion that we are all part of a great chain of being, a kind of universal double helix; but whereas so much of genealogy is the rather arid compilation of a family organization chart within a fixed hierarchical structure, it could become immensely revealing about specific people, and not just aggregates, within the context of a wider study.

We for our part must learn to perceive more clearly, and articulate our interdependence with our professional neighbors. First, we have to recognize that the days are past when archivists could run their repositories (or even divisions within a repository) as little fiefdoms from which they looked out with no little suspicion at their professional neighbors and carved out spheres of influence as best they could. This is, of course, a caricature since archivists, by the nature of their calling pragmatic and adverse to systems, learn to be tolerant of eccentricity among their colleagues. We do not need a highly articulated *system* of archives in this country; but it is time that we examined together the "universe" of our archival responsibility as it exists, using Buckminster Fuller's definition of a universe as the aggregate of all consciously apprehended and communicated experiences. For archivists these are the experiences which survive on record and much of it is still "out there." We have in the past assumed an infinity of acquisition potential in our bailiwick, to be harvested on specific fishing expeditions or by deposit of riches on our doorsteps. This has worked well enough in an era when the researcher/historian was prepared to infer the whole from the part, often snatched at random from destruction by the archivist. If we are to achieve true pattern recognition, we should develop the art of survey and identification and try to select more systematically from the total existing record what should be preserved, and establish priorities among ourselves, with the aid of the users; although this is much more easily said than done, for we operate within a jungle of mandates.

If the media of record are and always have been "change agents," and I believe H. A. Innis and Marshall McLuhan have made the case, we as custodians should pay more attention to what the media theorists are saying. We need not go all the way with technological determinism to recognize the profound effect of media on society, and we should be able to contribute our own insights through, for instance, the study of diplomatic. Such an approach would move this somewhat esoteric though valuable pursuit aimed, for instance, at the dating of early documents and the unravelling of the more arcane administrations of the middle ages, to a more fundamental level of the relationship of form to content in the media of record as a whole. Official documents are devised in specific ways to achieve certain administrative effects irrespective of content. In every age, people are more governed than they like to admit. The impact of government then as now is not so much via the

politician as via the bureaucrat and their record is fully documented in the archives. We need to know more about process and impact, less about results, when we research administrative history at the grass roots level.

The device of the letters patent over the royal seal being read out and shown in court to a pre-literate audience has a powerful audiovisual effect, using a technique of "show and tell" which every kindergarten has now learned to adopt. The words of command are brief and dramatic, the royal iconography majestic and powerful, the impact as telling as a modern TV commercial (which is yet another form of broadcast message). Before this parallel is dismissed as archival *lèse majesté*, we should consider the impact of commercials which reflect and create the folklore of our society and are heeded more than we are aware. They are documentaries of the first importance, and as documents the form of their presentation as opposed to their content deserves careful study.

The study of diplomatic is in a sense the study of the cliché deployed for administrative and other purposes of persuasion. Combinations of clichés capable of endless variations formed the basis of pre-literate rhythms, as in chess, and our eyes are once again being opened to their power.

We should perhaps work to ensure that those who draw sustenance and insight from archives feed on a balanced diet of media and are aware of the effects; we should be more conscious of the power of media hybrids, especially in the field of conversion to micro-images; if we have the mandate, we should ensure that our repositories have good media balance and, since we must be selective, develop the insight to choose the medium of record which is most appropriate in a given situation. There is a great deal to be learned about the popular enjoyment and appreciation of archival materials for their own sake as something comparable to, but distinct from, popular history. Above all, we must learn the "languages" of media without the benefit of syntax and with the grammar still uncertain. Only then will we be able to do full justice to our documents and our profession in the twenty-first century.

Archivists, as I have said, have developed out of a rich variety of experience and I would like to end by introducing you to my favorite colleague who has, alas, been dead these 300 years. William Prynne was very much an archivist, although he flourished in Stuart England long before the word was coined, and he was a man who would be quite at home in our company. I introduce him as a witness to the antiquity of our profession since we have been so busy renewing ourselves of late that we have almost forgotten those predecessors who have been thinking archivally for centuries and fighting in the same kind of battles as ourselves.<sup>4</sup>

William Prynne spent the greater part of his working life as a politician and was one of the most successful writers of pamphlets and tracts in his day. If he were alive now we would probably call him a journalist and I would like to remind you that the first Dominion Archivist of Canada practiced the same profession. As an indication of Prynne's success between 1634 and 1636, the Establishment marked its disapproval by fining him \$15,000, cropping his ears and branding him with the letters S L (for seditious libeller) on both cheeks. We can only assume that he was somewhat mellowed by age, because he was appointed Keeper of the Records in the Tower of London shortly after the restoration of the monarchy in 1660. John Aubrey tells us that "his manner of study was this: he wore a long quilt cap which

<sup>4</sup> My concluding passage first appeared in Hugh A. Taylor, "Archives in Britain and Canada—Impression of an Immigrant," in the *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 1, no. 7 (1969), pp. 32–33.

came two or three inches at least over his eyes which served him as an umbrella to defend his eyes from the light; about every three hours his man was to bring him a roll and a pot of ale to refocillate his wasted spirits; so he studied and drank and munched some bread; this maintained him till night and then he made a good supper”.

After a while, like all good archivists, he submitted his report on the state of the records which he says “through negligence, nescience and sloathfulness had for many years then past layen buried together in one confused chaos under corroding putrifying cobwebs, dust and filth in the darkest corners of Caesar’s Chapel in the White Tower . . . I employed some soldiers and women to remove and cleanse them from their filthiness; who soon growing weary of this noisome work left them almost as foul as they found them. Whereupon I and my clerks spent many whole days in cleansing and sorting them into distinct confused heaps in order to their future reducement into method, the old clerks of the office being unwilling to touch them for fear of endangering their eyesights and healths by the cankerous dust and evil scent.” You can see that he was a man of unquenchable spirit and enthusiasm who had not lost his gift for the telling phrase at a time when the career of archivist was not as respectable as it is today. We may not have to cope with London grime of the seventeenth century, but those “distinct confused heaps” are still very familiar.

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