

THE ARCHIVIST: SCHOLAR OR ADMINISTRATOR?

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This article looks at the relationship between scholarship and archives and reviews the debate over the archivist-historian. The need to give greater status to research as an archival function and the centrality of the historical imagination for the archival role are argued.

The relationship between scholarship and archives and the issue of research as an archival activity loom large in archival debate. At the core of the debate is the question: what is it that is unique to archives? The answer, I suggest, is that the uniqueness is in the archivist's knowledge of records, the acceptance of the fiduciary duty of trust for the care of our recorded heritage and the taking of the decision of what to keep (and to destroy). This knowledge and decision-making must be grounded in historical knowledge. History is used here in the widest sense of the word, not the academic discipline, but a way of thinking. In this paper I wish to look at the debate over the centrality of history to archives, the neglect of scholarly aspects of archival work, and the need to redress the balance.

The argument about archival scholarship impinges on the debate: should the archivist be an historian? The reasons for an affirmative answer are encapsulated in William Joyce's stimulating article, 'Archivists and research use'¹, and Tom Nesmith's eloquent argument, 'Archives from the bottom up: social history and archival scholarship'². Canadian archivists in particular are vigorously debating this issue. In 1983 George Bolotenko in *Archivaria*³ provoked controversy by promoting the cause of the archivist-historian and many replies, for and against, filled the following issues⁴: passions flared. Bolotenko raised the issue of the differing paths of archival training: the school favouring the archivist-historian and the Nortonian (Margaret Cross Norton) stream with its emphasis on administration. Bolotenko favors the former, seeing in the latter the path that lead to the current fashion for Information Management.

These are large concerns, with great import for the archivist. At issue

is the status of the archivist as scholar, and the connections between archivists and historical research: why archivists must be knowledgeable about records; why we should be participants in academic debates and why we should change from traditional passivity to a more active role. The implications of these issues have major import for our 'professionalism' and archival training.

The centrality of the Historical Imagination

To serve the needs of our users, to know their needs, the archivist should be familiar with historiography and with new trends in historical research. We need to refocus to bring forward from the shadows into the spotlight a neglected figure, our often forgotten *'raison d'être'*, the user, the researcher, primarily the historian (macro and micro) for is not research use the ultimate purpose of archives?⁵

The Society of American Archivists' Committee on Education and Professional Development found in 1983 that "training in research methods and experience in conducting original research is *essential* if the archivist is to fully discharge his or her professional responsibilities."⁶ The archivist needs to be conversant with the development of social history; with the growth of interdisciplinary approaches; with historical methodology and the great variety of sources now being used and topics being explored: as Nesmith comments, "archival work remains in essence an exercise in historical understanding."⁷

Our own archival training, however, offers no education in research methods. If trainee archivists have no experience in research, especially primary document research, how can they understand the research use of archives? Research value may be one of the most difficult values to define in deciding on the retention of records and whole arguments can range about it. It cannot however be ignored. Disposal scheduling which allows only administrative, fiscal and legal obligations to determine retention is deficient: research value is not to be covered by these alone.

Archivists need to be knowledgeable about record creation and use as a part of the history of our society. We need to know not just the form, functions and origins of the records but about the people who created them. We ought to be conversant with the current endeavours by researchers to find in the records kept evidence of the 'minor players' — the ordinary, the poor, the unpowerful. The archivist should understand the questioning that is occurring of the very meaning of evidence, and grapple with the charge that records are the products of elites — of the rich and powerful. Roper refers to our need to be an 'administrative historian'⁸; Brooke to the need for a 'modern diplomatic'⁹. Archivists need to understand the information they control and to realise that records are capable of various readings, including disinformation. "The information documents transmit is always incomplete and slanted;

documents mislead and obscure, perhaps more than they reveal. To know why that is so and how it affects their use in research we need to know something of the broad historical context which gave them birth and value."¹⁰

Research as an Archival Activity

There are two components of archival research — practical research and reference skills to assist the user and research into archives' own theory to benefit the profession. On the former, we need to understand the purposes and source needs of researchers. The researcher can rarely see all of the records: the archivist is the only one who can assist. This pivotal role in research requires knowledge of the records and ability to pathfind the researcher through the record maze. The archivist's skill is in knowing the paths to follow to locate material, using their understanding of record-keeping systems. This guidance into the records can be through finding-aids or personal contact. A more direct role can be taken in interpreting and sponsoring the use of records.

The archivist is in a peculiar position to know the records as often they are the only person to see through a whole collection. The size of holdings forces this to be true, but how often is it found that material of interest is indicated or that finding-aids are analytical as well as descriptive? Listings abound wherein every item seems to have equal weight when the archivist knows that some are gems and some dross. The gems have to be given some presence in the finding-aids. It is not impartiality not to do so as a negative or non-action is as much a taking of an attitude as a positive one. Do archivists do a dis-service to research by not revealing the depths (and shallows) of holdings? Are too many finding-aids lacklustre and of little assistance? Archivists do themselves a dis-service in not putting their knowledge into the finding-aids, which should be regarded as scholarly literature.

Apart from this practical research work, archives needs its own scholarship as well, to provide a more substantial body of archival theory. Both archival work and the 'modern diplomatic' need scholarly inquiry. Many concerns for scholarly investigation are listed by Frank Burke in his important article on archival theory¹¹. Why, as well as the usual how, have organisations functioned? What do records reveal (and not reveal) about decision-making and makers? How are records interpretations of events by record-creators?

The Archival Role

In the arguments over the place of scholarship in archives, proponents of a research function basically contend with the proposition that the traditional archivist is out of date, irrelevant, superseded by the new 'Information Manager'. This development has occurred in response to the

'Information Revolution', and its concomitant is that the archivist, or rather information specialist, should be involved with the records from their creation. None of the proponents of the archivist-historian idea denies the great challenges facing archives from the growth of records; the fragility of information and the impact of computerisation. But there is a sense of panic in those advocating the relinquishment of the traditional role. With the current loss of records through computerisation in the office, and as tellingly through the use of disposable stick-on note sheets, the historical imagination is more required than ever in endeavouring to grapple with these problems.

Surely it is for the records manager¹² to cope with the demands of modern administrations. Cooperation is called for and indeed scheduling must occur in tandem, but as the heart of the matter, Records Management dances to a different tune. As one Records Manager views the difference:

"The Archivist serves the need of the scholar, the historian, and posterity, whereas the Records Manager serves the need of a business which is usually profit-motivated . . . To put it another way, the Records Manager is basically a business administrator and the Archivist is basically a historian"¹³

Knowledge of records management for the archivist is for use as a skill, a methodology as important as computer literacy. But such tools "are not the substance or goal of archivy. That goal is broadly cultural, and to achieve it requires an historical orientation for archives and an historical training for archivists."¹⁴

Archivists have always dealt with constantly changing record media, but dealing with content requires the old skills. Information is not knowledge. In our training the drive for 'professionalism' has brought a surfeit of management and business models. It appears that management is more important than scholarly study — processing, storing and preserving seem the goals rather than being means to achieve the real goal of the best and most complete documentation. Has the required import been given to the teaching of "the history of records, media, engraving and printing technologies, administrations, and contemporary political, social and economic contexts"?¹⁵ The intellectual tasks of archivists need to be re-evaluated.

There must be room for research careers in archives, both in the working archives and at an academic level. Many argue in reply that there is no time for research, that it is a luxury when there is too much else to do, and the spectre of cost is raised. But surely the desired response is the need to reorganise priorities and to delegate onerous routine duties. We must not lose sight of the point of archival activity which is not to have shelf kilometres under some sort of superficial retrieval. There is no point in "control without understanding",¹⁶ in being "a warehouse operator moving about boxes, tapes, cabinets, and disks with, in relative terms,

no comprehension of their contents or context."¹⁷ For

"by emphasizing the housekeeping and administrative functions, the archivists have played into the hands of those whose values are not those of the founders of the profession. Those values are the dictates of scholarship: maximum scholarly access to the greatest number of sources, and the obligation to truth above all values."¹⁸

A place for archival research should be encouraged. It must be allowed for some archivists to explore archival concerns, for the ultimate benefit of the working archivist.

"Are we to believe that those who commit themselves to a research oriented career in archives have succumbed to some 'seduction' or that they are among the 'Lucifers' to be kept at bay? Is it not possible for an administrator of archives to articulate a larger conception of archives which embraces administrative *and* scholarly excellence?"¹⁹

If we want recognition and status, we must demonstrate our vital skills. They are not in boxing and storing, nor efficient retrieval. Others can do that. It is in our peculiar knowledge of the intricate, interlocking world of the record. We should show our scholarliness and lead debate. Archivists need to write for journals, attend conferences, interact more profitably with historians and teach users of records. A more active role must be taken for as Gerald Ham warns, "our passivity and perceptions produce a biased and distorted archival record"²⁰. Without a greater role for scholarship and research as archival activities, a vacuity will lie at the heart of the archival role. For as Ham continues

"If [the archivist] is passive, uniformed, with a limited view of what constitutes the archival record, the collections that they acquire will never hold up a mirror for humankind. And if we are not holding up that mirror, if we are not helping people understand the world they live in, and if this is not what archives is all about, then I do not know what it is we are doing that is all that important."²¹

FOOTNOTES

1. William Joyce, 'Archivists and research use' *American Archivist* Vol. 47 No. 2, Spring 1984.
2. Tom Nesmith, 'Archives from the bottom up: social history and archival scholarship' *Archivaria* vol. 14, Summer 1982.
3. George Bolotenko, 'Archivists and historians: keepers of the well' *Archivaria* Vol. 16, Summer 1983.
4. For full references to all the key articles in this debate, see Terry Cook, 'From information to knowledge: an intellectual paradigm for archives' *Archivaria* Vol. 19, Winter 1984-85, p. 29 fn. 2.
5. Joyce, op. cit, p. 133.
6. Quoted in Cook, op. cit, p. 42 fn 30.
7. Nesmith, op. cit, p. 8.
8. Michael Roper, 'The academic use of archives' *Archivum* Vol. XXIX, 1982, p. 33.

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9. Christopher Brooke is quoted in Nesmith, op. cit, p. 16.
10. Ibid, p. 16.
11. Frank Burke, 'The future course of archival theory in the United States' *American Archivist* Vol. 44 No. 1, Winter 1981.
12. See Cook, op. cit, p. 39 fn. 24 on responses from records managers.
13. G. F. Brown, a records manager, quoted by George Bolotenko, 'Instant professionalism: to the shiny new men of the future' *Archivaria* Vol. 20, summer 1985, p. 153.
14. Cook, op. cit, p. 35.
15. Ibid, p. 44.
16. Cook, op. cit, p. 43.
17. Ibid, p. 42.
18. W. Washburn quoted by Bolotenko, 'Archivists and historians', op. cit, p. 21.
19. Richard Huyda quoted by Nesmith, op. cit, p. 24 fn. 42.
20. F. Gerald Ham, 'The archival edge,' in M. F. Daniels and T. Walch (eds.), *Modern Archives Reader*, Washington DC, 1984, p. 326.
21. Ibid, pp. 334-5.