

ARCHIVISTS AND HISTORIANS: THE BALANCE BEAM OF PROFESSIONAL IDENTITY

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In the early 1980s, a debate was triggered by George Bolotenko concerning what is the essence of the archivist's role — the importance of the historian's craft and skills to the archivist being the point of departure. The writing of the main protagonists is conveniently summarised and discussed, and the essentially North American focus of the debate and relative silence elsewhere is noted.

For the past fifteen years or so the place of historical research in archival practice has been the subject of much debate by North American archivists and historians. Both the *American Archivist* and *Canadian Archivaria* in effect have been turned at times into battle grounds by competing branches of the archival profession, all striving to articulate, define, criticise, revise or reject the notion that archivists, virtually by definition, should have a significant breadth and depth of historical knowledge in order to become 'truly qualified keepers of records'.¹

One of the more influential (and inflammatory) articles was submitted in 1983 by George Bolotenko, entitled 'Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well'.² The article did not mince words in recording the author's considerable antipathy for those archivists who were not prepared to confirm the generic connection, as he saw it, between history, the practice of history and archivy. For those of his profession who went so far as to see similarities in role between the 'new' archivists and library 'scientists' and, in fact, suggested they were of the same family, Bolotenko reserved his sharpest barbs by pointing

out that the 'same family can produce both an Einstein and a mongoloid'.³ It is not surprising, therefore, that Bolotenko's views attracted much vitriolic debate.

The considerable heat generated by the debate at least produced sufficient light by which all sides could not fail to see that the hitherto ill-defined nature of the discipline was far from settled. In fact, it still appeared to be teetering along a fairly familiar balance beam somewhere between historian and information specialist. At one end there was Frank Burke⁴ who, through formulation of archival theory, looked forward to scholarly acceptance of a new philosophy based on archives as records of human experience, along with the concept of archivists and historians sharing the same heritage. Similarly Bolotenko, who saw archivist and historian as the 'obverse sides of the same coin which has currency in the same realm'.⁵

At the opposite end of the scale were not so much those opposing Bolotenko's views (although R. Scott James⁶ went close when he suggested that 'scholars want naturally to research, interpret and write, that is why they chose to be scholars not archivists'⁷), but rather the 'new breed' corporate archivist such as Leonard McDonald. A Group Archivist of a large multinational company, McDonald⁸ while acknowledging the 'deep culture clash' between the professional (for example, the archivist) employed in business and the manager (for example, the records manager), saw the problem readily solved in the most pragmatic (dare one say cynical?) way by having the latter subsume the former every time. After all, as McDonald points out, who pays the salaries?

It is important to bear in mind that the apparent dichotomy between historian and information specialist is a long-standing one and was set in motion over seventy years ago by one of the most important pioneers of the profession, Hilary Jenkinson. His view that 'the archivist is not and ought not be an historian'⁹ was later reinforced by his influential American counterpart Margaret Cross Norton.

One of Jenkinson's concerns at the time of producing his celebrated *Manual of Archive Administration*, first published in 1922, was to widen the then narrow gap between the archivist and the historian and to assert the existence of a professional status for the former, separated at an appropriate distance from that already long-established by the latter. While acknowledging the potential usefulness for the historian of the range of information that archives are able to provide, Jenkinson was quick to point out that archives 'were not drawn up in the interest or for the information of posterity'.¹⁰ While he was prepared to acknowledge that the archivist would need to have some knowledge of history, Jenkinson saw such an interest as being something apart, an essentially personal matter or hobby and definitely a side issue to his duty to his archives independently of any research 'which makes use of

archives for their own ends'.¹¹ The archivist, as Jenkinson envisaged him, was as 'a servant of his archives first, and afterwards to the student public'.¹²

Norton, although working within the then narrower American concept of 'archives', that is, the government record to the exclusion of all else, including those of private individuals,¹³ echoed Jenkinson's dictum with her own version written some ten years later:

The archivist should be a public official whose first interest is business efficiency, and only secondarily should he be interested in history. If the public records are cared for in a way that preserves their proper provenance, the historian not only of today but also of tomorrow will be as well served as the public official.¹⁴

Norton saw a need for the archivist to understand the 'historical and social significance'¹⁵ of the records in his custody, but she saw his primary role as being able to 'produce a given document when needed, to suggest the type of records in which to seek needed data and to protect the records from theft, mutilation, and physical deterioration'.¹⁶ Archivists, she insisted, should be interested in their records only as documents subject to legal use. Accordingly, they should be 'justified in their suspicion of historians or antiquarians who disturb their files'.¹⁷ Clearly, any historian dealing with Margaret Cross Norton would have been quickly 'put on the right track'¹⁸ in the event that he may harbour any intentions of pre-empting the field of archival care and preservation.

Jenkinson and Norton were, of course, people of their time. They were authentic pioneers seeking to lay substantial foundations for the new archival discipline which, at that time, was struggling to emerge from the large shadow of the professional academic historian and anxious to demonstrate that it could amply fill a professional niche of its own. It is curious, however, that the argument appears to be continuing, unabated, in recent times — 'flogging a dead horse', as some, such as Anthony Rees, see it.¹⁹ Indeed, in the absence of such influential pillars as Jenkinson, Norton and, more recently, Schellenberg, the discipline is beginning to look rather undisciplined, especially in the face of perceived challenges to the traditional medium of the textual record arising from the technology-driven 'information explosion'.

There was more than a hint of panic, it seems, in the rush by some senior Canadian archivists to refute Bolotenko in particular, and the historian-archivist connection in general. Spadoni²⁰ especially, as well as Rees²¹ and James²² were anxious to see archivy developing along new and, as they saw it, more dynamic lines in which 'a sympathetic perception of common goals and objectives'²³ was to be actively promoted with library science, records management and technology generally. Of greatest concern to members of this group were the

possible ill-effects being caused by views such as those expressed by Bolotenko and others opposing any suggestion of need (let alone pressing need) for archivy to embrace, and in turn be accepted by disciplines other than that of historian. 'It serves no one', stated Rees, 'least of all the archivist, to drive wedges of fear and mistrust between our work and that of administrators, technocrats, or record managers'.²⁴

While Bolotenko's article remains of particular interest, it appears — even to the untutored eye — to have been written somewhat with tongue-in-cheek. Dogmatic statements ('the historian still makes the best archivist'²⁵) and rather abrasive references such as the alleged tendency of the 'new historian, under press of scientism' to write not in English, but in 'gibberish';²⁶ not to mention the like tendency of 'archivists, in their rush to crystallise themselves into a fully-defined professional species [to] give vent to trendy windbaggery'²⁷ seem better designed to be provocative than informative. If such was the case, they would appear to have succeeded.

Perhaps the verbal jousting generated by Bolotenko's article is best seen as something of a side-show. The more balanced approach adopted by Cook²⁸ and Nesmith²⁹ on the one hand, and Taylor³⁰ and Kesner³¹ on the other, reaches much further into the very real set of problems that faces the archivist seeking to master 'the enormous amount, broad range, and complex character of contemporary administrative documentation'.³² All four appear to be agreed on the nature of the problem — the parting of the ways occurs in formulating the proposed solutions.

According to Taylor, archivists ought to exchange their traditional and primary 'historical records' orientation for the more prosaic role as managers of documents used from day-to-day in the organisations and institutions which create them. Taylor refers to this breed of archivist as 'information generalists with an archival emphasis', and sees them actually working within the agencies rather than further along the way in archival repositories. These 'new professionals' or 'new archivists' would advise and work alongside the administrators and policy makers prior to and during the creation of records. Their responsibility would also extend to selecting and nominating those of the agency's oldest records as being archival — at which point such records would be transferred to the central archive where they would become the responsibility of the 'historian-scholar-archivist'. Adopting something of a railway analogy, Taylor sees the new 'generalist archivist' established on the main line, the historian-archivist confined to the siding working in what Taylor calls the 'historical shunt'.

Kesner makes the point that, from the perspective of information flow and communication, many vital records exist only in an electronic form and decisions are often oral and undocumented; generally, the

rate of technological change has resulted in a profusion and staggering growth of information storage and delivery systems and services. He is concerned that if archivists do not actually participate in the changing information management environment, the users will seek assistance elsewhere by either bypassing their archives or not creating them in the first place. While he appears to be recommending an 'if you can't beat 'em, join 'em' regime, he is concerned to preserve the archivist's professional status and development — which, in essence, he sees manifestly as the historian-archivist. His solution is to urge the historian-archivist to take a broader view in defining his role. He is concerned that, unless he does so, the more creative, interesting and challenging tasks (which he sees as part of the responsibilities for maintaining the systems that manage the information) going, by default, to the record managers and librarians. While the historian-archivist sinks quietly into what Kesner describes as the 'antiquarian curatorial role' of popular misconception, a general failure to come to grips with EDP-generated documents will lead to 'mismanagement and ultimately the loss of some of the evidentially and informationally important records of our age'.³³

Don Page³⁴ is concerned, like Kesner, that archivists establish a more positive, unequivocal identity. As he describes it, 'while archivists may no longer be characterised as merely the hewers of wood and drawers of water for historians, they have been slow in developing a more satisfying substitute'.³⁵ He rejects the more extreme possibilities that include, on the one hand, archivists competing actively with professional historians and, on the other, archivists striving to become masters of more and more sophisticated archival management techniques to the exclusion of all else. Page sees a possible solution in the development of a distinctive archival scholarship — a scholarly understanding of the records in their care — and to ensure that such an understanding is built in at the same time as the record is created by developing close working liaison between the 'institutional historian' and the archivist.

Terry Cook³⁶ accuses critics of the historian-archivist (of which he is a staunch defender) of attempting to 'throw over the old' in order to cope with the new.³⁷ That is, in order to maintain archives in the age of the 'information revolution', the old notions of 'historical' archives no longer apply. Cook, however, is concerned that there is a fundamental confusion of means (technological method) and ends (archival substance). He sees, for example, records management and computer literacy as the means — the tools — by which archivists do their work. Although literally instrumental they are not the substance or goal of archivy — a goal which, being broadly cultural, requires an historical orientation for archives and, accordingly, historical training for archivists. The nub of Cook's views seems clear — let the records

manager manage without advice from or intrusion by any archivist who is prepared to abandon his former well-defined professional role in order to do so.

Tom Nesmith³⁸ in arguing for archival scholarship as an essential part of archival operations, points to the new challenges facing the archivist-historian. While the primary challenge, as Nesmith sees it, has been brought about by the increasing popularity of social history (and this has led to the archivist's declining involvement in academic historical research), the history of society should be the starting point for archival scholarship. Nesmith sees the historical study of records — of whatever nature — as the 'cornerstone of the discipline . . . [and part of] . . . the very fabric of archival practice and scholarship'.³⁹ Archivists should also seek to fully understand the histories of the non-textual media, 'not only in order to ensure that conservation measures and research conditions are appropriate . . . but also to understand the technical limitations and manipulations and the historical context influencing what was communicated and how it was done at different times'.⁴⁰

In the light of each of these well entrenched positions, perhaps the comparatively recent views of Terry Cook⁴¹ and John W. Roberts⁴² provide the most logical means for coming to grips with the archivist-as-information specialist and the archivist-as-historian dichotomy. In fact, Cook reasons that there is no dichotomy at all; rather, that both have much to offer archival work and the blending of the essential elements of each provides, in effect, 'a rich texture archivists can call their own'.⁴³ Cook further reasons that it is time for the archivist to depart from the Jenkinsonian sense of neutrality, just as the archival needs of the 'Information Age' demand a considerable shift from an exclusive dedication to 'parchment rolls and court registers'.⁴⁴ Cook maintains that the archivist must cease to be a passive recipient of institutional records and become an active documenter of the past.

Sceptical of those who, like Burke, espoused the need for what he classifies as 'overly-ambitious and quasi-historiographical' archival theory, Roberts instead sees only two 'strains' to archival theory. In fact, one is archival but not theoretical, mainly the 'practical, how-to, nitty-gritty of archival work'.⁴⁵ This Roberts conceives as the responsibility of the archival clinician (which, perhaps, can be seen as equating with Cook's archivist-information specialist). The second strain identified by Roberts (which he obviously shares with Cook), is theoretical and concerned with historiography — the clear province of the archivist-historian.

With the best will in the world, the modern archivist cannot be, at one and the same time, both an active archivist and an active historian. While archivists, per se, are not themselves concerned with historical interpretations of the content of their records, there is no reason why

such archivists should not share the values of the historian. By so doing they should be able to achieve an understanding of both the past and present and of the changes in the nature of historiography, especially those occurring in recent times.

In terms of record appraisal, the cultivation of historical values on the part of the archivist can be both personally satisfying as well as of immense assistance in determining the intrinsic historical worth of records which are potentially archival. Today, the latter task cannot be done by relying rigidly and exclusively on the teachings set down by the great theorists such as Jenkinson and Schellenberg. Those dicta were issued at a time when traditional or political history was still well entrenched. Inevitably, their approaches would have reflected the fashions of the historians of the time with their concern for political, economic and military events together with the activities of leaders and other elite.

While traditional history at least offered the archivist 'established periodisation, themes and priorities',⁴⁶ the 'new' social history requires a far broader and less predictable understanding by the archivist. Because the social historian tends to descend from the 'ridges' to explore the 'valleys' below in order to make sense of society as a whole, the activities of everyday life of ordinary people are thereby given a new importance. These broader directions have resulted in an intensity of interest by historians in areas previously ignored or neglected. For example, the history of women, labour relations, aborigines, and health and environment, to name but a very few.⁴⁷

In turn, this broadening of historiographical interest has presented difficult challenges for the latter-day archivist. Without sharing an understanding of the values of the social historian, an archivist may well reject records on the grounds that they are considered to be of little value, administratively, or to the more traditional scholar. At the same time, evolving technologies and an ever-increasing mass of information poses the constant problem for the archivist-historian of how to cope with volume yet, at the same time, ensure that potentially valuable records for the social historian are identified and preserved.

It seems that the archival profession has been facing a number of simultaneous challenges to its traditional roles as seen and interpreted by the founders of the discipline earlier in this century. Certainly, there is no threat to the essential principles of archivy without which it would cease to exist as a distinct and separate discipline. Yet, the variety and breadth of archival functions cannot and should not continue to be subject to restrictions such as those imposed on the profession many years ago based on circumstances well and truly set in another day and another age. At the same time, as Cook wisely insists, the archivist's 'rite of passage to the new age' will only be assured if he

continues to assert that he is in the 'understanding' business, rather than just the 'information' business.⁴⁸

If there is to be a balance beam between the archival clinician/information specialist and the archival-historian in this new age, then there must be acceptance of both and the reasoned arguments such as those advanced by Terry Cook and the down-to-earth pragmatism of John Roberts should go some way to securing the appropriate on-going balance between the two. Perhaps the final contribution should be left to Roberts who sees archivy, per se, as a 'fairly straightforward' . . . service occupation . . . [in which] the knowledge that archivists must have to be effective can easily be summarised:

- they need to know procedures and technology;
- they need to know the ethics of the profession and what is expected of them;
- they need to know history; and
- they especially need to know their records'.⁴⁹

As a footnote to this review — at least from a local perspective — more than twenty years have passed since R. C. Sharman was prepared to question certain long-held Jenkinsonian dicta in an apparent bid to more clearly distinguish the sometimes complementary, sometimes conflicting roles of archivist and historian.⁵⁰ It is over four years since Jan Brazier first drew attention to the on-going North American debate while calling for less passivity and more active promotion by Australian archivists of scholarship and research as intrinsic archival activities.⁵¹ In the same edition of *Archives and Manuscripts*,⁵² Peter Crush spelt out the practicalities for greater interaction at a working (research) level between archivist and historian.

Since then, it seems, Australian archivists have been virtually silent on what was (and still is) a perennial and open-ended topic for debate elsewhere. Indeed, rapidly developing information technology and the increasing importance of social history has expanded and progressed the debate in both Canada and the United States to a stage where the long-perceived divisions between archivist and historian are, rightly, no longer taken for granted or even regarded by many as dichotomous at all.

The recently-concluded six-part article by Luciana Duranti⁵³ clearly illustrates the notion that knowledge which is in large part historical surely helps the archivist understand the archival document and, by extension, the archivist's role in record management. Given that changing concepts and new techniques have the potential to considerably alter and certainly expand the role of the archivist, it is difficult to appreciate the comparative absence of public discussion in Australia amongst members of the profession. With an even deeper silence on the topic emanating from the UK,⁵⁴ one must assume,

reluctantly, that debate on this universal issue has been completely hijacked by North American archivists.

ENDNOTES

1. T. Nesmith, 'Toward the Discipline of Archives', *Archivaria*, no 19, Winter 1984-5, pp. 19.
2. G. Bolotenko, 'Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well', *Archivaria*, no 16, Summer 1983, pp. 5-25.
3. *Ibid*, p. 18.
4. F. G. Burke, 'The Future Course of Archival Theory in the United States', *American Archivist*, vol 44, no 1, Winter 1981, pp. 40-6.
5. Bolotenko, *loc cit*, p. 20.
6. R. Scott James, 'A Wearisome Issue', *Archivaria*, no 17, Winter 1983-4, pp. 302-3.
7. *Ibid*, p. 303.
8. L. McDonald, 'Ethical Dilemmas Facing an Archivist in the Business Environment: the Constraints on a Business Archivist', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol 10, no 4, October 1989, pp 168-172.
9. H. Jenkinson, *A Manual of Archive Administration*, London, 1965, p. 125.
10. *Ibid*, p. 11.
11. *Ibid*, p. 12.
12. *Ibid*, p. 124.
13. Bolotenko, *loc cit*, p. 5.
14. T. W. Mitchell (ed), *Norton on Archives*, Carbondale, 1975, p. 5.
15. *Ibid*, p. 14.
16. *Ibid*.
17. *Ibid*.
18. E. Posner, 'Foreword' of *Ibid*, p. VII.
19. A. L. Rees, 'Bolotenko's Siege Mentality', *Archivaria*, no 17, Winter 1983-4, pp. 301-2.
20. C. Spadoni, 'No Monopoly for 'Archivist-Historians': Bolotenko Assailed', *Archivaria*, no 17, Winter 1983-4, pp. 291-5, and 'In Defence of the New Professionalism: a Rejoinder to George Bolotenko', *Archivaria*, no 19, Winter 1984-5, pp. 191-5.
21. Rees, *loc cit*.
22. James, *loc cit*.
23. Spadoni, 'No Monopoly', p. 294.
24. Rees, *loc cit*, p. 302.
25. Bolotenko, *loc cit*, p. 6.
26. E. Pessen, 'A Historian's Perspective', *Prologue: The Journal of the National Archives*, Winter 1975, p. 243, quoted in Bolotenko, *loc cit*, pp. 7-8.
27. Bolotenko, *loc cit*, p. 8.
28. T. Cook, 'From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives', *Archivaria*, no 19, Winter 1984-5, pp. 28-49.
29. T. Nesmith, 'Archives from the Bottom Up: Social History and Archival Scholarship', *Archivaria*, no 14, Summer 1982, pp. , and 'Toward the Discipline of Archives', *Archivaria*, no 19, Winter 1984-5, pp. 16-20.
30. H. A. Taylor, 'Through the Minefield', *Archivaria*, no 21, Winter 1985-6, pp. 180-5.
31. R. M. Kesner, 'Wither Archivy?', *Archivaria*, no 20, Summer 1985, pp. 142-8.
32. Nesmith, 'Toward the Discipline', p. 16.
33. Kesner, *loc cit*, p. 144.
34. D. Page, 'Whose Handmaiden?: the Archivist and the Institutional Historian', *Archivaria*, no 17, Winter 1983-4, pp. 162-172.

35. Ibid, p. 162.
36. Cook, 'From Information to Knowledge'.
37. Ibid, p. 35.
38. Nesmith, 'Archives from the Bottom Up'.
39. Nesmith, 'Towards the Discipline', p. 17.
40. Nesmith, 'Archives from the Bottom Up', p. 25.
41. T. Cook, 'Rites of Passage: The Archivist and the Information Age', *Archivaria*, no 31, Winter 1990-91, pp. 171-6.
42. J. W. Roberts, 'Archival Theory: Much Ado About Shelving', *American Archivist*, vol 50, no 1, Winter 1987, pp. 66-74.
43. Cook, 'Rites of Passage', p. 171.
44. Ibid, p. 176.
45. Roberts, loc cit, p. 66.
46. E. Lockwood, '“Imponderable Matters”: The Influence of New Trends in History on Appraisal at the National Archives', *American Archivist*, vol 53, no 3, Summer 1990, p. 395.
47. The individual medical records of military personnel, for example, which in the past have been destroyed, are 'goldmines' of information for the social historian researching the changing nature of a nation's health.
48. Cook, 'Rites of Passage', p. 176.
49. Roberts, loc cit, p. 74.
50. R. C. Sharman, 'The Archivist and the Historian', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 4, no 6, February 1972, pp. 8-20.
51. J. Brazier, 'The Archivist: Scholar or Administrator?', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 16, no 1, May 1988, pp. 9-14.
52. P. Crush, 'Archives and Historians', *Archives and Manuscripts*, vol 16, no 1, May 1988, pp. 15-24.
53. L. Duranti, 'Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science', *Archivaria*, nos 28-33, Summer 1989 — Winter 1991-92.
54. F. Hull, 'The archivist should not be an historian', *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol 6, no 5, April 1980, pp. 253-9 — appears to have been the last word on the subject from the UK.