

The Compleat Archivist

by GORDON DODDS

My partisanship in asking Canadian archivists to welcome this the first issue of *Archivaria* will be more than evident. Nonetheless, I commend it to the profession as their official journal for publication of research and study towards the advancement of archival science. It is my fond hope that its regular appearance will be met with the anticipation and respect accorded its venerable American and British counterparts. I am confident that there is ample intellectual room for it in Canada and judging by the spread of Canadian archivists writing for other national and international journals the flow of contributions should not be stanchèd. Of course, in a sense, it is part of the baggage of association created by any discipline but then, without such exposure and contact, how can the archivist adequately test and measure the field?

Archivaria must become an essential piece of the Canadian archivist's equipment. Just as no self-respecting Victorian traveller in Europe could confidently take a journey without a Bradshaw so must archivists feel incompletely attired and professionally insecure without the opportunity of consulting the intellectual touchstone of their discipline. Bradshaw's intricacies presented no insuperable hurdles to the venturing, accomplished traveller and avid students of his annual maze, sleuthing the seemingly endless possibilities of progression, switching and retraction, could exercise their wits to great advantage. Much vehemence has lately, and quite properly, been directed at the 'how to' nature of writings on archival issues and I have to state categorically that I am far from advocating the essential dreariness of such instructional efforts. Bradshaw, perforce, was not just a procedural manual of excellent technique. It was far more a source of inspiration — a springboard of enterprise and imagination for the discerning. In every good sense, it permitted the novice to apprentice to mastery and urged the master to the frontiers of the journey if that was desired. The "archival edge" so sharply saluted by Gerald Ham in Toronto at the close of his SAA presidency has to be also the measure of *Archivaria*.¹

The intention of my remarks on these pages is to draw attention, as it were, to the nature of the beast. *Archivaria* ought to provide a beacon, or more properly and likely, several beacons of light to the aspiring archivist. To a large degree the qualities and mettle of the Canadian archivist will be reflected from between its covers. How will we look? I should like to believe that we will look as if we know what we are doing and where we are going and that we have the capacity to take our profession fearlessly to the continual challenges it will confront. To date rather too few of us have felt

1 F. Gerald Ham, "The archival edge", *American Archivist*, vol. 38, no. 1, January 1975, p. 13.

able or been inclined to do this, either collectively or individually, and our responsibilities suffer along with ourselves. The demise of archival records management programs across the nation is a case in point. Recently a university chief librarian, unable to justify another year for the archivist position in his budget and perhaps also aware of the illogic of such a library-based program anyway, threw back a most proper rebuke to my concern at the unfilled position — “where the hell were you in 1966 when you were needed?” Where indeed was the voice of the professional archivist and how did we appear to ourselves when the province of Alberta followed Ontario’s senseless program separation? Self-respect is of the essence and we shall really only gain it, not by mouthing our professionalism but, by deepening and broadening our capacity.

There is no instantaneous means of bringing this about, largely because of the individualistic and somewhat intimate nature of experience. Yet despite the often incredibly tortuous arguments in which we are prone to indulge as to what an archivist is, arguments which appear only to avoid facing realities or making decisions become mere sophistry. I am of the firm opinion that we cannot continue to build faith in ourselves on the assumption that if we had had the chance we would have done something else or the other polarity of a little familiarity. Both positions are represented well enough in Canadian situations as they are elsewhere and they both diminish archival science and archivists. With apologies to the memory of Izaak Walton, I should therefore like to outline briefly to you my notion of “the compleat archivist” — the archivist who through a rich humanistic education and broad experience can cope in any situation. I am aware of the idealist tone but I would suggest that attainment or proximity is not half as far away as we might nervously like to think and that in any case it is invariably better to make the attempt than not to try at all. I have every confidence that if we consider just how rich and diverse the archivist can be and how capable he is able to become that we shall overturn the passive curator, the historian manqué and the librarian-one-step-removed — some of the ghosts of archives past. Indeed we shall go further because the compleat archivist raids areas of knowledge and skills far beyond the traditionally allotted confines. Survival plainly encourages this though I would maintain that most archivists or aspiring archivists like other disciplinarians ought to be sufficiently tempted intellectually to want to explore. If we do not it is a comment on ourselves and our educational system not, I repeat, not on the responsibilities and challenges of the discipline.

Shades of renaissance are flitting now more obviously and regularly across the archivist’s horizon. Relatively novel related disciplines like information science and computer science force us to appraise our capacity. Hugh Taylor,² in an exciting proposal in 1972 offered Canadian archivists a

2 Hugh A. Taylor, “Information retrieval and the training of the archivist”, *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 3, 1972, pp. 30-35.

glimpse of the present horizon and in April 1975, a Toronto seminar of assembled archivists, librarians, information scientists and records managers listened to David Larson's major paper³ on inter-disciplinary education and program operation. Encouraged by his experience with the coordinative network system of state-wide archives, libraries, historical societies and documentation centres in Ohio, he was able to envisage a breed of information managers into which I certainly believe my compleat archivist could fit. Alertness to the social and psychological ramifications of a perishing cultural heritage, in the fullest sense of that much misunderstood and abused term, begins to prick our conscience and hopefully to stir our concept of the archivist in society. Why do we exist — if we know, do we care? Are we making sure that we shall be properly equipped to realise that care?

For at least the last two years, and I am not forgetting the importance of Alan Ridge's observations made at Charlottetown in 1964,⁴ the 'training of archivists' has become a recurrent topic of conversation in Canada, as it has elsewhere. I dislike the phrase since it connotes an instructive element in the process which has in the past taken on too much of a 'this is how it is done' and 'look and listen' quality. The compleat archivist is not trained in this limited sense, except in mastery of technique; the whole character and course of the compleat archivist's education is in contradiction to such instructive method. I recognise that the term training is not always used in the limited sense but I believe it would be helpful to start thinking and talking more constructively about the education of the archivist. Not unnaturally most of our published writings on this subject devote themselves to a relatively short period of professional education or sometimes to continuing professional education or professional development, usually in terms of instructional courses and workshops. I believe however that, in the process of our establishment of professional education for Canadian archivists, we would be short-sighted to neglect the life-time continuum of the educational process and to overlook the significance of diverse intellectual pursuits. Something of the spirit of this viewpoint was captured in a comment by the late and respected American archivist, Herman Kahn, who advised in 1970 that:

. . . in our talk about programs for the training of professional archivists, we should make it perfectly clear both to ourselves and to others that any program we are capable of setting up cannot of itself produce professional archivists from persons who have had no other training. . . . I dwell on the point that archival training alone does not create an archivist because I, as all of you, have seen too

- 3 David R. Larson, "Training in the information sciences: an interdisciplinary approach", *Fourth Bertha Bassam Lecture*, April 26, 1975, University of Toronto — to be published in Spring, 1976. A review of the day seminar by Marion Beyea is contained in C.H.A., Archives Section, *Archives Bulletin*, April 1975.
- 4 Alan D. Ridge, "What training do archivists need?", *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 1, 1965, pp. 3-12.

many truly tragic cases of able men and women who have had little or no training other than on-the-job or off-the-job archival training, who cannot understand why, after having had *only* that training, they are not the peers of others who have had much more than archival training.⁵

I subscribe to this general statement and though I have great confidence in what might be achieved in a university post graduate program in archival science by making good use of intermingled departments and institutes I am firmly of the opinion that Canadian archival agencies will do little to justify their existence in social terms unless they accelerate employment of persons who are capable of reaching toward the ideal of the compleat archivist. The problem is not really a matter of "continuing" education but rather of a richer and more satisfying education in the beginning — then the sighs and groans afterwards will not be so loud.

This is not the place to dwell on the nature of professional education programs for Canadian archivists. A report upon possibilities and desirabilities at the very least is in harness with the Archival Education Committee of the Association of Canadian Archivists and some determination will be called for at the June 1976 convention of that body. I should like instead to notice certain areas of knowledge from which the compleat archivist draws stature and in which, I believe, lack of some understanding, skill and experience will be nothing but a hobble upon archival responsibilities of the future. Lest I be misunderstood, I must re-emphasise that I am thinking precisely of the archivist who can stand on Ham's archival edge in any situation; being part of a large institution and of multi-staffed programs does not give an archivist any proprietary rights on such capacity or position.

Over and above the idiosyncrasies of personal qualities, and on the assumption that the principles and practices of our own discipline of archival science are fully understood, I have specified eight other areas of specialist knowledge and skill. Plainly there are others but I stand on these alone. The most traditional and familiar of these for most archivists is that of *history*, where in particular the archivist ought to have received intellectual excitement and have absorbed its research methodologies. This foundation cannot be removed without diminishing the authority of the archivist although I believe it is a mistake to hold that other humanities and social science or indeed pure science disciplines are not fully capable of providing similar provocation and method. An obviously warm bedmate to history in North American experience has been *library science*, from which not a few calling themselves archivists have emerged blissfully ignorant of basic distinctions. Nevertheless, it is an equal arrogance which spurns the librarian's study and experimentation in areas of information retrieval and

5 Herman Kahn, "The archival vocation", *American Archivist*, vol. 34, no. 1, January 1971, pp. 7-8.

more recently the librarian's social outreach enterprises. Archivists may now leave the cloisters.

Two further areas of knowledge ought also to fall within the compleat archivist's ken but have generally escaped thus far. I refer to familiarity with the evolution of statute and case *law* and with legal practice. The archivist's almost unique position in the understanding and writing of administrative and institutional history requires quite naturally and easily a comfortable knowledge of law. I have few doubts that the manuscript curator could do worse than follow its dictates and machinations. *Conservation* of archival materials also rests in a sphere of intricate specialisation in the eyes of many archivists. Only gradually are we beginning to attend to conservation in a widespread manner as we distinguish between major daily concerns of preservation and the relatively small-scale preoccupation of the document restorer. Both conservation and restoration have their place in the archivist's bag and their principles and mechanics should be well appreciated but I place the more embracing concept of conservation in the essential responsibilities of our profession.

Of the four areas remaining, that of *records management* should be a vivid neon light but all too frequently it is misunderstood through its own 'newspeak' and is only incidentally connected to archival programs in too many North American jurisdictions, public and private. It is a welcome realisation indeed to read that records management "is universally accepted in the developing world . . . that it is the archivists who are responsible for the records work; that is their justification and it is necessary to recognise this tradition."⁶ I cannot conceive of any valid argument within the archival context, even in the narrowest sense, which would support the separation of such naturally integrated activities. Nothing gets closer to the heart of "archivage" than a smoothly running archival records management program. Another area which has burgeoned in fewer years even than records management is the somewhat fearsome world of electronic data processing — or more wholesomely perhaps — *computer science*. The initial hostilities to EDP systems and documentation are receding now but I am concerned that, with one or two exceptions, archivists know next to nothing about the science and are not being exposed to its character or its capabilities — especially in concert with microreprography. We would do well to master its methodologies and grapple with the infinitely exciting dimensions of information control which it is making possible. Meanwhile, how much archival material is being lost by our groping ignorance?

The two final planks in the platform of my compleat archivist are separate in their own right but do tend to reveal common facets which are

6 Michael Cook, "The planning of an archives school: some comments on the proposed regional Institute of Archives Science for South-East Asia", *Journal of the Society of Archivists*, vol. 5, no. 4, October 1975, p. 236.

absolutely crucial to the future of meaningful archival programs and rewarding work. I refer to the skills of the *administrator* and the *teacher*. Both must have a well-developed facility for conceptualising and must pursue the finer points of decision-making. Organisation and regulation mentally and physically is their forte; being sensitive to human needs their most attractive quality. Above all else, they are versed in communicating — getting across subtly or blatantly as the situation warrants. The practical ramifications of this should be obvious in the archival condition and amongst all kinds of archival activities, by no means exclusively in the laps of senior management. I hold the notion, however romantic, that were we to grasp especially the best attributes of each of these two professions we should be a great deal clearer about what we are doing and why.

The compleat archivist will conceivably be rarely sighted — and that is probably no bad thing. To reach forever and get nowhere can be damnable but never to feel there was something worth reaching for is surely damnation. In the last resort, I want to see archivists in Canada reverse that awful impotence implicit in Edwin Welch's reflection upon the archivist "in a position of weakness. . . . Most archivists are only at the beginning of changes which they often did not initiate or even anticipate."⁷ If *Archivaria* is to mean anything at all, let its forthcoming pages display the tide of that reversal.

7 Edwin Welch, "Continuing education for archivists", *Canadian Archivist*, vol. 2, no. 5, 1974, p. 42.