

conspire, proudly and unabashedly, against Dr. Amtmann's interpretation of the Canadian identity.

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The Conspiracy Question: Inflation or Development?

Bernard Amtmann's article will have alarmed many archivists, particularly those who work in tax-supported institutions. We should all be disturbed by the suggestion that we accept Mr. Amtmann's arbitrary evaluation of the Gowan Papers at \$250,000. Equally unsettling is his attempt to intimidate archivists into endorsing the expenditure of huge amounts of public funds to purchase icons for the shrines he would have us erect. If mistakes have been made in the past by overspending on deposits to our national art bank, such errors should not be seen as examples to be followed in the document field. Our indignation should perhaps be greatest over the issues of ownership and rights raised by the auctioning of the Gowan Papers.

The material in question consists largely of the correspondence of James R. Gowan who was, among other things, a nineteenth-century County Court Judge in Simcoe County. The collection had been part of Judge Gowan's legacy to his nephew H.H. Ardagh, who, along with another relative named Strathy, was an executor of the Judge's estate and his "official" biographer. Although A.H. Colquhoun wrote a minor biography of Gowan in 1894, it was not until 1911 that Ardagh dutifully completed his, a laudatory effort which reputedly marked the last time the letters were brought to light for about half a century. During this time, the Gowan papers were deposited with the law firm of Strathy and Esten, forerunner of Stewart, Esten and McTurk from whose vault in Barrie the documents were removed in the early 1960s to begin a series of journeys leading to Amtmann's auction block. Along the way the collection was microfilmed by the Public Archives of Canada (with what proviso is not known), and formed the basis of a Master's thesis accepted at the University of New Brunswick in 1971. Now, seven years later, the collection is being offered for a quarter of a million dollars by Amtmann on behalf of, one assumes, members of the McTurk family who were until recently connected with the old Barrie law firm.

In recent months the press, radio, and professional publications have featured items on the prices commanded by historical and literary papers. The Society of American Archivists *Newsletter* of March 1978 noted that \$73,000 was paid for some of Wordsworth's papers. The Canadian Broadcasting Corporation carried numerous stories about the two-million-dollar Gutenberg Bible auctioned recently in New York. Mr. Amtmann has himself pointed out that McMaster University paid about half a million dollars for the Russell Papers some years ago. Into this milieu Mr. Amtmann would thrust the Gowan Papers!

In an attempt to justify a very high figure for the Gowan Papers, Amtmann talks of the "development of the art market to permit a fair evaluation." Might one not substitute the word "inflation" for "development"? Archivists should play no part in encouraging astronomical prices for the documents for our "Disraelis and Russells." It is our duty to make the most advantageous arrangements possible on behalf of our publicly supported institutions. Fulfilling this duty does not mean indifference or lack of

interest in items on the market as Amtmann suggests. If public money is to be used to buy national, provincial, or local treasures, then a share in the evaluation of these treasures rests with the public through its representatives.

Appraisal and the final price of these particular documents aside, the most important point for archivists may lie in the type of materials the Gowan Papers represent. Numerous similar collections exist in many law offices in Canada which could serve to illuminate our social, political, and, not least of all, our legal history. At present, little thought is given to the orderly and proper disposition of these documents. Some might argue that such papers belong to the client and heirs; others hold that the law firm has title; a few may even claim that individual partners of the firm have rights to material, especially if they discover it. An illustration of the lengths to which some will go to unearth items may be seen in the accompanying photograph, taken last March. Staff from Simcoe County Archives, with expert help, spent several days sifting through the wreckage. The results were four cubic-foot boxes of material salvaged item by item from the inchoate mess left on the floor. While the Archives was grateful to the firm for the opportunity to save material, it was impossible with limited resources to re-create documentary series or to determine if anything of historical worth remained. Even stamps had been ripped from covers which were then discarded on the floor. Such vandalism must be prevented despite Mr. Amtmann's view concerning private proper-



The vault of the Stewart and Esten office just days after the firm had moved, showing the work not of vandals but of lawyers searching for anything of value. (Photograph: Simcoe County Archives)

ty, that "if the owner wishes to destroy the material, this is his decision." Archivists must get involved in the preservation of legal collections, for among dry legal letters and registered documents there often exists correspondence and minutiae of wide interest. Law firms ought to consult archival repositories before disposing of older files, and the legal profession should look at the morality of windfall profits being realized by the sale of items once placed in trust.

Whatever happens with the Gowan Papers, archivists must ensure that appraisals reflect a reasonable price. We must establish closer liaison with lawyers to arrive at a proper disposition of collections, but not, as Mr. Amtmann suggests, so that we may in

turn closet them, but rather so we can ensure their survival and best use. Furthermore, archivists have a duty to ensure that valued papers remain in, or are returned to, their area of origin if proper facilities exist for their care. The Gowan Papers belong in Simcoe County for he was, after all, our very own circuit riding, politicking, patronizing judge, senator and knight.

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Appraisal of Collections and Individual Documents

I would like to comment on the article by Bernard Amtmann in which he states “that no market exists for a collection like the Gowan Papers” by outlining the principles and methodology of appraising archival documents. A basic distinction must be made between appraisal of *individual* documents—single diaries, discrete literary manuscripts and letters, maps, prints, drawings, rare books and similar archival and library records—and *large collections* of papers of prominent individuals and corporate entities. Different types of expertise and techniques are required to properly evaluate the two categories of materials.

Professional dealers are most proficient in appraising individual documents. Individual documents are often sold at auctions, through catalogues and over the counter, and the records of these transactions provide a valid guide in arriving at the fair market value of similar individual documents.

The appraisal of collections of papers requires a quite different approach. Very few collections are traded on the open market, as private collectors and investors are seldom interested in acquiring large quantities of papers. Those who do buy collections do so to acquire a few prestige documents which they preserve; the remaining items are often destroyed. The chief buyers of collections are archives, libraries and similar institutions who purchase material for its *research value*. Herein is the crux of the problem. No established market values exist for research collections. To translate the research value of a collection into a monetary market value demands an expertise usually beyond that of a professional dealer; a specialist of the subject of the collection and a curatorial specialist are required. The specialist in the subject of the collection might be a historian, a geographer, a cartographer, a demographer, or a literature specialist. Members of the academic community and such other professionals as genealogists, photographers, architects, archaeologists, meteorologists and palaeographers are often required as well. A collection of medical prescriptions, for example, may not strike the dealer as having a market value, but a historian of medical science can quickly decide if researchers might find such a collection of assistance. I question the ability of a dealer, no matter how knowledgeable in his trade, to determine the full value of a collection without comprehending its full research potential.

Equally important is the expertise of a curator. Curatorial specialists alone can determine the means and resources necessary to make the collection fully accessible for research. Few collections come to the archives with proper organization and appropriate finding aids. Without these the collections are virtually useless for research. Therefore, an unprocessed collection (that is, one requiring organizing, boxing and indexing) appraised at \$100,000 by a dealer might have a true value of only \$75,000 once the costs of making it ready for research are subtracted. The curator will also view the collection in terms of the repairs and restoration, including the conservation that may