

care than in the much vaunted archival “networking.” Certainly the implication is clearly that the ACA annual conference should be back with the Learned Societies, where we have much to contribute and little to fear.

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Archivist-Historians Ignore Information Revolution

The Appelbert Commission identified two landscapes in the Canadian archival community. Having read again two articles, one by Tom Nesmith and the other by George Bolotenko, there appears to be good cause to speak of two landscapes. Both Nesmith and Bolotenko deal with the archivist-historian or archivist as historian; both reflect considerable thought and concern; both, in my view, reveal disturbing misconceptions of the archivist’s role in today’s information environment. It is questionable if either reflects a realistic picture of Canadian archivists or “archivy.” They certainly do not reflect the corporate archival mandate and the role and challenge of its administrator.

In addition, as one of those trained in historical research skills at the graduate level, I take exception to the role which they wish me to play in today’s environment. I was confused, I must admit: am I to be an historian and serve other historians; or am I to use the skills of the historian to interpret my records for others. The latter is much more practical, but it still reflects an insular understanding of the role of the archivist for the future.

Identification and control of archival resources depends today on the application of more than historical training, skill, or disposition. It requires a more functional understanding of all the records themselves, and any potential use for them: why we keep them at all; the decision on what to make accessible first and to what level, and how to justify that; the balance between identification and acquisition, and access; the questions of legal admissibility and acceptability. It requires the creation of information systems which reach out to control archival resources in a myriad of formats and locations. And it requires more than a mere basic understanding of management techniques. And to explain this, let me deal with five issues: the relationship between historiography and archives; the alleged lack of communication; the librarian-records manager syndrome; archivist, archivist-historian or other; and finally, the management of information.

The relationship between historiography and archives. Tom Nesmith raises an interesting question: the role of the archivist in response to new historical methods. The alliance is broken; we do not merit the historian’s respect; we do not understand the nature nor value of our own holdings; we must return to a scholarly base to restore all of the above. We are fortunate to be under such a sentence of anathema and we still have time to avoid the fuller sentence of excommunication! It seems as if Nesmith wants us to make a special effort to allow the new breed of historian to have

access to all kinds of information about which he is, and we are, currently unaware. Yet surely we have identified, located, acquired, and preserved archival records on their generic value as archival; to have done so presupposes that we understand their purpose. The natural conclusion of Nesmith's article is that the archivist as historian will understand and communicate information resources. Yet he assumes that the historian is our major client, which is also Bolotenko's point, and one which I would dispute. To adjust our priorities to that one class of users would be disastrous. The type of users we face range more and more widely; one might be tempted to suggest that the onus is on the user to know the route of his quest on which we are but one stopping-point. Let the user have all the records he needs, not because of a new urgent need to preserve all facets of records and resources, but because the role of an archival programme is to encompass the totality of records intrinsically archival.

The lack of communication. I was not aware that historians and archivists had wandered so far apart as depicted by both authors (lapsed discourse, the love-hate relationship, and so on). Messrs. Nesmith and Bolotenko, were they to talk with archivists in the business, religious, and educational communities, might find that there is still a strong tie. Note that the Canadian Business History conference at Trent University in May 1984 has one session devoted to that link. Nesmith may feel "Passive by nature, subordinate to the truly creative work of others;" I certainly do not. I prefer to investigate the ways in which archivists themselves may be creative, whether in the collegial sense of a professional objective, or individually in our own institutions. That requires that we entertain different perspectives on how archives may be managed effectively; and that is what we do. "Barbarous bureaucratic gibberish" and "trendy windbaggery:" how out of touch it is to consider that the language of information management and management itself is not as generic to the archivist as to any other professional.

Librarians and records managers. Let us forget for the moment our feminine mystique. (I question the validity of this argument.) I prefer to think that the archival profile is one of competent professionals, without any consideration of "doddering old men" or "handmaidens." Instead, let us look at the dangers of being too much like librarians and records managers, both of whom may, I daresay, make excellent archivists. What archivist actually perceives library scientists as rather lowly in relation to the academic world? The answer must be the archivist who is an historian! And does the librarian really deal with the mass public and the archivist with the specialized researcher? Bolotenko has given an inflexible definition of the role of each as reference and resource experts. It simply does not reflect reality. And as for that other breed, the records manager. "The records manager seeks to destroy ... the [archivist] retains as much as possible." If that is the true role of an archivist, we need to do some serious soul-searching. Records managers keep what they must for as long as they are required to do so for a number of reasons. Not the least of these are statutory regulations and institutional mandate. Let's not cast into stone the image of the records manager as the *bête noire* of the archivist; we should build on his expertise. Unlike Terry Eastwood, I believe that, with the records manager, we still have a need to lobby with the appropriate people with the statute book; whatever was done without it may have been successful; will that trend continue? "Credibility or convenience?" — Mark Hopkins gives us a significant challenge in his ACA 83 paper on admissibility of archival records and the trustworthiness of the system which maintains them.

Archivist, Archivist-Historian, or other. What does George Bolotenko ask us to be: full-scale historians on one page; archivist-historians on another (is that “not quite one and not quite another?”); or historians “at least by disposition and in outlook”, or “in the sense of having an historicist’s disposition, that is, the interest in knowledgeably looking back to understand the context of record creation.” Which is it? One is unsure of what we are meant to be. A scholar may be the best individual to administer an archives, as Nesmith suggests, yet, so too may an effective administrator with “an historian’s disposition and outlook.”

I do not find the argument for the trained historian convincing. The underlying assumption is that an historian is a good archivist by virtue of his historical training alone; in today’s information environment that is unacceptable. And here I have a serious problem with Nesmith’s footnote on Richard Huyda’s ideas of management; I consider Huyda’s paper a key exposition of the training of future archivists. If those ideas, commonplace in other professions, are not endorsed, then I suggest that some archivists will never do more than apply historical research skills to a finite collection of records.

Management of Information: insular or innovative. Nesmith and Bolotenko decry the archivist who has not made historical enquiry of his holdings the principal item of the day. No one denies that archivists must know the origin, purpose, and accessibility of the records under their trusteeship; undeniably, too, to do so one benefits from having well-honed research skills. In the process, I suggest, we are, or should be, information professionals, interacting and communicating with others pursuing similar goals. It is our responsibility to contribute in a unique way to the objective of standardized and consistent information storage and retrieval. We cannot work in isolation from this. And will training as historians provide us with all the requisite tools? Is historical understanding and appreciation really the basis of our potential contribution?

Rather than isolate ourselves from other groups — the librarian of lowly academic status (rubbish!) or the destructive records manager (here Bolotenko is quite uninformed), we should build on our collective strengths and synergism. And to do so, historical disposition is only one asset. I raise the question of whether all archival records should be kept only because they have “historical value.” It is possible, after all, for them to have other institutional value — historical is but one. Shouldn’t we have an understanding of the legal, operational, administrative, fiscal, and organizational value of those records? These are not interpreted through historical training alone, but through our awareness of the function and direction of our institutions. We must be in tune with the full value of our records, and in so doing understand and communicate the full potential of their use; otherwise, we face a potential loss of information which far outweighs the potential scholarly use of the records we will have preserved, arranged, described, and made accessible after considerable, and fettered, scholarly-cum-historical analysis. In this case, it will not matter whether we are, or care to be, historians or whether we bring the cutting edge of historicity to our records; we will have missed the opportunity and necessity of preserving the archival records for which we have responsibility. In other words, let us be as concerned about today’s records and their archival value from all aspects of information-gathering and retrieval. Somehow, the argument that we should or should not assume the mantle of scholar/historian, by profession or disposition, pursues the wrong issue.

The real issue is the mechanism by which we as archivists will be prepared to identify and preserve today's records; otherwise, the well may run dry. And I repeat, the use of an historical/scholarly approach is inadequate if we wish to achieve the ultimate goal. It is this perception which Nesmith and Bolotenko are missing. The modern archivist must adapt to new language, different clients, varying methods of creating, maintaining, and disposing of information. (What will a "record" be in five years, or ten?)

I am always interested to read how, for example, corporate archives work, or should work, from archivists who have little exposure to their daily operations and priorities. Nesmith seems to think that the bulk of archival records, acquired and to be acquired, in private industry archives, are pre-1970 and textual. This is simply not true. In addition, such acquisition may not be a key priority now. The proliferation of micros, large databases in a distributed environment, huge mainframe financial applications: some of today's archival information has already been destroyed because there are no archival controls. Our two authors worry about our inability to communicate with and assist historians. I am troubled by the fuller implications today of electronic messaging and electronic mail, virtual storage and word processors. The ability with which people may create, manipulate, communicate, and destroy (or archive) information in digitized, non-textual form, without any direction from the archival community, is frightening. It should concern archivists that we are essentially not in control of tomorrow's archival resources. And what will our alliance with the historical profession be then?

If Nesmith and Bolotenko wish to pursue the goals they set for us, I wish them well; we probably do need archivists whose training and inclination is essentially scholarly. I do not underestimate the importance of historical enquiry and understanding, nor the knowledge which it can provide to assist us; however, I do not choose to pick up their challenge and that priority, for I see a more serious one on a daily basis. And in order to face that challenge, I will need more than scholarly enquiry to do so if I am to locate and preserve archival records so that all potential users will have at their disposal the information which they will need to accomplish their own objectives.

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