

In Defence of the New Professionalism: A Rejoinder to George Bolotenko

by **CARL SPADONI**

In his reply to his critics, George Bolotenko would like readers to believe that his original article on the "historian-scholar-archivist" ("Archivists and Historians: Keepers of the Well," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983)) has been completely misread and misinterpreted.¹ With "a gusto verging on the maudlin," his captious critics have unjustifiably focused on every word, phrase, clause, and sentence without subjecting his article to systematic scrutiny. Unsympathetic to the view that the archivist and the historian share the same house, all four of his critics, so Bolotenko alleges, are guilty of "ahistorical, acontextual" treatments of his essay. In protesting such misrepresentations, he appears to be echoing the Hegelian refrain, refuted long ago, that analysis without synthesis is falsification. I cannot speak for the other members of the "gang of four" who, I am sure, are quite capable of defending themselves against Bolotenko's verbal onslaught. Nevertheless, to argue, as Bolotenko does, that four archivists voiced specific criticisms independently yet misconstrued the entire purpose and direction of his article strains the limits of credibility.

At this point, it would be fruitless to cite the many examples of acerbic flourishes and *ad hominem* arguments used by Bolotenko in his original article to ridicule the archivist's search for a new professionalism. He is unwilling to admit that he might have provoked his opponents unnecessarily or that some of his remarks may have been offensive to those working in associated disciplines.

Bolotenko's reply has at least provided him with an opportunity to develop and to clarify his position. My disagreements with him still remain. His arguments, now clarified, have been watered down to such an extent that they no longer retain their rhetorical impact. In this rejoinder, I do not wish to engage in polemic, but I will attempt to address the substantive areas of disagreement.

Let us begin with Bolotenko's clarification of the relationship between archivy and library science. In his opinion, not only is the preliminary training of the

1 George Bolotenko, "Of Ends and Means: In Defence of the Archival Ideal," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 241-47; pagination contained in parentheses in my rejoinder refers to this article. My reply to Bolotenko, "No Monopoly for 'Archivist-Historians': Bolotenko Assailed," appeared in the "Special Feature The Debate Over History and Archives," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983-84), pp. 291-95; Anthony L. Rees, R. Scott James, and Bob Taylor-Vaisey are the other critics whose replies were published in the "Special Feature."

archivist and the librarian different, but there is also in large degree an antithesis in “mind-set” between the two professions. I objected to this latter generalization, pointing out that, unless one were favourably disposed towards medieval physiology, the generalization is just not credible. Bolotenko regards this to be such a pathetic charge that, in his reply, he accuses me of virulence. What he intended by antithetical “mind-set,” he now tells us, is “‘acquired attitudinal values’ (gibberish?); call it the result of ‘socialization’ at the work site; call it a ‘methodological orientation’ acquired through reading and on-site training.” (p. 242) Now it is probably true, at least to some degree, that people are conditioned by the workplace — by the tasks they perform and by the individuals with whom they interact. But it begs the issue entirely to suppose that these acquired attitudinal values are of such a character that they constitute a significant difference between the librarian and the archivist. If Bolotenko is right on this issue, it would be almost impossible for someone trained as a librarian to become an archivist. Yet this transition occurs with great frequency. Moreover, many people perform dual roles as librarian and archivist in one position. Does Bolotenko actually imagine that he and his colleagues at the PAC are so radically different in “mind-set” from the librarians working as archivists in the same building in the Rare Book and Literary Manuscripts Divisions of the National Library? The “mind-set” generalization is, therefore, false or unproven.

There is one other point that Bolotenko raises with respect to library science that I would like to controvert. He states, “if I do not err, it seems to me that it is with something like the tools, the means at the disposal of the library scientist, that they wish to define their ‘new’ archivist, the archivist as ‘technician.’ ” (p. 242) To begin with, I certainly do not regard myself as a technician. It does not follow that if the archivist is not an historian, then the archivist is merely a technician. Especially with regard to bibliographical control, the technical developments in library science have been tremendous in the last twenty years. There is no theoretical reason why these technical achievements cannot be adapted to archival purposes. Even so, it is a gross simplification to view library science chiefly as a technical discipline. It is a social science, and, as such, has a distinct human component. I do not wish to maintain that the archivist must be a librarian or that the archivist should be trained in library science methodology. But librarians can and do become excellent archivists, and there is nothing inherently wrong with archival courses being taught at library schools. As long as archives continue to be housed in libraries, librarians will be called upon to work as archivists.²

Before I move on to dispute Bolotenko’s definition of the historian, I would like to point out an inconsistency in his reply. As I interpret his original article, Bolotenko’s objective was to deny the well-known statement that the archivist

2 So antagonistic is Bolotenko to the library-archive alliance that he even suggests that the reason why I had my former position as Assistant Archivist at the Bertrand Russell Archives is due to my “doctorate in history and philosophy. . . . The matter of his library science qualifications is after the fact” (p. 244). Contrary to Bolotenko, a requirement listed in the job description is an M.L.S.; an honours degree in philosophy is also a requirement, and candidates who have taken a course in archives are given preference.

must not be an historian. Logically, if one denies that statement, then one admits the possibility that an archivist can be an historian. Bolotenko is not content with the logical consequence of this denial. He wants to claim that the archivist *ought* to be an historian, if not by training then at least by inclination. Yet, strangely enough, as if to placate his critics, he casually remarks: "I would like to point out that I am not at all making a whole and binding prescription for proper conduct by all archivists." (p. 245) This, however, is contradictory since he says elsewhere that those who "do not have an historical interest or disposition . . . will not make good archivists." (p. 244) If the word "ought" is to have any meaning in Bolotenko's claim, it must be prescriptive. From his claim, it follows that if x is not an historian, x cannot be a true archivist. One cannot have it both ways.

As pointed out by R. Scott James, one of the disturbing aspects of Bolotenko's original article was his indiscriminate use of the term "historian." Bolotenko now informs us that the "chief attribute of an historian . . . is his interest in man and society, in beginnings and evolution, in historical truth gleaned by the arduous process of subjection of all possible historical sources to the critical faculty in search of knowledge." (p. 244) He goes on to say that it matters not whether an individual is a zoologist, musicologist, or whatever. Every subject matter has a history, and therefore any individual with the right disposition can be an historian. Since archivists are intimately concerned with provenance, it would follow axiomatically that archivists are really historians in disguise. Archivists who reject history as the foundation of archivy are simply deceiving themselves, Bolotenko believes. Unfortunately, this interpretation of what makes an historian is so expansive as to become ambiguous and vague. One could argue similarly that anyone with the right disposition towards philosophy, economics, or physics, for example, can instantly be dubbed a philosopher, economist, or physicist. An appreciation of history may be a necessary condition for being an historian, but it is not sufficient by itself, no more than an interest in philosophy renders an individual a philosopher. If Bolotenko is arguing that subject specialists are best equipped to deal with papers related to a particular subject, no one will dispute his point of view. If he thinks, however, that the primacy of history can be salvaged thereby, he is sadly mistaken.

Bolotenko's amorphous definition of the historian is a principal strategy which he invokes in attempting to establish a generic connection between the archivist and the historian. Still, in his opinion, one can become a finer archivist if, in addition to the correct disposition, one has formal training in history. This claim is supported by reference to noted authorities in the archival profession whose arguments should be enough to persuade the recalcitrant reader. But, one wonders, what about the authorities who disagree with this claim and the arguments marshalled on its behalf? Authorities aside, the claim that formal training in history makes one a finer archivist is a value judgment. That such training can be an asset to an individual in certain archives which relate directly to the historical field of study is no doubt true. Archives themselves, however, are so diverse (business archives, religious archives, literary archives, etc.) that it is difficult to comprehend how a graduate degree in history automatically gives one an edge over a candidate without such a degree. Do we not often find

in the light of experience that higher education does not always translate into more effective work? I am not defending anti-intellectualism, but, as I stated previously in my reply, the work of the good archivist is due to individual performance and not due to the performance of a select group. Is it not just a bit coincidental that those who advocate training in history as the proper credential for the archivist have such training? Does this not appear as an attempt at self-justification?

“It seems to me,” Bolotenko observes, “that, given the historian’s disposition and training, work in an archival capacity can lead naturally to scholarly activity.” (p. 244) I must confess that in spite of his clarification of the “archivist-scholar,” I am still a bit puzzled as to how he conceives the relationship. Scholarly individuals are certainly good candidates to work in archives, especially if, after appointment, they take an active interest in the papers under their care and are able to provide in-depth reference service to clients. Bolotenko and I agree on this point at least. What I am puzzled about is whether he thinks that an archivist should act the role of scholar by reading and writing scholarly material during job hours. If this is what he recommends, I am surprised to learn that an archivist could afford such luxury in view of the current climate of job attrition and financial constraint. When one considers how many archives today are poorly sorted and insufficiently described, surely scholarly activity on the job is unrealistic. Promoting papers by publicizing the possibilities of research is one avenue an archivist should explore. Nor would I look askance at the archivist who reads a certain amount of professional literature on the job in order to maintain an awareness of developments and trends. An archivist, however, has no business playing the scholar while papers badly need attention and clients require service. Those archivists who turn to scholarly endeavours (especially related to their profession) after job hours are to be commended, but I see no reason why those who do not engage in scholarship after hours should be judged poorer archivists. We can do without the academic syndrome of “publish or perish.”

In defending what he considers to be the archival ideal, Bolotenko employs an argument from means and ends. It is this argument, supposedly implicit in his original article and which his critics allegedly fail to grasp, that he thinks clearly establishes the primacy of history in archival education:

. . . library science techniques, automated information retrieval systems, records management tools, bureaucratic administrative sciences, and so forth . . . while desirable and of extraordinary utility, remain only tools, only means. There must be an end design, an ethos, in whose service these tools are employed.

There was until recently in North America, and is to this day in Europe, an end, a purpose to archives and archivists, and that purpose is participation in the great cultural adventure of history — in its study and its writing and its dissemination. (p. 247)

These are grand sentiments, almost as wrong-headed as the romantic view that archives are temples of history and archivists are Clio’s highpriests. Bolotenko’s “means-end” argument will not work any more than his attempt to define the

historian within the archivist's compass. It is unfortunate that he persists in the delusion that culture today is under attack by the modernist forces of technology. In more mundane language, and as a corrective to Bolotenko's ideal, I suggest that the end to which all archivists should aspire is to ensure that the record of human activity is preserved, organised, described, and housed so that all kinds of research can be conducted under optimal conditions. As archivists, we do not participate in such research but prepare the groundwork for it. In effect (and Anthony L. Rees has already pointed this out quite clearly), Bolotenko's "means-end" argument confuses keepers with users.

It is not enough for Bolotenko to remind us time and again of the traditional link between archivy and history. The past does not imply the determinism of the future. The archival profession has been at a crossroads for the last several decades. The search for a new professionalism should not be stifled but encouraged. Historians will no doubt continue to take up the greatest number of jobs as archivists. Nevertheless, individuals from other fields are needed to offer different perspectives, to spark debate, and to contribute new ideas. Attempts at pre-appointment education such as at the University of British Columbia are to be applauded for combining the old and the new, for teaching different approaches, and for allowing theory to merge with practice.³ In the meantime, we should try to be tolerant of colleagues who have opposing views and to learn as much as we can from associates in neighbouring disciplines.

3 In this respect, I was much impressed by the maturity of Shelley Sweeney's "A Guinea Pig's Perspective on the UBC Master of Archival Studies Programme," *Archivaria* 18 (Summer 1984), pp. 263-67. If Sweeney's article is any indication of the calibre of student enrolled in UBC's programme, the "guinea pigs" are flourishing.