

Going Nowhere in Particular: The Association of Canadian Archivists Ten Years After

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This commentary begins with the premise that the Association of Canadian Archivists has been a disappointment in one way or another to most of its members over the last ten years. That judgement is not necessarily fair. Most members perceive the association to be falling short of the expectations they hold for it. The bill of indictment, as it has been expressed, runs something like this. The executive does not aggressively lead. The executive does not communicate with the membership enough. The committee system is unproductive. The annual meeting is a rewarding social occasion during which views and news are exchanged informally, but formal sessions are rarely intellectually or professionally as stimulating as they ought to be. Acting as a lobby, the ACA is ineffectual or, what is worse, apparently fractious and undecided. On vital issues of professional concern, the ACA is timid or divided and therefore unproductive. *Archivaria* is either out of tune with the membership or starved for copy on professional subjects from working archivists. The newsletter is not as timely and relevant as it should be. Other publication projects are piffling or non-existent. The association has isolated itself from other professional or scholarly organizations with which it has some common interest. Individuals in official positions do not know what they are doing. The association will not make progress until it has a permanent, paid secretary or some such officer.

Of course, all such criticisms add up to a kind of communal self-criticism for, in truth, whatever failings ACA has experienced must be shared by its members. The frequent attempts to blame the people bold enough to try to do something in the face of such bitter and defeatist criticism deliver a severe blow to initiative. If ACA faithfully reflects the state of the profession in English-speaking Canada, the personality of the profession as it is expressed through the association ought to trouble archivists deeply. It may be asked, therefore, why do they expend so much energy in expressing criticism, pessimism, and doubt and so little in well-directed, positive, collective action?

Some bogus answers must first be eliminated. Sometimes it is advanced that archivists are too small in number, too lacking in resources, or too isolated in this large country to allow them to operate effectively. How greater numbers of archivists would solve the problem is not obvious. There might simply be more negativism and dissatisfaction. More is not necessarily better. Moreover, such counsel asks the profession to wait for the

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millennium when archivists are rampant in the land. How throwing more money at a problem which is basically attitudinal would solve anything is equally baffling. And, the physical distances which separate the membership are not nearly so incapacitating as the insularities which derive from the perceptions archivists have of the status of their institutions and profession.

These remarks tread on the quicksand of perception. Indeed, they are rooted in what might be called the social psychology of the archival profession because the attitudes which archivists harbour determine what they are able to accomplish collectively through the ACA. Hence, what follows is entirely personal perception, backed by no more than personal experience and intuition, although there is corroborating evidence from study of other professions which suggests that the struggles and failings of archivists are not unique.

The founding of the ACA ten years ago was marked by a quite remarkable outpouring of optimism and energy. From the beginning, many archivists had a dual agenda for the association. On the one hand, it was expected to aid and abet, or as some would have it, prod archival institutions to greater glory by voicing concerns and by lobbying for change in the larger context of society. In short, archivists were ambitious to raise the profile and increase public appreciation of archives. There was a considerable yearning for a small place in the Canadian cultural sun for archives. On the other hand, and without distinguishing one thrust from the other, members of the association wanted to create the basis for a profession. Thus, the structures and organs of the association were established.

In those days, there was apparently no lack of things to do. The journal and newsletter were placed on a firm footing. A policy with regard to professional education was developed and approved at the meeting in Quebec City in 1976, alas without even publicizing it or distributing it to the membership. To this day, that policy statement stands as virtually the only one of its kind. Other public statements by the ACA have responded to the concerns of archives, not those of archivists. All this demonstrates how difficult it is for archivists to detach themselves from parochial, institutional concerns. Lacking any policy to follow, each new executive strikes out in whatever direction it wishes.

Attempts to publish manuals, brochures, or occasional papers produced a directory, some ill-distributed and ineffective leaflets, and a response to the Symons report several years after the report was issued. Committees were struck, sometimes devised plans, but did little. Early conferences, which were full of lively debate and interchange, particularly at the Annual General Meeting, gave way to woolly discussion of a contrived theme for the year while the conference has degenerated into the professional equivalent of a corporate annual meeting in which the activities of the year are given the membership's blessing. A recent habit of holding an executive forum gives members a golden opportunity to indulge their penchant for criticism or hectoring, but rarely does it spark generous debate about objectives or aims. Slowly enthusiasm has dissipated and with it optimism. Today it is difficult to say what the association wants to do other than to fall back on its broad aims as expressed in the constitution. It holds an annual meeting and continues to publish the *ACA Bulletin* and *Archivaria*. All of the activities of the association put together probably involve only a handful of members in actually doing anything in any given year. People pass from office with relief and, frequently, with determination to leave the cares of the association to others.

Archivists ought to have the most generous regard for those who have tried to do anything for the ACA. They have persevered against great odds. They are frequently resented by their colleagues, many of whom believe that work for the ACA is self-seeking. They are especially resented if they take office time or resources to do any of this work. Their actual efforts, when they are not criticized, are often taken for granted or ignored. Sometimes they are not even given the usual, perfunctory public thanks at the Annual General Meeting. In short, the officers of the ACA have been victimized by the deep-seated attitudes of the profession. Far from having great ambitions for the association, members bequeath it a kind of sterile environment in which officers feel grateful if they can escape office without being embarrassed. Those that do try to do something greater are frequently squelched or ignored. It is sad to watch all this because over the past ten years our institutions and the competencies of archivists have grown considerably. Indeed, Canadian archivists have much to be proud of. They serve Canadian society well. They are intelligent, lively, and by and large friendly toward one another. They do share a spirit of community, but cannot act on it very effectively through the association. Why is this so?

For an answer, we must look outside the bounds of archives and the profession to the wider society in which archivists ply their trade. The British historian H.G. Nicholas once characterized records and archives as existing in a climate of "lethargy and neglect." In short, like a well-known American comedian, records and archives "don't get no respect." By extension, then, archivists also "don't get no respect." For instance, not infrequently positions are advertised, even senior positions, for which the qualifications include neither archival education nor experience in the field. This is simply shocking. It continues to demonstrate how undervalued the learning, talents, and experience of archivists are. The image of archives and archivists in society presents the association with great odds against which to labour. At bottom, archivists tend to find in the association a convenient outlet for many of the frustrations which they feel as a result of being undervalued or neglected by society. When it is also realized that most were trained in humanities disciplines which prize individual intellectual achievement and critical analytical ability, that most have their professional field of action circumscribed severely by bureaucratic strictures, and that most work in a peculiar kind of isolation deriving from the uniqueness of their archives, the profession has a recipe for quirky individualism and flintiness, qualities which combine to undermine collective achievement. In fact, as the Wilson report states, the preservation of a nation's archives is a complex cooperative activity. Even the workings of individual repositories put a premium on cooperation.

Admittedly there are many barriers to interinstitutional cooperation, but archivists must endeavour to distinguish the professional side from the institutional side. The realm of agreeing on professional goals and priorities can be stimulating and life-giving. American archivists have in the 1980s created an evolving consensus within the profession to carry to the outside community, while at the same time they have attacked purely professional issues, such as certification and accreditation, with zeal if not yet success. The point is that the debate about such issues is lively and productive in the United States. Here there simply is none.

If such comment appears to be outrageous, consider a recent study which came to this conclusion:

Archivists blame other archivists for the stereotype society has of the profession, sometimes blaming a particular segment of the profession, sometimes blaming archivists in general. Archivists criticize other archivists for

the way they look, the way they act, their attitudes, their personal lives, their mental equipment and processes, the way they do their work and so on. When to this evidence of assigning blame is added evidence of a desire to dissociate from the group, the probable presence of a serious condition is evident. It is a condition commonly found in minority groups. It is self-contempt or self-doubt, sometimes referred to as self-hatred. Such self-contempt is sometimes manifested as scorn for one's group, sometimes as dislike for one segment of one's group, and sometimes as doubt of oneself, doubt of one's worth.

No, these are not the words of some deranged author of a Master of Archival Studies thesis, they are in fact the words of Pauline Wilson in her study *Stereotype and Status: Librarians in the United States*, which I doctored for archival purposes, not unreasonably, I submit. In fact, a similar study of Canadian archivists would probably reveal a condition at least as serious, for Canadians do not even have the comfort of a relatively well-established profession. Archivists are as yet straining to establish one.

The first task, and one organizations such as the ACA must foster, is to cultivate self-respect, which is the necessary condition for carrying the profession's message to the outside world. There is no good reason for archivists to think of themselves poorly, but they evidently do as is attested by two dominant symbols of the stresses and strains of the past ten years. One symbol is found in the anguished resignation from the association of its first president, who found the malaise beyond bearing. Whether or not one agrees or sympathizes with Gordon Dodds, who in his own way spent his energy to found a self-respecting profession, his action symbolizes the profession's plight. The other symbol is the now monumental debate about history and archives, as the editors of *Archivaria* style it. There are two general responses to the debate, as opposed to the camps within the debate. There are those who believe the debate is unimportant or even irrelevant and therefore ought to be ignored. And there are those who believe nothing is more important, who wish to proselytize the profession to a right-minded way of thinking. Such a rift also symbolizes the predicament.

In regard to the ACA and archival education, this paper is not the place for a brief in defense of the MAS programme, but it is perhaps time to reflect on the continuing curiosity that, despite or maybe because of the existence of the MAS programme, the profession in English Canada is eerily silent about the vital issue of archival education. Again, for explanation the circumstance of the profession must be examined.

As matters stand today, archivists have almost no control over who shall be an archivist. Most archivists are presently employed by agencies dependent on the public purse. They are public servants or employees of universities or libraries dependent on public funds. As such, they are subject to rules and regulations, prime among them are rules affecting hiring practices, which are devised with anything but professional standards in mind. It is not easy to see any concerted professional effort to change this situation.

In this regard, archivists are not alone, as the situation of the social work profession might demonstrate. Recently the tragic case of the death of a boy beaten by his father raised questions about the training of social workers in British Columbia. It turns out that, despite the existence of professional education for social workers at many Canadian universities, British Columbia requires that people hired as social workers have only a

bachelor's degree in some related field. The provincial government maintains that all social workers are trained to handle child abuse cases. If matters of life and death do not stimulate public authorities to require professionals in the field of social work to have a course of professional education, where does that leave archivists? Archivists rationalize their situation and hide from the problem because it is too painful to address and too difficult to see being resolved in the workplace where authorities who are in control have objectives well-nigh antithetical to the profession's best interests. I do not pretend to tell archivists what they should do *vis-à-vis* archival education, but they should do something both as a profession and as individuals in the workplace to promote some improvement in the state of our learning and professional capacities. In archival education, as in other issues of pressing professional concern, what is patently lacking is some sense of communal mission, some expression of a real community of archivists striving to reach well-articulated and agreed upon objectives. Instead, there is polite and empty discourse leading nowhere in particular.

The cure, however, is at hand. Let's respect ourselves first. Let's trust ourselves. Let's forgive ourselves our shortcomings. Let's try to get together. The odds are against us for sure. To begin, the ACA ought to dispense sometime soon with the annual conference in its present form and convene a congress to air all the professional — not institutional — issues that should be aired and make resolutions to address them in some constructive way. Forget the institutions where archivists work; forget the state and status archivists enjoy out there; gather round the kitchen table and have it out with respect, affection, and dedication to the profession's collective self-interest.