

Review Article

Archival Studies in the Canadian Grain: The Search for a Canadian Archival Tradition

by HEATHER MACNEIL

Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance. TOM NESMITH, ed. Metuchen, N.J., & London: Society of American Archivists and Association of Canadian Archivists in association with Scarecrow Press, Inc., 1993. 513 p. ISBN 0-8108-2660-7.

In 1925, William Carlos Williams published *In the American Grain* which attempted, through a collage of the lives and prose styles of representative Americans, to identify a uniquely American tradition, a set of shared beliefs, legends, and customs handed down from one generation to the next. In tracing the contours of that tradition, Williams hoped to present "its signs and signatures, its backward glances and, by implication, its warnings for the future."¹ The interest in and search for a tradition is a quest for identity and belonging that engages us as individuals, as nations, and as professionals. In his analysis of the American archival profession, Luke Gilliland-Swetland suggests that a professional tradition reveals itself through "observable actions, objective practices, and public statements of intellectual rationale, as well as the subjective values and the less tangible professional awareness of identity and mission that animate and give meaning to those public actions."²

Richard Berner's 1983 study, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis*³ might be considered the first sustained attempt to define an archival tradition in the American grain. In it, Berner reflected on the development of American archival theory and practice over almost two centuries and identified two traditions that had shaped archival administration in the United States. The first was an indigenous historical manuscripts tradition dating back almost to the birth of the country and rooted in librarianship; the second, a public archives tradition imported from the archival traditions of France and Prussia.

Ten years later, we have *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance*, a collection of previously published essays inspired, in part, by the Society of American Archivists' *A Modern Archives Reader* but closer to Berner's work in its attempt to characterize an archival tradition shaped in the spirit of what we might call the Canadian grain. As the book's preface explains:

this collection reprints articles ... that reflect the best archival thinking and debate in Canada across four categories: the overall history and evolution of Canadian archives, major theoretical statements concerning the nature of archives and archival work, systematic analyses of archival records and media, and highlights of Canadian contributions to archival practice.

Since the intention underlying the endeavour was to bring Canadian archival thinking and debate to the attention of American archivists and students enrolled in archival studies, the essays are drawn mainly from *Archivaria*, though a few contributions have been selected from other professional journals such as *Records Management Quarterly*, *American Archivist*, and *Cartographica*. The interpretive thread that ties the essays together “and thus defines the Canadian archival tradition” is characterized by the book’s editor, Tom Nesmith, as “the contribution of archivists in English-speaking Canada to the recent rediscovery of provenance.” In a lengthy and often insightful introductory essay, Nesmith explores the history of that rediscovery and places the Canadian contribution to it within a broader framework of international archival developments. Before examining Nesmith’s interpretation of the meaning of the Canadian “re-discovery of provenance,” it is worth summarizing the essays he has chosen to reflect it.

The exploration begins, fittingly enough, with Luciana Duranti’s “The Odyssey of Records Managers,” which traces the genesis of the European archival profession through the history of the keepers of records from the ancient world to the twentieth century. She explains how records keepers pursued the implications of provenance into the study of records creation, administration, and forms, revived the older tradition of diplomatics to pursue these aims, and built a distinct body of knowledge as well as a distinct profession on this intellectual foundation. As Duranti points out, before the creation of central state archives, the purposes of archives were linked by and large with those of law and administration; archival documents included current as well as non-current records. It was only with the establishment of the Archives nationales de France that their purposes became linked with those of history, a shift which “determined a material and theoretical distinction between administrative and historical archives.”

This distinction carried over to North America. As Ian Wilson and Terry Eastwood point out in their respective essays on the early history of the National Archives of Canada and the British Columbia Archives and Records Service, the Canadian archival tradition was shaped by nineteenth-century historical conceptions of the purpose of archives as well as by the particular circumstances that created Canada. The uniting of separate colonies into a single nation brought with it a search for a national identity which, it was believed, could be fostered by a knowledge of history, based on archival sources. As Wilson points out, the assumption “that historical writing and the evolution of a national consciousness were inextricably linked seemed commonplace” and led to the creation of an Archives Branch within the Department of Agriculture by 1872. Since it was created in response to cultural rather than administrative needs, the Archives Branch “sought both public and private materials. Any distinction between the two seemed invalid in colonial society.” This aspect of Canadian archival history highlights a significant distinction between the Canadian and American archival traditions. As Laura Millar summarizes this distinction:

Unlike the United States, with its tradition of public archives responsible for government records and separate, privately administered historical societies responsible for the acquisition and care of private papers, Canada has, since the early days of Confederation, upheld a tradition of direct government involvement in the care and administration of its historical and cultural resources. The public sector involvement in the country's cultural and social sphere runs deep within the Canadian consciousness; it is inherent in the essentially collectivist nature of our social structure.⁴

Another distinction between the two traditions is reflected in the fact that, whereas in Canada a National Archives was created a mere five years after Confederation, in the United States the generally held belief that "the government's role as a custodian of memory ought to be comparatively modest"⁵ delayed the establishment of a National Archives for 160 years after American independence. In *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture*, Michael Kammen observes that, in the United States, "until the late thirties, the safekeeping of public documents—and hence of American public memory—remained largely a matter of private initiative and institutions."⁶

The nationalist and collectivist instincts that first animated the birth of Canadian archives gradually led to the emergence of the idea of "total archives." In "Total Archives: The Canadian Experience," Wilfrid Smith reflects on the four principal features of the concept that have developed over the last century. Smith enumerates these features as follows:

1. All sources of archival material appropriate to the jurisdiction of the archives are acquired from both public and private sources ...;
2. All types of archival material may be acquired, including manuscripts, maps, pictures, photographs, sound recordings, motion picture and other audio visual material, and machine-readable records; all records originating from the same source should be acquired and preserved in their totality rather than divided among several repositories;
3. All subjects of human endeavour should be covered by a repository in accordance with its territorial jurisdiction rather than being assigned to different repositories on the basis of subject;
4. Life cycle: there should be a commitment by both the creator of the records and the archivist to ensure efficient management of records throughout the "life cycle" or, to be more precise, the archival authority should be concerned with records from the time of their creation at least to the extent to ensure that records judged worthy of preservation are selected and transferred to the archives.

Smith also alludes to a fifth element concerning networks proposed by Terry Cook: "an institutionalized system of archives—national, provincial, and municipal cooperating with university, church, county, business, and labour—to ensure that the records of all significant human effort are preserved." In light of this fifth element, it is a pity that Terry Eastwood's historical exploration of efforts to develop a Canadian archival network⁷ is not included in *Canadian Archival Studies*, since it complements the history of the evolution of Canadian archival institutions and

provides an interesting counterpoint to the history of network building in the American archival community.

Though the total archives agenda was an administrative as well as an historical-cultural one, the latter strain dominated archival practice for the first half of the twentieth century and beyond. The administrative agenda of total archives was accomplished slowly and only with great difficulty, as Jay Atherton's examination of the long campaign to establish the authority of the National Archives for the systematic transfer of records demonstrates. In "The Origins of the Public Archives Records Centre, 1897-1957," Atherton brackets the history of that campaign between two symbolic events: the appointment of a Treasury Board Commission in 1897 to investigate records disposal issues in light of the West Block fire and the opening of the Public Archives Records Centre in 1956. With the opening of the Centre and the establishment of the Public Records Committee, which gave the Public Archives a virtual veto over the destruction of records, the two prerequisites defined by W. Kaye Lamb for a satisfactory system of disposal for government records—an adequate review procedure and an adequate storage space—were finally met.

Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, as Canadian archival institutions solidified their mandates and authority, discussion turned inevitably to the body of knowledge required of the archivist in the context of total archives and the most appropriate means of balancing total archives' cultural and modern administrative imperatives. Gordon Dodds's "The Compleat Archivist," published in the first issue of *Archivaria*, is an early attempt to characterize the intellectual baggage required of the fully professional archivist. Dodds identifies eight areas of specialist knowledge and skill related to archival studies, among them, history, library science, law, records management, and computer science. As Nesmith observes, "Dodds's comments on history's far-from-exclusive role foreshadowed a heated debate over the place of historical knowledge within the archivists' field of expertise," a debate that pitted the "professional archivist" against the "historian-archivist."

In *Canadian Archival Studies*, the professional (or administrative) side of the debate is represented by Hugh Taylor's "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s" in which he argues that the longstanding archives-history alliance had prevented archivists from playing a role in contemporary administration and sidelined them on an "historical shunt." The distinction between current and non-current records, Taylor regards as "a fiction of the historical method." He detects in the new information management environment an opportunity for archivists to move out of the historical shunt and re-enter the mainstream of record-keeping. To meet the information requirements of contemporary administration, Taylor maintains, the archivist should be equipped "not so much with a knowledge of academic history as with a knowledge of automation, communication theory, records management, diplomatic, and the use of records in administration."

The historical side of the debate is represented by Terry Cook's "From Information to Knowledge: An Intellectual Paradigm for Archives." In that essay, Cook refutes Taylor's position, asserting that "the 'historical shunt' is the glory of archivists, not their regret, the very essence of their unique professional contribution to knowledge and humanity." According to Cook, historical research method-

ologies, analytical insights, and contextual understanding from studies of the philosophy of history constitute the archivist's specialized knowledge. Without it, he avers, archivists would be incapable of the depth of analysis required to explain the provenance of modern records. From Cook's perspective, a reorientation of the profession that emphasizes, among other things, the short-term administrative uses for records rather than the long-term cultural analysis of them, the "management" of records and information rather than their scholarly "study," and training in technology and procedures rather than an historical understanding of records, constitutes a significant threat to the archival profession.

During the course of this debate, the argument for the continuing relevance of historical knowledge shifted from an insistence on the centrality of subject knowledge to an insistence on the centrality of what Nesmith describes as "provenance knowledge." His "Archives from the Bottom Up," which is included in *Canadian Archival Studies*, calls for an "historian of the record" approach to archival analysis, involving the application of historical research methodologies, "not to the content of the records, but to the records themselves and the evidential context that gave them birth." The notion that archivists should focus more on why and how people created documentation rather than on the subject content of that documentation is also woven into Hugh Taylor's "Transformation in the Archives: Technological Adjustment or Paradigm Shift." In that essay, Taylor explores a number of cultural and technological transformations taking place which are contributing to the break-up of traditional knowledge theory. Influenced by the theories of Marshall McLuhan and Harold Innis concerning the power of media to shape societal institutions and human perception, Taylor argues that archivists should extend their understanding of the provenance of documentation into the origins of recorded communication.

Throughout the 1980s, the growing belief that an understanding of records and the contexts of their creation were central to archival studies and archival work manifested itself in two separate, but related, lines of inquiry: the first was directed toward the study of records and reflected the historian of the record approach advocated by Nesmith in "Archives from the Bottom Up"; the second was directed toward the archival administration of records. The essays chosen to illustrate the first line of inquiry include studies of textual and other media records and are characterized by Nesmith as:

part of a Canadian contribution to the development of a modern diplomatic which maximizes "the power of provenance." [They] explore provenance information about the creators of documentation, the administration of documents, and the forms, functions, and physical characteristics of various archival documents.

The studies of textual records include Hugh Taylor's survey of the rise and decline of the textual record in "My Very Act and Deed: Some Reflections on the Role of Textual Records in the Conduct of Affairs," as well as two specific essays on record-keeping practices in two federal government departments: Terry Cook's "Paper Trails: A Study of Northern Records and Northern Administration, 1898-1958," and Bill Russell's "The White Man's Paper Burden: Aspects of Records Keeping in the Department of Indian Affairs, 1860-1914." The studies of other

media records include Jim Burant's investigation of military artists, "The Military Artist and the Documentary Art Record," Andrew Birrell, Peter Robertson, Lilly Koltun, Andrew Rodger, and Joan Schwartz's study of amateur photography, "Private Realms of Light: Canadian Amateur Photography, 1839-1940," and Terry Cook's essay on Anglo-Canadian imperial cartography, "A Reconstruction of the World: George R. Parkin's British Empire Map of 1893."

The second line of inquiry—the administration of records—concerns itself with the development of systems, structures, and procedures that facilitate the management and use of provenance-related information. This line of inquiry is explored in *Canadian Archival Studies* from a number of perspectives. Jay Atherton's "From Life-Cycle to Continuum: Some Thoughts on the Records Management-Archives Relationship," looks at the mutual interests of archivists and records managers in the management of recorded information throughout its life history and provides practical grounds on which to forge stronger relationships among the creators and administrators of records. Two quite different perspectives on the administration of media are provided by Terry Cook and Andrew Birrell, who debate the effects of separating records according to media. In "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on Total Archives," Cook argues that the media emphasis in archival functions at the National Archives has privileged the acquisition of media as media (rather than as documentary evidence), fragmented intellectual control over archives, and eroded provenancial relationships within multiple media fonds. The media orientation is defended by Andrew Birrell in "The Tyranny of Tradition." He disputes Cook's contention that the principle of provenance precludes the separation of records by medium, maintaining that, so long as the functional integrity of records is maintained, the principle is followed. According to Birrell, the problems associated with media separation that Cook identifies reflect a restricted, textually-biased understanding of what constitutes historical significance, documentary evidence, and, for that matter, intellectual control.

In "Archival Theory and Electronic Records," Catherine Bailey explores the applicability of traditional archival theory to electronic record-keeping systems in the areas of appraisal, arrangement and description, and public service. Her analysis demonstrates that, although electronic records require certain adaptations to archival theory and practice, an understanding of the contexts of records creation is as relevant to electronic record-keeping systems as it is to more conventional paper-based systems.

The central role played by provenance in the development of archival descriptive standards is explored in Kent Haworth and Wendy Duff's "Reclamation of Archival Description," which examines the efforts of the Bureau of Canadian Archivists to build descriptive standards on a foundation of archival principle, notably *respect des fonds*. As Haworth and Duff explain, the *Rules for Archival Description* prepared by the Bureau's Planning Committee on Descriptive Standards reflect a commitment to this principle by establishing the fonds as the primary unit of description and by adapting the library technique of multilevel description for the purpose of describing a fonds and its parts in their relevant provenancial and documentary contexts.

As Nesmith notes in his introduction, the decision to make the fonds the foundation of archival descriptive standards has been the subject of some debate within the Canadian archival community, as archivists attempt to determine what constitutes a fonds for practical purposes. The omission of Debra Barr's prescient and influential critique of Michel Duchein's criteria for determining a fonds⁸ is, therefore, regrettable since her advocacy for the approaches to the problem of multiple provenance series developed by the Australian archivist, P.J. Scott, and the American archivist, Max Evans, foreshadowed and influenced subsequent discussions and explorations of the fonds concept. Nesmith acknowledges the influence of these articles, but only in a footnote.

The exploration of the rediscovery of provenance in the context of archival administration is completed by an examination of the relevance of provenance to the much neglected area of public programming. In "From Paper Archives to People Archives: Public Programming in the Management of Archives," Gabrielle Blais and David Enns argue that the archival community's failure to develop effective public programming strategies are partly attributable to the poor quality of provenance-based finding aids and to the lack of a strategy for educating users of archives about archival principles such as provenance and showing them how these principles might be used in search strategies. If archivists wish to secure the participation and support that they need to achieve their purposes, Blais and Enns conclude, public programming strategies need to encourage "more immediate ties between [the public] and the archival record ... [and] provide the opportunity for the public to comprehend and value archives."

Canadian Archival Studies itself concludes with Terry Eastwood's "Nurturing Archival Education in the University," in which he reflects on the philosophy and practice of archival education and evaluates the experience of the first seven years of the archival studies programme at the University of British Columbia. His reflections on European archival knowledge and North American archival practice lead him to conclude that North American approaches to the treatment of archives do not pay sufficient attention to the nature of archives as evidence of action. He believes that the treatment of archives and the duties of archivists should flow from a clear understanding of that nature. For that reason, the nature of archives should be the primary focus of archival studies:

Archives are the documentary expressions of the bodies, corporate or personal, which created them, and the archivist's primary duty is to preserve them in the context and the composition given to them by their creators ... so that they will express to people who use and interpret them authentic memorial of the actions which brought them into being.

In the model of archival education that Eastwood describes, the study of the nature of archives—their context and composition—is the core around which the study of archival functions and archival methodologies are built.

Any collection of previously published essays is of necessity both subjective and incomplete. Contemporary critical theory teaches us that the production of knowledge, far from being a disinterested activity, may be more accurately described as an effort to make the views of a particular class of people prevail. It would be

naive then to expect that any collection drawn from previously published essays would be truly representative of professional activity or thought, since the journals from which they are taken are part of that knowledge production industry. Quite apart from the scholarly nature of professional journals—which, in itself, constrains the number of perspectives that will even be offered for publication—there are the additional constraints imposed by referees, editors, and editorial boards, all of whom play influential roles in the formation of professional literature. The great majority of essays included here are drawn from *Archivaria* and, accordingly, reflect the particular editorial bias of that journal. In 1984, Gordon Dodds reflected on the central role played by *Archivaria*'s editors in shaping Canadian archival literature:

because Canadian archivists in particular have never in these twenty years exactly been flooding the journals with contributions on anything, the editors took it upon themselves to search out articles quite deliberately and to fashion an issue in a particular manner. As far as *Archivaria* is concerned, this policy and method has revealed that a high percentage of articles derive from archivists and historians working in specialized subject areas of the federal government (not always the PAC itself).

Canadian Archival Studies reflects this contributor profile: out of the twenty-three essays selected for inclusion, twelve are written by archivists who have spent their careers working in the National Archives (I have not included in this number the essays written by Tom Nesmith, Gordon Dodds, and Hugh Taylor, all of whom have spent a portion of their careers working for the National Archives). As a consequence, there are fewer voices from other parts of the archival community and fewer perspectives on the nature of archives and the role of archivists than one might wish. This absence of voices and perspectives is, however, a problem general to the professional literature and not specific to *Canadian Archival Studies*. There are, of course, other omissions in this collection that are attributable purely to editorial choice and taste. The essays Nesmith has chosen are those that, in his opinion, best reflect the themes developed in his introductory essay. To compensate partially for certain omissions, however, he does provide a number of cross-reference footnotes that, he hopes, “will lead readers to good essays which, for reasons of space, could not be republished here.”

The essays selected for inclusion in *Canadian Archival Studies* are, on the whole, worthy exemplars of various aspects of the Canadian archival tradition. Taken together, they make a persuasive argument for the broad acceptance of provenance by Canadian archivists as an intellectual foundation for most, if not all, aspects of archival work. This acceptance should not be mistaken, though, for a consensus about the interpretation of either “provenance information” or “provenance knowledge,” to use Nesmith's terms. If we examine the implicit and explicit ways in which the notion of provenance is used in *Canadian Archival Studies* and the reasons why it is endorsed, it becomes clear that it means different things to different people.

In its pure dictionary articulation, provenance means “to come forth, arise. The fact of coming from some particular source or quarter; origin, derivation.”⁹ In archival terms, provenance was traditionally understood to mean the individual or

corporate body responsibility for the creation, accumulation, and use of a body of records, i.e., a fonds. The principle of provenance, which was designed to protect the integrity of a fonds, was applied in a fairly straightforward manner through physical arrangement. By keeping the fonds physically together, the archivist preserved and protected the contextual relationships embedded within it: the physical arrangement of a fonds provided clues to its intellectual arrangement. For some of its contemporary advocates, exploiting the power of the principle of provenance is simply a matter of making the implicit explicit by shifting the application of the principle from the physical arrangement of a fonds to the analysis of its intellectual arrangement. Provenance knowledge, by these lights, embraces knowledge about the various administrative and personal contexts of records creation: the functions and activities the records embody, the processes and procedures they reflect, their relationships to other types of records. The application of this knowledge to the management of records throughout their life history is viewed as a means for archivists to strengthen and expand their roles as administrators and custodians of records. Luciana Duranti's "The Odyssey of Records Managers," Jay Atherton's "From Life Cycle to Continuum," Hugh Taylor's "Information Ecology and the Archives of the 1980s," Terry Cook's and Bill Russell's respective analyses of the Department of the Interior and the Department of Indian Affairs, Cathy Bailey's "Archival Theory and Electronic Records," and Kent Haworth and Wendy Duff's "The Reclamation of Archival Description" all reflect, in varying degrees, this perspective on the application of provenance knowledge to archival work.

For other advocates, and here I would include Tom Nesmith, exploiting the power of provenance is also a matter of making the implicit explicit. The difference is that the framework of implicit meaning and, hence the interpretation of provenance knowledge, is stretched to include the larger socio-historical contexts of records creation, what Nesmith calls their "societal provenance." Applying this knowledge means uncovering the socio-cultural as well as the administrative forces that have shaped the records' formation and showing how changes in recorded communication have affected their meaning. In this formulation, provenance is not so much rediscovered as it is reinvented as historical technique, since it brings within the archivist's purview both the history of society and the origin and evolution of recorded communication. This application of provenance knowledge to the study of records and recorded communication is seen as a means of strengthening the archivist's role as an interpreter of the record, albeit in terms of its context rather than its content. This perspective of the application of provenance knowledge is reflected, again in varying degrees, in Terry Cook's "From Information to Knowledge," in Hugh Taylor's "My Very Act and Deed," in Andrew Birrell *et al.*'s "Private Realms of Light," and, of course, in Nesmith's own contribution, "Archives from the Bottom Up".

Although there are points of agreement between these different perspectives concerning the nature of provenance knowledge and its application to archival studies and archival work, ultimately the points of disagreement are more interesting and revealing because they highlight an inherent tension between the cultural and administrative strains within the total archives tradition—a tension that, oddly enough, given our very different histories, replicates the historical tension within the American archival community between the historical manuscripts and public

archives traditions. In *American Archival Analysis*, Richard Berner argued that, during the 1950s, archivists working within historical manuscripts repositories—who had traditionally drawn from the theory and practice of librarianship for the management of their holdings—gradually came to accept the principle of provenance as a more effective foundation on which to base the acquisition, arrangement, and description of holdings. In Berner's view, this general acceptance of the principle of provenance signalled the ascendance of the public archives tradition as the dominant tradition within the American archival community. The view is disputed by Luke Gilliland-Swetland, who argues that the differences separating the two traditions were more profound than their different approaches to the management of holdings. Gilliland-Swetland characterizes the "competing ideals" underlying these two traditions in the following way:

Defenders of the historical manuscripts tradition perceived themselves as members of a community of humanities scholars and, by extension, as historian-interpreters of the documents they preserved. Advocates of the public archives tradition perceived themselves to be professionals with mastery over a body of specialized theory and practice; consequently they viewed their role as administrator-custodian of the documents they preserved.¹⁰

The widespread acceptance of provenance by the American archival community during the 1950s had no discernible effect on these very different ideals. As Gilliland-Swetland makes clear, the acceptance of provenance, far from demonstrating the inevitable ascendance of the public archives tradition, illustrated instead:

... the multiplicity of ways in which principles and practices could be adopted. Believing that the primary function of an official archives was its legal function, Margaret Cross Norton [a promulgator of the public archives tradition] had developed an extensive argument regarding the role of the principle of provenance in establishing the *archival*, by which she meant *legal*, quality of a record. "The necessity for acceptable certification [legal authenticity]," Norton wrote, "is the basis for the adoption of provenance as the basis for the classification of archives." Historical manuscripts repositories, however, adopted the principle of provenance because it provided a powerful tool for understanding the historical context (rather than the legal or administrative context) in which the materials were created since contextualization is the *sine qua non* of all sound historical scholarship.¹¹

An analogous (though not identical) dichotomy between the interpreter-historian of the record and its custodian is evident in the Canadian archival tradition. This dichotomy and the differing perspectives it has spawned concerning the role of archivists and the nature of archival work have formed an enduring text and subtext in archival debates since the earliest days of the Association of Canadian Archivists. The Cook-Taylor exchange on the place of historical knowledge in archival work did not still the debate on this fundamental question of professional identity. It simply directed it away from subject-related issues: the role of historical subject knowledge in archival work, and toward methodology-related issues: the role of historical methodologies in archival work.¹²

It is not unreasonable, therefore, to expect that an analysis of the Canadian archival tradition, particularly one that takes as its theme the rediscovery of provenance, would reflect a sensitivity to the differing interpretations that have influenced archival debates for almost twenty years and which underpin the various understandings of the nature of provenance-based knowledge and its applicability to archival work. Nesmith, however, commits the same error as Berner by reading into the widespread acceptance of provenance on the part of the archival community, an attendant consensus concerning its interpretation and application. The editorial flaw in *Canadian Archival Studies* reveals itself, not so much in the editor's selection of essays to illustrate the Canadian archival tradition, as in his selective interpretation of that tradition. This selectivity becomes clear when he explains what he considers to be the Canadian contribution to the rediscovery of provenance. After exploring archival developments in the United States that had precipitated a renewal of interest on the part of American archivists in the principle of provenance, Nesmith asserts that:

... Canadians have also reached a renewed appreciation of the power of organic, contextual information by another route. Many Canadian archivists have thought that these problems could best be addressed by a renewal of the place of historical knowledge in archival work. This is emphatically not an agenda, as it is sometimes caricatured, designed to turn archivists into historians exploring the subject content of archival records, but rather to use historical research methodologies and interpretive insights to unravel the full, rich, contextual power of provenance of archival records. The result of both efforts in Canada has been a deepening of the knowledge of Canadian archivists of provenance information about recorded communication, records administration, and institutional history, as well as the emergence of an approach to archival administration and education which is shaped by this knowledge. The essays have been chosen to illustrate this development.

The notion that the use of "historical research methodologies and interpretive insights" characterizes the Canadian contribution to archival studies is perfectly consistent with the historian of the record approach that Nesmith advocates. As we have seen, this approach is reflected in some of the essays in *Canadian Archival Studies*; it is by no means, however, reflected in all of them. It is inappropriate, therefore, to cast them in that light. The contributions demonstrate a multiplicity of perspectives that belie any one interpretation.

Moreover, his assertion that the historical perspective remains at the core of the discipline of archives and shapes its methodologies and interpretation of records remains a matter of debate within the Canadian archival community. Luciana Duranti, for example, in arguing for the essential autonomy of archival science from other disciplines, including history, has maintained that archival methodology is fundamentally different from historical methodology. This difference in methodology leads, in turn, to different interpretations with respect to the documents that are the object of archival and historical analyses:

Archivists seek to preserve documents rather than facts while the historian interprets facts. The archival method also deals with facts and therefore involves interpretation. But, if it is true that data become facts when patterned

according to ideas, it is also true that the most common facts are the product of broad cultural assumptions, ideas that we no longer recognize as such; we don't think of them, we think with them. Thus the archival method is not completely objective. But the facts in question for the archivist are facts about the documents. There is no second level interpretation, no tacit assumption about what the facts in the documents may mean. The historical method instead seeks facts about and within the documents and does so for the express purpose of patterning and interpreting them. The archival method interprets once, and then only the most stable aspect of the document, the artifact, with ideas shared by an entire civilization. The historical method interprets three times, and mainly interprets the least stable aspect of the document, the meaning, with ideas shared by a particular group within a given society and filtered through the historian's own experience, thoughts and feelings. Those who use and those who preserve the documents thus employ different methods in the service of different purposes.¹³

The methodological and interpretive differences Duranti describes are magnified when filtered through the lens of diplomatics, which is a tool used by both archivists and historians. Since the revival of diplomatics in Canadian archival studies is one of the sub-themes Nesmith develops in *Canadian Archival Studies*, it is worth exploring his interpretation of diplomatics and the essays he has chosen to illustrate it. Such an exploration will demonstrate that, as with the concept of provenance, there is a widespread acceptance of the need for a "modern diplomatic" but little consensus as to what it means and how it should be applied to archival work.

As Nesmith points out in his introduction, the 1980s witnessed a growing convergence of interest among European and North American archivists in reviving and adapting the European tradition of diplomatics "as a tool with which to cope with the mass and complexity of institutional records, especially those in electronic form." The call for "a modern diplomatic" has been echoed by a number of commentators, among them, Christopher Brooke, Francis X. Blouin, Hugh Taylor, and Nesmith himself. In "Archives from the Bottom Up," Nesmith urges Canadian archivists to "accept the invitation Christopher Brooke offered British archivists to develop 'a modern diplomatic'." The modern diplomatic to which Brooke and Nesmith refer is one that goes beyond the traditional identification of the processes and procedures underlying the creation of documentary forms. As Nesmith explains, Brooke believed that if the work of identification "is not mingled with scholarly and historical insights, it rapidly degenerates into arid formulation, analogous to elementary philology." Nesmith then draws a link between Brooke's notion of a modern diplomatic and his own historian of the record approach:

Brooke makes the point that we must understand the people who created and used the documents before we can really understand their research value, and that it seems to me, takes us into the history of society. The information documents transmit is always incomplete and slanted; documents mislead and obscure, perhaps more so than they reveal. To know why this is so and how it affects their use in research we need to know something of the broad historical context which gave them birth and value.

The value of diplomatics enunciated here is predicated on a presumed disparity between what a document purports to mean and what it actually means. Diplomatics is no longer viewed as a tool for understanding the characteristics of archival documents (their internal and external form, the processes and procedures they reflect), but rather as a tool for interpreting the meaning contained within them. By recasting diplomatics in an interpretive light, Brooke and Nesmith collapse the essential distinction between the archivist's use of diplomatics and the historian's use of it.¹⁴ The historian's use of diplomatics is a particularizing one; the archivist's use, a universalizing one.

That Nesmith does not recognize, or accept, this distinction is evident when we consider one of the essays he has selected for inclusion in *Canadian Archival Studies* to characterize the Canadian contribution to a modern diplomatic. Terry Cook's "A Reconstruction of the World: George R. Parkin's British Empire Map of 1893," which was originally published in *Cartographica*, "is offered," its author informs us, "as a case study of the political, social, and cultural impact of a cartographic record and, by extension, as a plea for the broader study of maps as an integral part of 'main-line' historical themes rather than solely in the specialty of cartographic history." In this study, Cook illustrates how the map's design elements and use of Mercator's projection reflect "its author's political programme and propagandist intentions." Although the ostensible object of analysis is the map, its true object is its underlying meaning, i.e., the political, social, and cultural forces shaping the reality depicted on the map, forces which the author of the map himself is not completely aware of. As Cook concludes: "While Parkin doubtless believed that he was scientifically depicting geographical reality on his map, an historical analysis of the motives behind *The British Empire Map of the World* suggests otherwise."

When examined in the preferred terms of the historian's use of diplomatics as a tool for interpreting the "facts" contained within a document to expose their underlying meaning, Cook's analysis of Parkin's map has undoubted value. When examined in the preferred terms of the archivist's use of diplomatics as a tool for understanding the nature of the document itself, its value is less clear. On the basis of the information Cook provides about the document, it is difficult to see how his object of analysis can even properly be considered an archival document. An archival document is usually distinguished from other sorts of documents by virtue of the circumstances of its creation as an unself-conscious record of action, one that is dependent on and interrelated with a larger documentary whole. As J.H. Hodgson succinctly puts it, "archives are *unselfconscious* by-products of human activity, they have the objective formlessness of raw material, compared with the subjective roundness of literary artefacts like books, whether printed or manuscript."¹⁵ Parkin's map has considerably more "subjective roundness" than it does "raw formlessness," since it was created self-consciously and specifically for the purposes of publication. While the map's meaning is clearly subject to interpretation, it is essentially an autonomous work.

It is not Cook's analysis that is at issue here since he does not claim that his study is a diplomatic analysis in the archival sense; nor does he claim that the object in question is an archival document. It is, rather, Nesmith's inclusion of it in

Canadian Archival Studies to demonstrate an archival analysis of an archival document that raises some questions. The four other essays Nesmith includes to illustrate modern diplomatics (the two studies of federal government departments, military artists, and amateur photography) reflect a slightly more judicious mix of archival and historical approaches to the study of records and record media. His characterization of these studies as diplomatic analyses is, however, more metaphorical than precise since none of them actually examines in detail the elemental archival unit, the traditional object of diplomatic analysis.

The essays included in *Canadian Archival Studies* to illustrate the Canadian contribution to the revival of diplomatics reflect one way of looking at diplomatics. They do not, however, reflect the full extent of archival thinking on this subject. There are two recognizable strains of thought within the Canadian archival literature concerning the applicability of diplomatics to archival work. The one that is reflected in *Canadian Archival Studies*, which is rooted in the historian of the record approach to the study of archival documents, posits a convergence between historical insights and archival methodology. A second strain of thought, from *Canadian Archival Studies*, is rooted in the traditional diplomatic approach to the study of archival documents and posits its contemporary relevance while maintaining its original methodological framework. Given the clear links Nesmith draws between the revival of diplomatics and the rediscovery of provenance, it is rather odd and disappointing that he fails to include any essays that represent this perspective on the archivist's use of diplomatics. In six consecutive issues of *Archivaria*, Luciana Duranti has explored the concepts, principles, and methods of diplomatics and suggested "new uses for [this] old science."¹⁶ Not one of these essays is included in *Canadian Archival Studies*. In a footnote, Nesmith comments that, "since the series presents a tightly interrelated elaboration of diplomatic analysis, it is not possible to select any one article for publication here without breaking the necessary contextual links with the other articles in the series." While it may not have been possible to select an article from this series—and the point is a debatable one—it certainly would have been possible, and desirable, to include an article demonstrating the practical application of the principles, concepts, and methods that Duranti explored. Janet Turner's diplomatic analysis of an archival document in the fonds of the British Columbia Conference of the United Church of Canada¹⁷ is an example of such an article. In it, Turner explores the specific ways in which the diplomatic analysis of a single archival document can shed a surprising amount of light on the administration that generated it. She examines the value of archival diplomatic analysis, as well as its limitations, and demonstrates the need "to employ other tools of the archivist's trade in order to corroborate the discoveries of diplomatics and to address questions left unanswered by diplomatics."¹⁸ Such an analysis, which speaks from the perspective of the archivist's traditional use of diplomatics and which makes an argument for its continuing relevance, would have provided a useful counterbalance to Cook's analysis of Parkin's map, which speaks from the perspective of the historian's use of diplomatics, a use that we are invited to see as a metaphor for the archivist's use of it.

This lengthy excursus into diplomatics is intended to make the point that in Canadian archival studies the concept of diplomatics, like that of provenance, is fraught with interpretive differences. The divergent strains of thought underlying

Canadian contributions to the rediscovery of provenance and the revival of diplomatics are important and worthy of exploration in any analysis that seeks to characterize the Canadian archival tradition. It is not that Nesmith chooses to concentrate on certain aspects of Canadian archival studies—the historian of the record perspective is recognizably part of the Canadian archival tradition—it is more that he chooses to ignore other aspects equally as important.

The persistence of these multiple perspectives that collide and divide at various points tells us much about the struggle of Canadian archivists to reconcile the historical-cultural and administrative strains within the total archives tradition. Since the idea of a tradition is predicated on a shared set of beliefs, it may be inappropriate to even characterize Canadian archival studies in terms of any one tradition. On the other hand, the more or less peaceful if uneasy coexistence of very different ideals within one professional body is perhaps, in itself, a hallmark of the Canadian archival tradition,¹⁹ one that is reminiscent of our larger political and cultural customs.

Despite the criticisms noted above, *Canadian Archival Studies* is a worthy first attempt at characterizing an archival tradition in the Canadian grain. It succeeds in presenting some, if not all, of its signs and signatures, its backward glances, as well as some of its intimations for the future. From our present perspective it is impossible to predict whether the total archives model will eventually collapse under the weight of its divergent strains or whether these strains will eventually be synthesized into a more amenable framework. We do know that traditions tend to be persistent creatures. The Canadian total archives convention has endured for more than a century; it may well continue to do so. As it evolves in response to changes in the nature of record-keeping environments, archival institutions, the archival community itself, as well as society as a whole, however, we may eventually cease to recognize ourselves in it. As Harvard philosopher Ralph Barton Perry reminds us, this too is in the nature of traditions:

Tradition is as inalienable as blood inheritance. In short, we shall resemble our past as a son his father, but we shall be so different that our past would scarcely recognize us and would probably disown us.²⁰

Whether the total archives tradition proves to be “as inalienable as blood inheritance” will remain an open question until the publication of the next volume of *Canadian Archival Studies*.

Notes

- 1 William Carlos Williams, *In the American Grain: Essays by William Carlos Williams*, introduction by Horace Gregory (New York, 1956), p. xii.
- 2 Luke J. Gilliland-Swetland, “The Provenance of a Profession: The Permanence of the Public Archives and Historical Manuscripts Tradition in American Archival History,” *American Archivist* 54 (Summer 1991), p. 163.
- 3 Richard C. Berner, *Archival Theory and Practice in the United States: A Historical Analysis* (Seattle and London, 1983).
- 4 Laura Millar, “Zen and the Art of Archival Management: The Relationship between Theory and Practice in Community Archives,” paper presented to the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists, 24 July 1993, p. 3.
- 5 Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory: The Transformation of Tradition in American Culture* (New York, 1993), p. 14.

- 6 Ibid., p. 77.
- 7 Terry Eastwood, "Attempts at National Planning for Archives in Canada, 1975-1985," *The Public Historian* 8 (Summer 1986), pp. 74-91.
- 8 Debra Barr, "The Fonds Concept in the Working Group on Archival Descriptive Standards Report," *Archivaria* 25 (Winter 1987-88), pp. 163-170.
- 9 Taken from the *The Compact Edition of the Oxford English Dictionary*, vol. 2 (New York, 1981).
- 10 Gilliland-Swetland, "The Provenance of a Profession," p. 163.
- 11 Ibid., p. 168.
- 12 The most recent manifestation of these differing perspectives may be found in two recent articles in *Archivaria* which explore archival theory from the perspective of the interpreter-scholar and that of the administrator-custodian. The former perspective is given in Brien Brothman, "Orders of Value: Probing the Theoretical Terms of Archival Practice," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 78-100; this perspective is challenged by Terry Eastwood in "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival Studies," *Archivaria* 35 (Spring 1993), pp. 232-51.
- 13 Luciana Duranti, "Comments on Hugh Taylor's and Tom Nesmith's Papers," presented to the annual meeting of the Association of Canadian Archivists, Windsor, Ontario, 8 June 1988.
- 14 In a recent article in *Archivaria*, Terry Eastwood asserted that "the historian uses diplomatics as a tool of interpretation, but the archivist uses it for its value for understanding the universal characteristics of the archival document." Eastwood, "Nailing a Little Jelly to the Wall of Archival Studies," p. 242.
- 15 J.H. Hodgson, *The Administration of Archives* (Oxford, 1972), p. 4.
- 16 See "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 7-27; "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part II)," *Archivaria* 29 Winter (1989-90), pp. 4-17; "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part III)," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), pp. 4-20; "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part IV)," *Archivaria* 31 (Winter 1990-91), pp. 10-25; "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part V)," *Archivaria* 32 (Summer 1991), pp. 6-24; "Diplomatics: New Uses for an Old Science (Part VI)," *Archivaria* 33 (Winter 1991-92), pp. 6-24.
- 17 Janet Turner, "Experimenting with New Tools: Special Diplomatics and the Study of Authority in the United Church of Canada," *Archivaria* 30 (Summer 1990), pp. 91-103.
- 18 Ibid., p. 101.
- 19 Another hallmark of that tradition is our openness to other archival traditions, particularly European ones. Although *Canadian Archival Studies* does not mention it, Canadian archivists have made a significant contribution to archival studies through the commissioning or actual undertaking of translations of European archival theorists. Among those archivists who have appeared in translation in *Archivaria* are Michel Duchein (French), Hans Booms (German), and Elio Lodolini (Italian). See Michel Duchein, "Theoretical Principles and Practical Problems of *Respect des fonds* in Archival Science," *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983), pp. 64-82; Hans Booms, "Society and the Formation of a Documentary Heritage: Issues in the Appraisal of Archival Sources," (Hermina Joldersma and Richard Klumpenhower, editors and translators) *Archivaria* 24 (Summer 1987), pp. 69-107; Elio Lodolini, "The War of Independence of Archivists," *Archivaria* 28 (Summer 1989), pp. 36-47.
- 20 Quoted in Michael Kammen, *Mystic Chords of Memory*, epigraph.