

## ***Acquiring and Preserving Private Records: Cultural versus Administrative Perspectives***

I read with interest Christopher Hives's response to my comments on the diminishing commitment of British Columbia's publicly-funded institutions, particularly the British Columbia Archives and Records Service (BCARS), to collect and preserve private records [*AABC Newsletter* 4, nos. 1 and 2 (1994)]. His remarks are instructive and thought-provoking. He identifies clearly how shifting government priorities, budgetary constraints, and the sheer volume of what we now perceive to be worth collecting have severely limited the capacity of publicly-funded institutions to acquire and handle public records. Similarly compelling is his argument that the task of acquiring and preserving private records cannot be assumed entirely by public institutions, and that historians and other user groups might usefully be employed in helping to persuade organizations to contribute financially to existing repositories for the care for their records.

Where I differ with Hives is in the way we conceptualize the problem. As an historian I see records in cultural terms, the heritage of what we thought and how we acted in the past. In short, I see archival records as a reflection of who we are as a people—our collective memory—and think it imperative that, if we are to understand our history, and hence ourselves, we find ways to preserve this patrimony. I suspect that Hives would agree with this point, but his emphasis is elsewhere. He sees the issue in administrative terms, as a problem to be managed within the limitations imposed by cost-cutting governments and universities. This leads him to accept the cutbacks rather than challenge their rationale and articulate the case for managing private records in publicly administered institutions. Canada has a long tradition of mixed public and private record-keeping in our provincial and federal archives, and we should defend it vociferously. My concern is that, by thinking administratively, he and other archivists may be losing sight of the broader cultural mandate of the archival profession.

I also cannot leave without comment Hives's suggestion that we encourage organizations to "act locally" by preserving their own records. The idea of private organizations and individuals managing private records for public use seems questionable to me. Such repositories will be geographically dispersed and their conditions of access highly variable. In addition, most individuals, groups, and organizations who generate records do not have the administrative stability, the financial resources, or the long-term commitment to manage their own papers. To put the issue less delicately: institutions and organizations, like individuals, die; then what happens to their records? Surely the essence of the problem is to find ways to maintain records in environments that are secure and accessible over time. In addition, for users, a highly decentralized structure of archival holdings is not only inconvenient but greatly diminishes their ability to follow leads from one record source to another, a voyage of discovery that larger institutions facilitate. To achieve long-term security of records and to create a working environment that allows research to be carried out efficiently, some degree of centralization of expertise and materials is imperative. An alternative to Hives's suggestion would see private records concentrated in a number of institutions—such as municipal

archives, museums, and university or college libraries, as well as the British Columbia Archives and Records Service—that are already permanently funded and have a history of record-keeping. Dispersed across the province, these institutions would provide a reasonable compromise between centralization and sensitivity to locale. To Hives's statement that "there are ... no real alternatives" to having organizations maintain their own records, I say nonsense. Archivists and members of the community who use archival records will simply have to be more creative in finding such alternatives. Making the case for publicly-funded repositories of private records is a good place to start.

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