

In Memoriam

Dr. Wilfred I. Smith: An Archival Tribute*

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On 20 May 1950, Dr. W. Kaye Lamb, just eighteen months after his appointment as Dominion Archivist, wrote in his most persuasive manner to the director of the summer school at the University of Saskatchewan asking them to release Wilfred Smith from his commitment to teach History 24. He noted that the Archives was “most anxious not to lose the opportunity of securing him.” Secured he was and barely a month later Dr. Lamb, on board the *Empress of France* on his way to negotiate microfilming the Hudson’s Bay Company archives, paused to write Norman Fee asking him to “please say a few words of welcome to Smith and Wilms [sic] for me.” He added with a greater prescience than he could know, “I have hopes that their arrival may be a turning point in several respects.”¹ Wilf became one of a small group who would fulfil Dr. Lamb’s hopes, first, in completing the early vision of the Archives by seriously addressing the issues of public records management. Then, as Dr. Lamb’s successor, he would elaborate on the themes of service to scholarship and to effective record-keeping highlighted in the Archives’ centennial in 1972. He would build on these proud traditions to address the opportunities and demands of the 1970s and 1980s.

While Wilf’s published articles touch on many aspects of the archival endeavour, one sentence caught my attention while preparing these remarks as particularly characterizing his approach to our work. It is from his 1973 Presidential Address to the Society of American Archivists:

Ours is a noble calling – the preservation of the original records of human experience – and it requires the full extent of our individual and collective resources and efforts if we are to fulfil our important responsibilities to past, present and future generations.²

For many of us, scattered in provincial and university archives across the country, to whom the National Archives was immense, extraordinarily expert and, dare I say, daunting (if not occasionally threatening), Dr. Smith exemplified much of the “nobility” of our profession and welcomed us into it. That Dr.

Wilfred I. Smith, Dominion Archivist, war veteran, Officer of the Order of Canada, President of the Society of American Archivists, member of the executive committee of the International Council of Archives, is known throughout the profession simply as “Wilf” speaks eloquently of the affection in which he is held. It suggests something of his approachability and of his unfailing support for those who shared his commitment to archives, not as a job or position but as a calling. He earned the honours he received and worked unstintingly in the associations he headed yet maintained an essential humility, ready to work as a colleague, open to exploring new approaches, and invariably encouraging.

My first meeting with Wilf took place about thirty years ago. I was amongst the newest of the new in the Queen’s University Archives but on my first trip to the Public Archives, the Assistant Dominion Archivist made time to see me and to discuss some then rather difficult issues regarding private sector acquisitions and political papers. I have since developed a far greater appreciation as to just how contentious those issues were and of Wilf’s remarkable restraint in yet encouraging me in an archival career.

Our colleague, Marion Beyea, Provincial Archivist of New Brunswick, echoes my own impressions: “My lasting memory of Dr. Smith (besides what a gentleman he was, in every sense of that word) was his patience and support in the face of the boundless enthusiasm, energy, and idealistic notions of young archivists who didn’t accept the realities of funding and didn’t know what had been tried and tested before.”³

Wilf participated in, led, and in many ways inspired a period of extraordinary change in archival services in Canada. While he was Dominion Archivist, the Public Archives in its new quarters grew manyfold under his leadership. In dealing with the history of the Public Archives prior to Dr. Smith’s tenure, one can write that history largely in terms of the interests and activities of the Dominion Archivist. Wilf introduced a more modern team approach to administration, recruiting a capable management group, delegating, and broadening participation in the acquisition of private materials, and (in current management terms) empowering staff. The archival record increased many times over, truly covering all documentary media, beginning to deal with the new electronic media, seeking to mirror all aspects of Canadian society, and exploring the broad implications of the term Wilf introduced to the Canadian archival lexicon: “total archives.”⁴

In the same period, the archival system across Canada grew significantly as existing archives expanded and new archives proliferated. Such rapid expansion challenged archival practices, strained institutions, and stimulated the sense of profession. In the 1960s, at a time when many of his colleagues in the Archives were, at best, ambivalent about the notion of an “archival profession,” Wilf assisted in the establishment of the archives course at Carleton University and later committed the Archives to ensuring its continuation.⁵ This intensive four to six week course, open to new staff both at the Public

Archives and from archives across the country, laid the foundation through the 1960s, 1970s, and into the 1980s for a common Canadian archival methodology and approach, an outcome much envied by our American colleagues. It also helped create the sense of a national archival community with friendships formed and contacts made to last a career.

Wilf also urged the importance of developing archival literature. During his tenure, and with the active participation of Hugh Taylor, the Public Archives created an environment in which what seemed almost a “faculty of archival studies” flourished. These efforts focused around the archives course and the publication of *Archivaria*. Beginning in 1975, this journal quickly established itself as one of the leading journals of archival thought internationally. Blending and advancing theory in close conjunction with establishing new practices in the Archives, *Archivaria* has had a significant impact in providing the research and intellectual basis for the evolving profession within Canada and has enabled Canadians to influence colleagues internationally. Wilf supported *Archivaria* and, though it depended to a large extent in those years on the Archives’ resources, respected its intellectual independence. One of the most active members of that seeming “faculty” who has gone on to receive international honours for his contributions to archival theory and practice, Dr. Terry Cook, emphasized this in a recent personal message. Rather early in his writing, Terry published what is now regarded as an essential article in *Archivaria* critiquing the application of “total archives” at the Public Archives, the archival approach with which Wilf was most closely identified.⁶ It was a strong article by a junior staff member. How did Wilf react?

Certainly not with anger. There was no summons to his office. There was no indirect disapproval conveyed down the hierarchy. Rather, some weeks later, at an exhibition opening or similar event, Wilf said something like “Well, Terry, that was quite the article you wrote. Now, of course, you’re right. You raise a number of good points. The ‘total archives’ concept certainly can be applied poorly, and we need to do a better job in that area, better finding aids, more coordinated acquisitions, but don’t you think that the principle or idea of ‘total archives’ is still valid?” Well, I did, and I do support Total Archives, but that wasn’t the point. The point was Wilf’s encouragement to young archivists to try out new ideas, to think critically, to challenge the sacred cows – and he received the results generously and openly, while still signaling his own position.⁷

The true character of a government administrator is revealed in crisis when a mistake is made and someone is angry, or the journalists are calling. Ed Dahl, who developed extraordinary expertise on early Canadian cartography during his career at the Archives, recalled such an occasion to me, admitting to having inadvertently committed an error. In due course, Wilf received an angry letter and asked Ed in to explain. Ed remembers that Wilf’s reaction was: “not judgmental at all – and [he] wondered ‘what the story was’... He

had more of a 'these things happen' view of it, and gave me a sense that we were in this together and simply had to come up with a solution."⁸

Wilf and the Assistant Dominion Archivist, Bernard Weilbrenner, were particularly active in the International Council of Archives, extending their sense of "calling" in helping others around the Commonwealth and encouraging archival development in the Third World. That Canada and Quebec won the right to host the 1992 International Congress of Archives in Montreal is high tribute to the respect Wilf and his team had won around the world. Notre collègue au Québec, le conservateur des archives nationales, Robert Garon, m'a écrit:

On m'a rapporté que M. Smith a obtenu de haute lutte que le Congrès international des archives de 1992 se tienne à Montréal. La décision a été prise par le Conseil international des archives à sa réunion de l'automne 1984 (après le Congrès de Bonn) et on a dit que les Européens faisaient bloc derrière Madrid, concurrente de Montréal.

M. Smith a ainsi permis aux archives de tout le Canada d'accroître leur notoriété dans le monde entier et a pavé la voie à un beau succès collectif.⁹

Within Canada, to help co-ordinate the increasing complexity of inter-institutional relations, Wilf inaugurated the annual series of National, Provincial and Territorial Archivists Conferences in 1971. Occasionally described as the "club" for provincial archivists to share their tales of joy and of woe, this group has over the years provided a forum for serious issues in an informal, collegial setting. It has dealt with the union list of manuscripts, worked to implement the federal microfilm diffusion program Wilf began, helped plan and undertake other union lists, addressed various reports affecting archives, and worked with the meetings of national and provincial culture ministers to help establish the Canadian Council of Archives.

In these, as in many other initiatives, Wilf worked in their springtime, planting ideas, beginning institutions and organizations we now take for granted, and encouraging the many newcomers entering the profession. We benefit from the harvest. Most importantly, he set the tone and created an environment in which all could flourish and evolve, taking their own shape but contributing to the overall mission of preserving Canada's documentary heritage.

Another point that shines through in Wilf's approach has been his emphasis on expanding the public use and awareness of archives. There was a strong missionary element to his sense of "calling." He saw a "massive" public interest in the unique records we hold and enjoy and he sought to share this with schools and many others, leading towards what he termed "the total utilization of archives." He used the various technologies available to him of publication, exhibition, and of distribution of microfilm to other institutions.

The challenge Dr. Smith issued to the profession twenty-five years ago remains fresh today:

Each of us, in the great variety of institutions which we represent, should face the future with confidence and a determination to use all available means to extend the influence, area of service, and role in society of archives to an extent that has not been contemplated in the past.¹⁰

Let this stand as his hope and wish for the National Archives he served so well and for the archival cause to which he devoted his professional career.

Notes

* These remarks are an adaptation of an address made on behalf of the National, Provincial, and Territorial Archivists and other professional colleagues at a memorial service for Dr. Smith at the National Archives of Canada on 2 September 1998.

1 National Archives of Canada (hereafter NA), RG 37, vol. 99, file 60-9-Sask, W.K. Lamb to H.H. Ferns, and Ferns to Lamb, May-June, 1950; NA, MG 35, B5, vol. 5, file Fee, W.K. Lamb to Norman Fee, 22 June, 1950.

2 W.I. Smith, "Broad Horizons: Opportunities for Archivists," Presidential Address, *American Archivist* 37, no. 1 (January 1974), p. 4.

3 E-mail message, M. Beyea to I. Wilson, 28 August 1998.

4 See W.I. Smith, "'Total Archives': The Canadian Experience," In Tom Nesmith, ed., *Canadian Archival Studies and the Rediscovery of Provenance* (Metuchen, 1993), p. 133.

5 See W.I. Smith, "Archival Training in Canada," *The Canadian Archivist* 7 (1969), pp. 39-49.

6 T. Cook, "The Tyranny of the Medium: A Comment on 'Total Archives,'" *Archivaria* 9 (Winter 1979-80), pp. 141-49.

7 E-mail message, T. Cook to I. Wilson, 31 August 1998.

8 E-mail message, Ed Dahl to I. Wilson, 1 September 1998.

9 E-mail message, R. Garon to I. Wilson, 26 August 1998.

10 Smith, "Broad Horizons," p. 14.