

Obituaries



Gordon Dodds, 1941–2010



Image courtesy of Marietta Dodds

Gordon Dodds leaves Canadian archivists a rich legacy. He was one of the giants who animated our professional infrastructure and its intellectual underpinnings. As first president of the Association of Canadian Archivists, editor of *Archivaria*, educator, author, and administrator, his many accomplishments are important milestones. Perhaps greater yet was his ability to inspire in others what being a professional archivist meant in the later twentieth century. As Gordon now joins history, we may well reflect on how he shaped our own history.

William Gordon Dodds was born on 28 April 1941 in Newcastle-upon-Tyne, in Northern England. He spent twenty years in the village of Wideopen, and summers along the wild Northumbrian coasts. His surroundings were replete with traces of the Roman Empire, early Christianity, and the first landmarks of the Industrial Revolution. From these he absorbed the love of history that formed the core of his undergraduate and Master's studies at Durham University, with research theses ranging from supplying corn to the Roman army in Britain to the Northumberland's turnpike trusts. History also animated his first book, co-authored with Lyall Wilkes, *Tyneside Classical: The Newcastle of Grainger, Dobson and Clayton* (1964).

Gordon worked one undergraduate summer at the Northumberland County Archives. There he admired the enthusiasm of the county archi-

vist, Hugh Taylor. Spotting a like-minded soul, Hugh encouraged Gordon to become an archivist after his studies. While admiring Hugh's manifest commitment, Gordon considered the attractions of an archival career "as singularly remote," anticipating that historical research would be "infinitely more dynamic." He went on instead to teach history in grammar schools and for an adult education association between 1963 and 1965.

These early years in the north of England were not completely idyllic. In childhood, Gordon suffered from rheumatic fever, which left him with an irregular heartbeat and lingering medical difficulties. When telling those closest to him that the end was in sight, he mused that he never thought he would make it even to age 69. Until his final illness, Gordon treated his condition as an abnormality rather than a handicap, typically kept it to himself (for he was always a very private individual), and transcended physical challenges with incisive intellect and a wry sense of humour.

Desiring to escape the depressed economy of Northern England and the rigidities of the English class system, Gordon came to Canada in 1965 to lecture in the first year of classes at Simon Fraser University. He moved to Ottawa the next year to work at the then Museum of Man as a historical researcher and then to teach at the Eastern Ontario Institute of Technology. He met his wife, Marietta May, at a Victorian rooming house where they both boarded in Ottawa. Locked out on a cold winter night, Gordon scaled a veranda pillar, climbed in the second-floor balcony door, opened the front door for Marietta, and soon won her heart. They married within months and eventually welcomed two children, Michelle and Stefan, and much later on, just twelve days before his death, granddaughter Yzabella.

In 1967, Gordon returned to England with Marietta to start doctoral studies at the University of London. And in these studies Gordon had his archival awakening. The disarray he found among records essential to his research seriously impeded his thesis research on the Third Earl Grey. In that setback, Gordon felt the calling to make archival documents more accessible to researchers. He returned to Canada, completed a Master of Library Science degree at the University of Western Ontario, and began his archival career in 1972 at the Provincial Archives of Ontario.

Bringing his British perspective of the greater integration of contemporary records and historical archives, Gordon championed greater engagement by government records archivists with records management. He spoke and wrote on the subject, chaired the records management committee of the Archives Section of the Canadian Historical Association (CHA), and offered courses on records management to archival and records associations. As editor of *Archivaria*, he developed a special thematic issue on records management. In his Toronto years, he also plunged into the activities of the dynamic Toronto Area Archivists Group (TAAG). He co-edited its *Guide to Archives in Ontario* series, and organized several TAAG conferences. As a contemporary

noted, Gordon provided “a necessary element of formality and traditional archival professionalism amongst all our naïve enthusiasm.” And teaching and education were never absent: on weekends he taught a graduate-level course on archives at Western, and he advised the Ryerson Polytechnical Institute on its liberal arts program.

During his Toronto years, Gordon was very prominent in the movement to create an independent association for professional archivists in Canada, rather than continuing as a section of the CHA. The “Young Turks” (as Hugh Taylor called them) included most prominently Gordon, Marion Beyea, and David Rudkin, who travelled across Canada successfully drumming up support for the new initiative. As the last vice-chair of the CHA Archives Section in 1974–1975, Gordon was the natural choice as first president of the new Association of Canadian Archivists (ACA), which formed in Edmonton in June 1975.

As president, beyond establishing the association’s infrastructure, his key priorities were to inspire professional breadth of vision and depth of knowledge through scholarship and education. He strongly supported in principle, in direction, and in funding formula, the new scholarly professional journal for ACA that, under Peter Bower’s leadership as founding editor, became the *Archivaria* that has since been acclaimed around the world. And for two years following his presidential year, Gordon chaired the ACA’s Education Committee that generated guidelines for full-time, two-year, post-graduate archival education in Canadian universities. These guidelines were debated, approved, and then promoted actively, leading to the first such program being established at the University of British Columbia in 1981.

Through formative, graduate-level education for all new archivists, leading to a career that combined sound practice with research and scholarly publication, Gordon envisioned a “compleat archivist”: a multidisciplinary scholar specializing in the history and character of records and the rich contexts surrounding them. In his welcoming message to the new professional association, Gordon outlined nine areas of knowledge and skills that the “compleat archivist” not only should master and practise, but that should form the fundamental features of any graduate archival education curriculum designed to foster our professional mindset: history, library science, law, conservation, records management, computer science, administration/management, teaching, and, of course, “archival science.”¹ Such comprehensiveness was well ahead of its time. That the archival community and the ACA failed often enough in its early years to live up to these ideals dismayed Gordon, and led him away from ACA affairs to focus more on regional and institutional issues, and on his own research and writing.

1 Gordon Dodds, “The Compleat Archivist,” *Archivaria* 1 (Winter 1975–76), pp. 83–85.

In 1978, Gordon joined the British Records Section of the then Public Archives of Canada (PAC). Highlights of those years included collaborative work with his colleagues, led by Peter Bower, on a memorable exhibition on Sir Humphrey Gilbert and an extensive survey of all archival sources in the United Kingdom relating to Canada. Gordon also assumed the editorship of *Archivaria*, producing six issues rather than the usual four per editorial term. Marietta Dodds provided the essential administrative infrastructure for *Archivaria* in those years, when the journal was still hand-labelled and mailed from the editors' homes. Gordon also directed the month-long PAC Archives Course, then the principal Canadian venue for educating new archivists, and he continually delivered conference papers and published articles.

In 1981, Gordon joined Peter Bower in Winnipeg, where Peter had been appointed Provincial Archivist of Manitoba the year before. Gordon spent a quarter century there, first as Chief of, and then Associate Provincial Archivist for, Government Records, and after 1998 as Provincial Archivist. Drawing together a team of talented and committed archivists, he led the design and implementation of a highly successful, provincial corporate records management system, including a full-service records centre. When the Archives received responsibility for administering new freedom of information (FOI) legislation for the Manitoba government in 1985, Gordon seized the opportunity to link records analysis and description for archival as well as FOI purposes. His vision of records underpinning democratic accountability was a foundational shift in archival practice in Canada. As Archivist of Manitoba, he fought successfully for model archival legislation for the renamed Archives of Manitoba to address modern record-keeping realities, and promoted the development of the web-accessible and very innovative "Keystone" descriptive system for complex archives. He championed privacy protection following the expansion of the Manitoba FOI law in 1997. Toward the end of his career, he took great pleasure in securing international recognition for the Archives of Manitoba's constituent Hudson's Bay Company Archives through its addition to UNESCO's "Memory of the World Register," the first such Canadian designation.

Gordon also forged close links with the graduate program in Archival Studies at the University of Manitoba where he taught complete courses as well as specialized seminars, and integrated many student interns and graduates within the Archives' staff. One graduate writes: "I remember my course with Gordon fondly and how much I appreciated his wisdom and knowledge of public policy and archives." Gordon always remained a teacher and "he was superb at it," recalls a colleague, "for his brilliance and empathy came through his modesty and complete lack of putting on airs."

Among all the pressures of this daily work, Gordon somehow found time

to write reviews, articles (including a Kaye Lamb Prize-winning essay² for *Archivaria*), and five more books. With his friend, historian Roger Hall, he produced three of those books: *A Picture History of Ontario* (1978, reissued in 1991 as *Ontario: 200 Years in Pictures, 1791–1991*); *Canada: A History in Photographs* (1983); and *The World of William Notman* (1993). An archival image specialist remarked that these were pioneering works in demonstrating the importance of visual records as sources for understanding Canadian history rather than merely illustrating it. In 1991, with Russell Smandych and Alvin Esau of the University of Manitoba, Gordon edited a collection of essays on records relating to children, *Dimensions of Childhood*, for the University's Legal History Institute. In 2003, he honoured his old mentor by editing (with Terry Cook) *Imagining Archives: Essays and Reflections by Hugh A. Taylor*.

To those who knew him, Gordon was much admired as being intellectually gifted, an inspired writer, and ever passionate about his life's work. His quiet encouragement of colleagues was remarkable, coaxing them to accept leadership roles, often before they thought they were ready. He had an uncanny ability not just to spot nascent talent, but to persuade people to develop their skills to new levels. "The moment," a colleague recalls, "when Gordon tapped me on the shoulder and said 'I think you should be the first Chair of TAAG', stays with me always. I was slightly in awe of his certainty, as well as his intensity. I fed off them." Another remembers "how Gordon as *Archivaria* editor worked with me on early book reviews I did – gently, persistently, trying to get me to think like an archivist. It had a profound impact on me ... opened a new intellectual world to me." Another colleague reflects on Gordon's "strength of purpose about archives that gave many the vision to carry on. Hard to pass that on. But many carried on in his spirit." A senior administrator observed that "no job was too small or too large for Gordon." In fact, that colleague continued, "If you want a big job done, call on Gordon Dodds." He tackled everything with enthusiasm and energy, ever ready to roll up his sleeves and get the task completed, whether it was boxing up old records in basements, hammering out drafts of complex legislation, or winning over reluctant senior bureaucrats and politicians.

Gordon retired in 2006 and moved with Marietta to Qualicum Beach, BC, to enjoy travels around North America, Ireland and through parts of Europe, and to find pleasure walking along the oceanfront, birdwatching, and gardening. But it was all too short: he died on 19 June 2010 from gallbladder cancer.

Gordon urged archivists to dream big. In that same first issue of *Archivaria*, he declared to his colleagues that to "reach forever and get

2 See "Canadian Archival Literature: A Bird's Eye View," *Archivaria* 17 (Winter 1983–84), pp. 18–40.

nowhere can be damnable, but never to feel there was something worth reaching for is surely damnation.” Gordon reached far and helped many of us reach further than we might otherwise have dared.³

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3 I want to acknowledge, with considerable gratitude, the essential contributions to this piece from those who knew Gordon well: Peter Bower, Sharon Cook, Edward H. Dahl, Marietta Dodds, Stefan Dodds, Roger Hall, Sandra Martin, Tom Nesmith, and Nancy Stunden. Tim Cook and Wendy Smith kindly put a high polish on my prose. All these supporters contributed similarly to my appreciation of Gordon’s life in the “Lives Lived” feature of *The Globe and Mail*, 16 November 2010. Additional (unsolicited but telling) comments about his personal influence, that I have used here, came from Jim Burant, Barbara Craig, Scott James, Jane Nokes, and Lori Podolsky Nordland.