

From the Guest Editors: Perspectives on Personal Archives



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and CATHERINE HOBBS

*I alone know the secret thoughts in these cabinets,
And how the letters relate to the pamphlets in boxes.
I alone know the significance of underlinings
On the pages read closely.*

F.R. Scott, "On Saying Goodbye to My Room in Chancellor Day Hall,"
The Collected Poems of F.R. Scott (Toronto: McClelland & Stewart, 1981),
excerpted in *Archivaria* 16 (Summer 1983): 62

*In fact, we believe a computer functions much more like an environment – or
a writing space, to use a term popularized by Jay David Bolter. Access to an
entire computer is not unlike having a key to an author's study or workroom.*

Matthew G. Kirschenbaum et al., *Approaches to Managing and Collecting
Born-Digital Literary Materials for Scholarly Use*, White Paper to the NEH
Office of Digital Humanities, May 2009, 23

This issue of *Archivaria* focuses on personal archives, those defined as the archives created by individuals and family groups. The guest editing of this volume was an initiative of the Special Interest Section on Personal Archives (SISPA) of the Association of Canadian Archivists, and the guest editors are all members of SISPA. When first considering the issue, the group sought to elicit papers with both scholarly and practical perspectives about approaches to personal archives from archivists and others who work with personal archives, as well as to elaborate future research and discursive possibilities for this field of interest.

Until recently, archivists dealing with personal archives have had a modest number of scholarly resources upon which to draw. In particular, issue 24 (1996) of the Australian journal *Archives and Manuscripts*, which was devoted to personal recordkeeping and contained essays by Australian authors Adrian Cunningham, Chris Hurley, Graeme Powell, and Sue McKemmish,

was a watershed publication. Several monographs, a special section on personal archives in *Archivaria* 52 (Fall 2001), and an expanding number of single articles in various journals have been published in the intervening years by a number of authors, as evidenced by the footnotes in this issue (authors that include, among others, Richard Cox, Jennifer Douglas, Catherine Hobbs, Christopher Lee, Heather MacNeil, Sue McKemmish, Riva Pollard, and Geoffrey Yeo).¹

The recent publication of *I, Digital: Personal Collections in the Digital Era*, edited by Christopher Lee (Chicago: Society of American Archivists, 2011), included contributions from many influential authors in the field of archives and other disciplines. The volume highlights how the fluidity between personal archives, personal records, digital recordkeeping, and social media affects change in the digital world, while also providing practical experiences to aid archivists dealing with personal digital records. In particular, the recent intersection of digital forensics with archives has added significantly to the emphasis on the practical elements of workflows and preservation, and momentum to considerations of personal archives curation.²

The current environment for personal archives is also one where scholarship in other fields, such as personal information management theory, human computer interaction, digital humanities, literary theory focusing on life writing and genre studies, and cultural studies focusing on the “everyday,” intersect with archival theory. These interactions position the ideas around personal archives securely in a multidisciplinary environment, enriching and expanding our understanding of personal archives beyond that afforded by traditional archival theory.

When writing about archival theory as it relates to personal archives, the comment is frequently made that the literature on the subject is underdeveloped. However, as can be seen in this special issue, statements lamenting the dearth of scholarship relating to personal archives are no longer accurate: a rich body of literature is developing to examine this emerging field of inquiry. Looking at the contributions here, including the sources cited both from within the archival field and from the literature of other disciplines, it is apparent that there is now a robust core of work examining the issues of personal archives. There is still plenty of room to continue exploring and

1 A bibliography on research relating to personal archives is maintained by SISPA: <http://personalarchivesbibliography.pbworks.com/w/page/16005219/FrontPage>.

2 Prime examples of this are the white paper *AIMS Born Digital Collections: An Inter-Institutional Model for Stewardship*, a collaboration between the universities of Virginia Library, in partnership with Stanford University, the University of Hull, and Yale University (www.digitalcurationsservices.org/aims/), and the Maryland Institute for Technology in the Humanities partnership with the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill’s Library Program to elaborate BitCurator (<http://mith.umd.edu/bitcurator-team-convenes-to-analyze-digital-forensics-in-archival-workflows/>).

challenging theories and practices relating to personal archives, and archivists are now well positioned to build on this growing body of scholarly work.

The key to the continued development of writing on personal archives will be a multidisciplinary approach, one that draws from the work being done in a variety of fields to examine the creation, use, and meaning of records of individuals and groups. Personal archives are as idiosyncratic as their creators, and while this may frustrate archivists' attempts to develop and apply an overarching theory to explain and deal with them, it may be as important to acknowledge this idiosyncrasy and adapt and apply strategies from traditional archival theory and elsewhere to deal with the particularities of each fonds.

Our intention with this special issue was to publish articles that would highlight some of the debates and tensions underlying the theory and practical application of archival concepts and approaches to personal archives in order to continue what has already become a rich dialogue in the area. The call for papers underlined the following themes: gaps within archival theory; challenges, strategies, and/or implications of using traditional arrangement and descriptive practices; agency or collaboration creators; and the broader ethical, cultural, and political implications of preserving personal archives for the future. In this way, the aim was to consider not just qualitative and practical concerns of dealing with these archives but, more broadly, where the profession is going with regard to personal recordkeeping and archives. The enthusiastic response excited us: the proposals addressed and exceeded the themes articulated in our call for papers, and demonstrated the scope and originality of current research on personal archives. The articles we have chosen offer a collection of diverse perspectives on personal archives that contribute to the broadening literature in this area. They present a combination of theory and targeted case studies or field research that is directly applicable to understanding how archivists have worked with, and dealt with problems or issues relating to, the archives of individuals. And though none of the articles are solely focused on digital records, they do hold implications for our understanding of the personal in the digital environment.

This special issue also addresses themes or concerns that are latent in the current archival environment and have surfaced in SISPA discussions, such as the potential use of MPLP for personal archives; and the blurring of professional/personal life. In SISPA meetings over the years, we have often found ourselves asking questions about the boundaries of the concept of a personal fonds. The current issue exposes threads and tensions within a singular concept of personal archives. It offers perspectives from non-archivists, and also blends Canadian and international perspectives on theory and practice. Jeremy M. Heil looks back over the past decades to analyze the legacy of Queen's University's archival management and its effect on a particular fonds; Cheryl Oestreicher's case study examines the application of MPLP for processing a complex fonds of an individual; and the articles by

Creighton Barrett and Jennifer Douglas cast new light on the familiar issues of provenance and original order. Other articles proffer concepts that have yet to be fully utilized in this domain, such as the “safe space” conceptualization examined in Elizabeth Keenan and Lisa Darms’s discussion of the Riot Grrrl archives and the “archival multiverse” explored by Sue McKemmish and Michael Piggott. The latter essay closes the issue, bringing together a number of theoretical threads that have greatly influenced archival thinking in Australia. McKemmish and Piggott critique the conventional binary opposition between personal and organizational records and boldly invite us to consider eliminating the concept of personal archives entirely.

The editors trust that the thoughtful and provocative discussions of all these concepts will encourage readers to think about how we can or should adapt our positioning of individuals vis-à-vis the archival endeavour. We hope that this issue of *Archivaria* is a vital addition to the literature on personal archives and that its new propositions and views into recent practice can serve as fruitful ground for dialogue and debate within archival circles and in multidisciplinary contexts.

Rodney G.S. Carter is the archivist for the St. Joseph Region of the Religious Hospitaliers of St. Joseph, based in Kingston, Ontario. He obtained a master of information studies degree (archival studies) from the University of Toronto and an honours BA in art history from Queen’s University. He has published a number of articles and reviews in Archivaria, as well as articles in Historic Kingston and Queen’s Quarterly. Carter has been actively involved in the Association of Canadian Archivists, serving on numerous committees, including a term as vice-president from 2009 to 2011, and has served on committees for the Catholic Archivist Group and the Archives Association of Ontario (AAO). In 2012, the AAO presented him with the Alexander Fraser Award, given “to individuals who have contributed in a significant way to the advancement of the archival community in Ontario.”

Rob Fisher, a senior archivist at Library and Archives Canada, has extensive experience with personal archives and the records of organizations in the fields of Canadian scholarship, education, journalism, intellectual and religious life, and social development. He has served as chair of the Membership Development Committee of the Association of Canadian Archivists and has long been active in the Special Interest Section on Personal Archives. His writings on archival theory and practice have appeared in Archivaria, including the article “In Search of a Theory of Private Archives: The Foundational Writings of Jenkinson and Schellenberg Revisited” (Archivaria 67). Fisher has also written widely on Canadian history, genealogy, and naval history for scholarly journals and popular magazines like Canadian Military History,

The Northern Mariner, The American Neptune, Family Chronicle, The Beaver, and Legion Magazine, among others.

Carolyn Harris is an archivist at Yukon Archives in Whitehorse, where she works with municipal and territorial government records. From 2010 to early 2012, she was project archivist at the Clara Thomas Archives and Special Collections at York University in Toronto. Her work on a personal fonds there led to the publication of “Paper Memories, Presented Selves: Original Order and the Arrangement of the Donald G. Simpson Fonds at York University,” which appeared in *Archivaria* 74. Previously, she served as archivist at the Ontario Jewish Archives. Harris holds a master of information studies degree (archives concentration) from the University of Toronto and an honours bachelor of arts in history and English from McMaster University, Hamilton, Ontario. Though she has been surprisingly seduced by records management and government records, she remains passionate about personal archives and the evolution of scholarship in this area of archival theory and practice.

Catherine Hobbs has been the literary archivist (English-language) at Library and Archives Canada for fourteen years, during which time she has been responsible for the archives of many prominent Canadian authors, editors, literary agents, small press publishers, and authors’ professional associations. She is an adjunct professor in the MA program in public text at Trent University (Peterborough, Ontario), chair of the Special Interest Section on Personal Archives (SISPA) within the Association of Canadian Archivists, and a board member of the Section on Literary and Art Archives within the International Council on Archives. Hobbs has a background in literary theory and information science, and she writes and lectures on issues surrounding literary and personal archives. Her most recent writing includes a dialogue with Sarah Kastner, “Literary Archives, Fictional Truths and Material(real)ities: The Yvonne Vera Project,” in the online journal *nomorepotlucks* (<http://nomorepotlucks.org/site/literary-archives-fictional-truths-and-materialrealities-the-yvonne-vera-project-catherine-hobbs-and-sarah-kastner>).



ACA 2014 Archivatopia

June 26–28, 2014

Victoria, British Columbia



Archives and the archives community in Canada and around the world are experiencing fundamental stresses. Recent years have been difficult for prospective and practicing archivists. How can we alter our perception of the stresses we all face to change them from obstacles to opportunities? How can we position ourselves to overcome difficulties and capitalize on new possibilities? Now is the time to assess the current state of archives in Canada and, more importantly, to chart our way forwards to archival utopia. Archivists have responded to the call to define their “archivatopias.” Join us in Victoria, BC, Canada’s Shangri-la, to hear how archivists from across Canada and around the world envision the ideal future for archives and archivists, and to discuss together how we can strive to make these dreams a reality. High points of this exciting, thought provoking conference include:

- presentations on the role of education and training to prepare archivists of the future;
- expert panelists addressing the design, construction, and maintenance of archival facilities that help ensure preservation and promote access;
- case studies of strategies that position archives to reach out to and include the records of marginalized and unrepresented social groups and movements;
- experiences of archivists supporting the work of small institutions by developing capacity and building partnerships and networks; and much more!

This year’s conference not only promises an engaging program, but also offers opportunities to join colleagues in experiencing Victoria’s utopian setting. Social events will highlight the unique natural charms of Victoria and Vancouver Island, including Coast Salish traditional carving, whale watching, touring Canada’s oldest Chinatown, and Cougar Annie’s garden brought to the stage. ACA 2014 will connect you and your colleagues through Facebook, Twitter, and the ACA website. The 2014 Conference App will ensure you have up to the minute Archivatopia details, no matter where you may be (floating in the Salish Sea, biking Dallas Road, swimming on Gonzales Beach, paddle boarding in the Inner Harbour, relaxing in Butchart Gardens, or replenishing your fluids at Spinnakers).

The ACA 2014 conference hotel is the Fairmont Empress. Among its many features are a central location in downtown Victoria within walking distance of many of the city’s attractions, excellent dining, traditional high tea, and cocktails in the colonial style Bengal Lounge. Get the royal treatment at Willow Stream Spa, admire the Edwardian era architecture, the hotel’s own archives, the restored Palm Court ceiling, and kick up your heels in the Crystal Ballroom.

Plan for extra time to make Victoria your summer vacation destination! Vancouver Island is green and beautiful year-round, and is rated the Top Island in the Continental US and Canada and one of the Top Ten islands in the World by the 2012 Travel+Leisure World’s Best Awards.

For information on, or to register, visit the ACA 2014 section of the website at <http://archivists.ca/content/annual-conference>