

THE ARCHIVAL EXPERIENCE IN ENGLAND AND CANADA

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We have generally committed human memory and oral communication to writing for two reasons: to ensure an accurate statement "for the record" of courts of law, parliaments, and similar institutions that have (we hope) an unlimited life, and to transmit over distance information on the conduct of human affairs and the execution of human transactions.

The English archival tradition evolved for the most part from the record keepers of the courts, where the continuity of documentation since the twelfth and thirteenth centuries is unique in Europe. With no violent invasion since the Norman Conquest to contend with, bureaucratic organisms large and small laid down their great beds of parchment and paper in a society that is profoundly "oral" by tradition (in contrast to the United States). England, with its tradition of common law and an unwritten constitution, set great store by customary rights and precedents that were accorded to individuals and duly recorded down the ages. This kind of record, which the Normans virtually initiated with the Domesday Book in 1086, has provided a remarkable "oral history" from that day to this.

In time, these records evolved from a vital record of legal decisions, financial accountability, and disposition of land and property, maintained by various institutional Keepers, to become the raw material for historical writing. It was quite natural, therefore, that the Public Record Office should become the repository for this material, drawn from a wide range of national courts and departments of government to be serviced by a Keeper or Assistant Keeper in the same tradition. Organic continuity of custody was continually stressed as being evidence of legal integrity and, as defined by Sir Hilary Jenkinson, became a characteristic of the authentic "public record." Historians,

as we know them today, had very little input into the establishment of the Public Record Office, and the English archivist does not generally engage in historical research during the professional part of his life, despite his historical training. We have always felt secure in our profession and have never seen ourselves as historians *manques*. This is partly because an English archivist requires considerable paleographical training to master a wide range of mediaeval and later court and legal hands, and to unravel the intricacies of institutional and administrative history which lie behind the records and which are so much a part of his discipline.

So much for the records of the central government. Within English counties the Courts of Quarter Sessions provided local administration and government with their own courts, hand in hand with the ancient corporations of the cities and boroughs. The modern profession of the archivist developed usually from history graduates with archives diplomas, running "record offices" attached to the office of the Clerk of the Peace for the County, who was also Clerk of the County Council, symbolizing the continuity with modern county government.

In England these record offices also became custodians of private manuscripts. Since many of these collections came initially from the great landed estates of the county, with extensive records of tenants and the old manorial courts on the one hand, and often private papers of ministers of the Crown on the other, they clearly had a semi-public quality which was generally recognized. From here it was a small step to receive all kinds of material from persons and institutions in the private sector. The richness of central and local archives in England has to be experienced to be believed. "Permanent loan" is a contradiction in terms that is widely utilized to recognize the archivist as a kind of trustee (during good behaviour!) of collections which owners recognize as a heritage to be shared by the public without charge, so long as such material is properly maintained and serviced by the archivist. However, the increasing monetary value of this material is beginning to place some strain on this typically English compromise.

In other respects, the English archivist is much like his Canadian and American colleagues, for we have much in common professionally. In England, however, there has been a tendency in the past to concentrate on the earlier legal records and early material in the private sector to the neglect of the more modern records of public administration. This is quite natural and human, given the riches that have come down to

us and the demand for their availability, but this situation is now changing, as indeed it should.

Canada has inherited the English tradition in archives as in so much else.¹ As in England, we expect government to preserve a large part of the national heritage as a public service. We are perhaps more "governed" than our friends south of the border, and we tend to place an emphasis on "peace, order and good government" as the British North America Act has it, in contrast to "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness."

In consequence, the Canadian provincial archives (as with county archives in England) take custody of both public records and private manuscripts, and because provincial and federal governments have many similarities of method and function, there is a close relationship between them. As in the United States, there are many nonpublic alternatives such as the universities, but the dominion/provincial archival axis is very strong and is a marked feature of the Canadian scene. The Provincial Archives of Nova Scotia in fact pre-dates the Public Archives of Canada by 15 years, and its foundation in 1857 makes it the earliest public archives in North America. Now in 1979 its new building is set fair to be the first in North America to use solar energy as a power source.

In further contrast to the United States, the Canadian federal archives helped into being the Canadian Historical Association, which again has placed Canadian archivists in a less dependent relationship to Canadian historians. There is, of course, close cooperation but we do not over-emphasize historians among our users; they remain first among equals.

With so much emphasis these days on access, freedom of information, and "the right to know," it is perhaps interesting to reflect that it was Joseph Howe, a publisher and newspaper proprietor famous for his defense of freedom of the press, who helped establish the public archives in his native province of Nova Scotia, as a means of securing public access to the historical record. Likewise the first dominion archivist to preside over the federal archives in Ottawa was also a journalist, charged not only with assembling the record but, by so doing, making it available. This emphasis on access has been a prominent feature of the archival scene in Canada, surpassed only by that of the United States.

From the United States we have adopted the record group, which

has led (perhaps less happily) to the manuscript group. The record centre concept is another most valuable import. In general, however, archives and archival systems should reflect the cultural assumptions of nations and communities, and we have to remember that mediaeval administration had a profound effect on English archives and on the European tradition in general. The United States is the first great nation to have been founded entirely on a literate base, and the early emphasis on the printed word quite naturally led to a priority for libraries, literature, and private correspondence in contradistinction to public records. This dichotomy is reflected in the configuration of U.S. archives and is further emphasized by America's preference in the past for a minimum of government expenditure in the public sector. The general absence of a European-style registry system in government departments also reflected a profoundly different attitude toward public documents as public record.

As we move into an age in which social organization and information are becoming increasingly decentralized and the media of record are becoming more visual and oral, less linear and textual, we are seeing the archival scene adjust in a corresponding manner, with the proliferation of small repositories presided over by "cloistered" archivists, and with the growth of regional associations to serve them. These are profound and important changes, which national archival associations will do well to heed and respond to. I believe that the SAA is becoming more aware of these changes, and I personally look forward to closer relationships with the "regionals" in a manner which preserves their proud record of autonomous action in the best American tradition.

FOOTNOTE

1. For a more extensive survey of Canadian archival development, see Hugh A. Taylor, "Canadian Archives: Patterns from a Federal Perspective," *Archivaria* 1 (Summer 1976): 3-19.