

## The Public Archives of Canada at the End of its First Century\*

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# THE PUBLIC ARCHIVES OF CANADA AT THE END OF ITS FIRST CENTURY\*

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When an organization like the Canadian Historical Association invites a senior citizen to address it on an occasion like this, it presumably knows that it is exposing itself to grave danger of reminiscence. And when this particular senior citizen is invited to talk about the Public Archives of Canada, the danger becomes still more threatening, for I have been a client of that institution and a close observer of the various things that go on there, for (I am somewhat alarmed to discover) rather more than forty years.

When I was asked to give this talk, I was afraid that I might not be able to establish the precise date on which, as they say in the Ottawa Valley, I first darkened out the Archives' doors. On this point, I am sorry to say, the Stacey Papers appear to be incomplete; and I was once told that on matters of this sort the Public Archives did not keep records. However, on actual inquiry I found that, as on so many other occasions, I had underrated the establishment; for it produced with hardly any delay a Students' Register recording the date on which I made my first timid approach to the old building on Sussex Street. It was the 8th of September in the year 1930.

This was not only my first appearance at the Archives, it was my first visit to Ottawa; and like every red-blooded Canadian boy in such circumstances I was determined to savour to the full the wonders of the Capital. The Rideau Canal; the Peace Tower; the National Museum with its dusty dinosaurs; the new Prime Minister, Mr. R. B. Bennett; and, of course, the late Prime Minister and current, reluctant Leader of the Opposition, Mr. W. L. Mackenzie King. As it happened, I had the opportunity of observing these great men from the Undistinguished Strangers' Gallery of the House of Commons; for Mr. Bennett had had Parliament called for the laudable purpose of raising the tariff. In recent years, Mr. Neatby has exploded the Liberal legend that Mackenzie King deliberately lost the election of 1930 in order to leave the Conservatives holding the large wet baby of the Depression. But nobody who actually saw King performing in the House in that September of 1930 could ever have believed that legend. It was apparent to the most casual observer that he was extremely displeased

\*Address delivered in Ottawa on June 5, 1972, at a banquet honouring the Centennial of the Public Archives of Canada.

at finding himself on the Opposition side. As for Bennett, you may not believe this, but it is clear in my memory that although he had won a great electoral victory as recently as 28 July, by September there were already indications that his government was becoming unpopular. All governments become unpopular in due course; but Bennett's record, I think, is likely to stand a long time.

However, the primary reason for my presence in Ottawa was not to observe politicians but to collect material for a thesis that would enable me to acquire a Ph.D. degree and, thereafter, a job. (I got the degree.) Therefore immediately on my arrival I betook myself to the Public Archives of Canada. I talked my way past the guard on the door (in those days the building was guarded by the Mounted Police, who lent the establishment a certain tone which it now lacks — not that I have anything against the Corps of Commissionaires, much the reverse, but they don't wear red coats); I signed that register; and I at once came up against the problem of what is known as Access. The Archives had a Manuscript Room. By present standards it did not contain a very great many manuscripts, but there was in it one collection, comparatively recently acquired, of which the institution was properly very proud: the Macdonald Papers. Since at that time I was thinking of writing a thesis on the Fenian Brotherhood, these papers appeared to be relevant to it; and I boldly asked to see them. The gentleman in charge of the Manuscript Room seemed taken aback. Across his face there stole that expression which I have often seen since on the faces of archivists when confronted with a historian demanding Access: a look of mingled apprehension and hostility. He said he would look into the matter. I went back to the Students' Room, sat down at my plain deal table and began reading some ancient manuscripts which it was considered proper for me to see. Then suddenly there materialized beside the table none other than the Dominion Archivist, the celebrated Dr. A. G. Doughty himself. (He was not yet Sir Arthur, for he was a knight of the Bennett creation.) He proceeded to interrogate me strictly concerning my request to see the Macdonald Papers. One should not be too hard on him, for, after all, the records I wanted to use were then only about seventy years old. I have always felt that he suspected me of being an agent of the U.S. War Department, intent upon penetrating the inner secrets of Canadian defence. (Remember, I was a graduate student from Princeton.) However, it may be that after examining me closely he decided that I looked too stupid to be employed on such important work. At any rate, he decided to let me into Sir John A. Macdonald's papers; and I proceeded, holding my breath, to explore those magnificent purple-backed volumes, now, alas, no more, which gave

even the humblest researcher a sense of being in the real presence of history.

It is undoubtedly the result of being a senior citizen that I find myself looking back at the old building on Sussex Street with nostalgia and even a certain regret. As I sit in the modern and splendid reading room at 395 Wellington Street, trying to work in a handsome chair and at an expensive table which some overpaid consultant contrived to ensure was just the wrong height to write at; as I cringe under the scrutiny of an electronic eye colder even than Sir Arthur Doughty's, I reflect that there was a lot to be said for the old place and also that some remarkably good work was done there. I remember particularly one of the most consistent customers of the Archives, the late Professor A. L. Burt. He was working there when I first arrived, and he had been working there, summer after summer, for years. In 1933, the results of these researches were published in the book called *The Old Province of Quebec*, which seems to me a considerable turning-point in Canadian historical writing. Unlike most of the books in Canadian history that were recommended to me when I was an undergraduate in the twenties, it was an original narrative and interpretation laboriously hewn out of the hard bedrock of the primary sources. I do not suggest that Burt founded single-handed a new school of Canadian history. I merely suggest that *The Old Province of Quebec* was an early and important example of a new spirit and approach. The origins of these are certainly to be found a good many years before; this is evidenced in the founding of the *Canadian Historical Review* in 1920 and — less important at the time, I think — of this Association, two years later. Mr. Ian Wilson has told us something about the earlier pioneers, the people of the era of Shortt and Wrong, in a paper which serves to emphasize that the improvement of Canadian historiography was, as John Fiske said of the discovery of America, a gradual process. The large results, however, began to appear about the time Burt's book saw the light, now almost forty years ago. Donald Creighton's first book, for instance, was published four years after *The Old Province*; and it was part of a series, the Carnegie Endowment's *The Relations of Canada and the United States*, that is itself something of a landmark in this country's historiography. From that time onward, a steady succession of scholarly works on Canadian history has come from the presses. Individually these books have, naturally, been of widely varying degrees of merit. Some of their authors, like both Burt and Creighton, have been artists as well as painstaking scholars; others have had less claim to consideration in either capacity. But collectively this more than five-foot shelf of books represents a modest cultural revolution. Today Canadians have the means, if they choose to use them, of understanding their

country's past far better than they ever did before; and understanding its past is surely vital to dealing with the hard problems of its present and anticipating the challenges of the future. That, at least, is the way it looks to me; but perhaps I am blinded by my trade-union outlook.

Now the very obvious but every essential point I want to make is just this. To an extraordinary extent the considerable achievement in historical writing that I have been describing depended entirely upon the Public Archives of Canada. Few of the good books that have been produced in the last forty years or so would or could have been written if the Archives had not existed. It is true of course that Canadian historians owe a great debt to other archival organizations. They have leaned heavily upon the Public Record Office in London and upon the Archives de France; though fortunately a high proportion of the Canadian content of those institutions is available in our own Archives in the form of transcripts or photocopies, so that the Canadian scholar can enjoy their benefits without travelling farther than Ottawa. There are of course certain fringe benefits in London and Paris which are less fully available in Ottawa; to enjoy these it is necessary to obtain a Canada Council grant. (It is perhaps fortunate that the Canada Council appears to be inadequately informed about the holdings of the Public Archives of Canada.) To look in another direction, the hospitality of the National Archives in Washington — a younger institution than our own, but well developed — is well known. Canadian historians have also profited by our various provincial archives, which have grown remarkably in recent years, and by a vast variety of private, special and institutional collections ranging from the Royal Archives at Windsor to very local historical societies. But the central pillar of Canadian historiography has been the Public Archives of Canada; and if that institution weakens or withers then Canadian historical studies will weaken or wither along with it. And, as I have suggested already, if history goes many other things go. Our history is the prop of our national spirit; it makes us what we are; it is all that makes us different from other parts of the human race. In fact, it gives us our "identity" — a word so popular in this country these days that even the President of the United States has heard it.

All this boils down to the proposition that archives and archivists are, nationally, extremely important. From this proposition few members of this particular audience will dissent. But I am too old and cynical to think that the general public in Canada is very likely ever to assess archives and those who serve them at their proper value. I think people are reading rather more Canadian history now than they used to; but the historian remains a pretty shadowy personage; and, let's face it, the archivist stands one step further back in the shadows than

the historian. After all, he is the fellow who passes the ammunition. But if the citizenry at large do not appreciate the importance of archives, there are nevertheless some indications that governments are beginning to do so. And if this talk of mine has a message, it is the Government of Canada that it is addressed to. The message is that the Public Archives of Canada is an institution of enormous national significance, and that the Government must take an active interest in its welfare and, specifically, must be prepared to spend enough money on it to ensure the continuance of its great services to the Canadian nation.

The advance notice of this address stated that I was going to talk about the past and future of the Public Archives. This presumably absolves me from saying anything about the present. Even with this helpful proviso the task is large, and I have been somewhat at a loss how to approach it. However, the same notice made a reference to a paper I wrote for the Massey Commission of 1949-51; and since that Commission was the last grand inquest of the nation into archives matters (as into a good many other things) it has occurred to me to use its report as a starting-point. I propose therefore to look at a few specific and basic problems which the Commission isolated, to consider what progress we have made with them since 1951, and to speculate a bit as to how we can deal with them in the future. Let me emphasize that in this talk I can do these things only in the briefest and most general terms, and must leave out many things which ought to be put in.

To take first things first, then, let us look for a moment at least at the problem of *Public Records*. In this respect the past twenty years have witnessed another revolution. It was pointed out during the Massey Commission's investigation that the Public Archives had never functioned properly as a Public Record Office, and that the records of Canadian history since 1867 were in great part "scattered all over Ottawa, in inactive departmental files", often in confusion and of course unavailable to historians. A basic recommendation of the Commission was that provision should be made for a regular review of the inactive files of all departments and for "a steady process of transfer to the Archives, or destruction" of all records which had been inactive for ten years. Although this recommendation was not carried out precisely as written, its object has been essentially achieved. The Public Archives is now working as a Record Office, still somewhat imperfectly perhaps — for I gather that some departments are still backward about transferring records, and up to now there has been no power to compel them — but there is a steady flow of inactive files from the departments to the records centres where they are held and serviced; and both from

there and direct from departments files of historical interest come to the Archives proper to be available to researchers. This activity, which is on a large scale, is known as Records Management. Records Management is a great game. Any number can play, including the professionals in the Records Management Branch of the Archives and various very rank amateurs in the departments. It is not surprising that this activity is so prominent in the Archives' programmes, for it is a very important practical service performed for the Government, which in the 1950s was suffering from a very severe case of what has been called paper indigestion. It is clearly a good thing for all of us that that great animal, the Government, should be kept healthy and — shall I say — regular.

Looking at the Records Management process from the point of view of the historian, my chief worry is the danger of important historical records being destroyed. This is not an imaginary danger; many people here, including myself, could cite specific cases of destruction of groups of files that certainly ought to have been preserved. It is an undeniably difficult problem, and in the light of the enormous number of items that have to be processed we shall probably never be fully protected against the loss of the odd significant file; but we should not accept as legitimate the possibility of loss of an important group of files. The only protection against this is a combination of eternal vigilance and sound organization. The vital matter is to ensure that no recommendation and no assessment of the value of files is ever made by anyone except a person with historical training. I have long believed that every government department should have a small historical section, which, in addition to dealing with inquiries and the like, could advise on the scheduling of the department's records. In the absence of such trained departmental personnel, the Archives of course must do the job. No mere administrator should be allowed within a mile of decisions or recommendations on destruction of files. We have all known administrators whose one idea concerning records management was to destroy as many files as possible. These people are descendants of the ancient Thugs of India. They are servants of Kali, the Destroyer; and like the Thugs they should be stamped out wherever found. The Dominion Archivist and his staff should never forget that they are servants of Vishnu the Creator and Preserver. If it is necessary to hire more historians in order to provide against the destruction of valuable historical records, then that is what the Government ought to do. I understand the people are available.

One word about private records. During the last two decades there has been a great expansion of the Archives' holdings in this field, including acquisition of the papers of several Prime Ministers and other political figures. A good deal has also been done in the way of acquir-

ing papers of business and other corporations, and it is to be hoped that development in this direction will continue on a larger scale. All told, the documentary holdings of the Public Archives of Canada have expanded since the Second World War in an utterly unprecedented manner. I need hardly recall that this development, along with the revolution in public records administration which I have spoken of, took place mainly during the twenty-year tenure as Dominion Archivist of Dr. William Kaye Lamb. When Stewart Wallace was putting together his biographical dictionary, he said of Sir Arthur Doughty, "the Public Archives of Canada are to-day very largely his creation". This was true when I first knew the place in 1930. It is no longer true now. The Public Archives as we know it at the end of its first century is very largely the creation of Kaye Lamb.

At this point I must mention once more, I think, the blessed word *Access*. It is true that this is not specifically an Archives problem; it is a question of government policy. Nevertheless, it is a matter of such overmastering importance to archivists and historians, and so decisive an influence on the quality of history that is produced, that I cannot disregard it.

On this matter the Massey Commission made a general statement which should always be kept before the Government:

Subject to national security, the Commission considers that the public interest is best served by a liberal policy in the matter of access by historians to public records. The free pursuit of truth by scholars is a most important feature of our democratic system and one meriting every consideration from the Government. Without unlimited opportunities for research in the country's modern records the historian cannot render to our society and our culture the highest service of which he is capable.

Getting down to specifics, the Commission found itself faced with difficulties. The British Government, under the influence, I speculate, of an efficient but obscurantist civil service rather like the Canadian one, was at this time enforcing a "fifty-year rule" on access to its records: that is, the historian could not see them until they were half a century old. During the first half of the twentieth century Canadian affairs were closely intertwined with those of Britain in so many departments that if Canada was to maintain what is called "diplomatic comity" she could not avoid following the British practice with respect to a large proportion of her records. Nevertheless the Canadian Government, partly perhaps because of mere lack of interest in the subject, had never laid down a fixed term of years as a limit to access. In these circum-



stances the Massey Commission recommended that this somewhat casual system should be continued. I had suggested this to the Commission, simply because it was clear that if a period was fixed it could only be fifty years, and under the vague system then being followed some records at least were available after shorter periods than that.

However, the winds of change blow in London, as elsewhere, and in 1966 the British Government adopted a thirty-year rule. This was interpreted so liberally in practice that even Cabinet minutes became available after that period. It was evident that if Canada followed this example it would mean a considerable liberalization of records policy, and after a time-lag of actually less than three years Canada did so. On May Day 1969 the Prime Minister announced in the House of Commons, without referring to any other country's policies, that after 1 July of that year a thirty-year rule would be in effect. He also said that with respect to records less than thirty years old, "controlled access may be permitted in special cases", even where the papers remained in the hands of the originating departments.

For this relief much thanks. I hope however that I shall be forgiven for pointing out that the Prime Minister's speech was the beginning of a piece of archival comedy that ended only recently. Cabinet minutes and the like, he said, would in no case be opened until they were thirty years old. He added, "Of particular interest in future years, beginning in 1970, will be the release of annual portions of records of the cabinet war committee for the period 1940 to 1945." But 1970 came and went, and so did 1971, without any War Committee minutes being released. Another development now took place. During 1971 the British and United States Governments decided, and announced, that at the New Year of 1972 they would release virtually all their records for the whole of the Second World War, through 1945. This involved a considerable temporary relaxation of the thirty-year rule. Nobody in Ottawa appears to have taken any notice. Then, at the New Year, the newspapers filled up with dispatches from London detailing once-secret stories culled from the records of the British War Cabinet. At this point Mr. George Bain of the Toronto *Globe and Mail* called attention to the fact that in spite of the Prime Minister's statement of 1969, no such stories were coming out of Ottawa. The Privy Council Office explained to Mr. Bain that the War Committee minutes had had to be "reviewed", and the review had been prolonged "because it had been assigned as a part-time job to two people within the office and they had been taken from it from time to time for other, more urgent work". However, once Mr. Bain had blown the gaff, the review was completed with laudable rapidity; and eight volumes of War Committee minutes

and related documents arrived at the Archives for release to the world.

The situation thus created was interesting. The release was made in accordance with the terms of Mr. Trudeau's famous statement, and the documents released did not go beyond 1941. In other words, in London and Washington, the seats of the Governments that ran the Grand Alliance (Western Branch), what Winston Churchill once called the "deadly secrets" of the war were fully on view; but in Ottawa, where the Cabinet by comparison was not much more than a group of parish politicians conferring round the pump, the local records for 1942-45 were still being jealously guarded. Mr. Bain doesn't seem to have noticed this, but some other people did and mentioned it; and finally, on 28 April last, Canada joined the world and the Cabinet War Committee minutes for the whole war became available. Along with them came the first "conclusions" of the full Cabinet, which began to be recorded on St. Valentine's Day 1944.

These incidents may suggest that the Government of Canada has really not had a very active interest in the question of access to public records for historians. Nevertheless, it must be conceded that we have come a long way. With the thirty-year rule in effect, and records coming into the Archives from departments that never transferred a file before, we are in a far better position to write the history of modern Canada than our predecessors were, or than I was when I was young. Consider the case of the Department of External Affairs, once regarded as the very citadel of obscurantism. In my paper of 1951 I referred to the first transfer of records from that department as a "most encouraging development" — even though many of the files were to remain restricted. Today the Archives contains a large quantity of External files, and under the thirty-year rule they are open to historians. What is more, the Department of External Affairs has proclaimed its "desire to be of the greatest possible service" to scholars interested in Canadian external relations and foreign policy, and it appears to be practising what it preaches. This almost restores one's belief in progress.

However, historians are never satisfied, and they ought not to be. Most of them refuse to accept the thirty-year rule as final, although there is some disagreement as to just what ought to replace it. I myself, as an old soldier, am a bit of a conservative, and am prepared to admit that there are such things as state secrets, though in most cases time seems to take the edge off them pretty rapidly. I am not in favour of a two-year rule or a no-year rule. I think a good case could be made for a twenty-year rule, and I should almost be prepared to make a small bet that before too many years we shall get it. I am also prepared to proph-

esy the procedure by which it will be introduced in Canada. It will be adopted first in one of the more progressive countries with which we have close relations. Then, after the proper Canadian time-lag, we shall get it here too.

When the Massey Commission was doing its work, better *Accommodation* for the Archives was considered a matter of urgency. Nevertheless, the Archives did not move into its new building — I should say, its share of a new building — until 1967, sixteen years after the Commission reported. Today we find ourselves faced already with a new accommodation crisis.

The Commission saw the solution for the Archives' problem as an addition to the existing building on Sussex Street, combined with the removal of what may be called the institution's museum section to form with other elements the nucleus of a Museum of Canadian History. (This conception, very unfortunately, was never realized.) On my humbler level I agreed with the Commission. However, something quite different was done. I find that I wrote, "So far as physical location is concerned, it is clear that there would be some advantages in placing the National Library in as close proximity to the Archives as possible." But it certainly would not have occurred to me to advocate placing these two institutions under one roof, and when it was finally revealed that this was the plan I must confess that I was appalled. It seemed to me evident that this arrangement inhibited any effective scheme for the future expansion of either the Archives or the Library, while at the same time it offered alarming possibilities of guerrilla warfare between the two. The scheme would have worked better, no doubt, had the appointments of Dominion Archivist and National Librarian continued to be combined in one person. But the Massey Commission — rightly, I think — recommended against this, and the Government agreed. The Government then, apparently, proceeded to erect a building based on the principle it had rejected.

At any rate, the situation now is that the building opened in 1967 is already bulging at the seams, and the Archives, and I think the Library too, have been forced to find additional accommodation in other buildings. This simply means that one institution or the other has to move out of 395 Wellington Street at an early date. My own view — and I gather it is rather widely shared — is that I should be glad to see the Archives move into a building designed exclusively for its own needs. And the ideal site now is the one next door, where a group of the "temporary" buildings that have been such a permanent feature of the Ottawa scene are at long last being demolished. Here, it seems to me, it should be possible to construct an Archives building

perhaps a bit more functional than 395 Wellington, with ample space for records storage, working library, offices and technical services, and more accommodation for readers: the time is coming when the Archives will have to look after more than 117 researchers at a time. Above all, the building should be planned to permit of material expansion in later years. Under this plan, the Public Archives of Canada and the National Library would stand side by side, pursuing independently, but I hope in friendly cooperation, their separate but similar roles in the cultural life of the country. I hope the Government will now proceed, without any unnecessary delay, to implement a programme along these lines.

Accommodation is important; one cannot store records, or do research on records, or operate Xeroxing machines, in an open field in the rain. But there is something still more important, and that is *People*: what are known nowadays as personnel; in fact, staff.

When I first knew the Archives, its staff was of course very small, and I suspect a good many of its members' qualifications for their jobs were like Wendell Willkie's description of the big guns at Dover: purely political. Yet the institution commanded respect; and this was simply because its staff included a number of people of genuine scholarly distinction — people like Norah Story, and J. F. Kenney, and A. G. Doughty himself. This is a part of its tradition which the modern Archives must never lose sight of. The Massey Commission, which I keep on coming back to — and I wish people would go back to its report rather oftener — recognized that the Archives stood in great need of a large increase in staff; but it emphasized that it was essential that only "properly qualified persons" should be hired. It recommended forcibly "that the present policy of engaging for professional archival duties only those with adequate historical training be continued." This is a principle on which there should be no compromise. A university, we are always told, is a community of scholars. The universities have trouble living up to this ideal; for a while last year the one that I frequent hardly seemed to be a community of any sort. But we try, and we must go on trying. The Archives, I think, has been having problems not entirely dissimilar to the universities': the result of very rapid expansion, great changes in personnel, and consequent uncertainties about the goals of the institution. My advice to the Archives is to pursue the old academic ideal: it too should seek to be *a community of scholars*. Not merely a unit in the public service (though of course it is that); not just a group of technicians (important as technicians are in this technological age); and certainly not a gaggle of administrators. Administrators are a necessary evil, but they should be kept in their place. The archivists who

set the tone for the Public Archives of Canada must be scholars if they are to retain their own professional pride and standing and if the institution they serve is to continue to command its old distinction.

This brings me to my final point. What *are* the goals of the Public Archives of Canada? Whom, or what, does it work for? Does it work for the historian, that is, people like me? Or does it exist for the benefit of the Government? Obviously it works for the Government; the Government pays the bills, and therefore it will always call the tune. But this does not mean that the Archives is just a cog in the Ottawa administrative machine. The Government of Canada maintains many institutions whose function it is to contribute to the enrichment of Canadian life; and it is among these that the Public Archives belongs. Nevertheless, in my darker moments, which are fairly frequent, I find myself suspecting that there are some persons connected with the Archives who really believe that its main reason for existence is the part it plays in that great inter-departmental parlour game of records management, in which people spend their days pushing around files in whose contents many of them have no interest and whose significance or lack of significance they are frequently quite incapable of assessing.

If there really are persons holding such beliefs — and I fervently hope I am just imagining them — it is probable that nothing would be gained by arguing with them. But in taking leave of this audience I would like to put on record my own view of the mission of the Public Archives of Canada. The Public Archives of Canada became great through its enormous and distinguished services to Canadian history, and it will remain great only by continuing to serve Canadian history, and thereby enriching the national culture of Canada. Its administrative functions are valuable but nevertheless incidental. For the Public Archives of Canada to come to regard itself as a mere administrative convenience for the Government would be little short of a national disaster. If that were to come to pass, then God help the Archives; and God help Canadian history; and, in the long run, God help the Government too.